

Introduction to Islam

Jennings

2nd ed 1994

Chapter 5



Muhammad and the Early Muslim Community

Before Muhammad

Even with all their gods, spirits, shrines, poets, *kāhins*, and elegant tribal genealogies, the old desert dwelling Arabs, especially, appear to have been basically fatalistic. They had no real belief in a transcendent source of personal meaning and thus no hope. The Qur'an captured the essence of these people's dominant conviction:

They say, "There is nothing but our present life; we die, and we live, and nothing but Time destroys us." Of that they have no knowledge; they merely conjecture. And when Our signs are recited to them, clear signs, their only argument is that they say, "Bring us our fathers, if you speak truly." (45:24-25)

The resurrection of the body was as foolish a notion to most Arabians as it had been to the ancient Greeks.¹ This life is all there is, and so make the most of it. One of the ways in which the Arabs enjoyed life was by drinking wine, and there are many drinking songs that have come down to us, from both the Jāhiliya, when imbibing was not considered to be a sin, and Islamic times, when it has been punished. Tarafa, a pre-Islamic poet who did not wish to waste time, stated:

So permit me to drench my head while there's still life in it,
for I tremble at the thought of the scant draught I'll get when I'm dead.
I'm a generous fellow, one that soaks himself in his lifetime;
you'll know tomorrow, when we're dead, which of us is the thirsty one.

...
I see Life is a treasure diminishing every night.
and all that the days and Time diminish ceases at last.
By your sweet life, though Death may miss a lad for the nonce
he's like a loosened lasso, whose loops are firmly in hand.²

The Arabic word that is translated as "Time" both in the Qur'anic passage and the preceding poem, is *dahr*; "impersonal, blind fate." A "divine saying" (Arabic, *hadith qudsi*), those extra-Qur'anic traditions that God is believed to have revealed to Muhammad, deals with *dahr* in a striking manner:

The son of Adam [that is, humans] vexes me by saying, "Curse Time!" So none of you should ever say, "Curse Time!," for *I am Time*, who causes its night to follow its day, and so, if I willed, could bring them both to nothing. (emphasis mine)³

This change constitutes a breakthrough in religious consciousness. All along, behind a seemingly impersonal and capricious fate, was a willing, purposeful, personal God. In this saying God is not claiming to be *dahr*; rather, he is the real power of the universe that the Arabs had mistakenly associated with mere time.

Muhammad the Person

The Early Years

Around 610 C.E. a prophet was born in Arabia when a voice descended upon a thoughtful, middle-aged man of sensitive feelings.⁴ This man, Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah, had taken up the habit of retiring for personal meditation and spiritual cultivation to a cave in a mountainside outside Mecca. He would pack enough provisions for a few days' retreat, after which he would return home for more, in order to pass additional days and nights at Mount Hira. He would often dream, and it was then that the first revelations came to him, "like the morning dawn." A mysterious, personal presence came to Muhammad and announced: "O Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God." Muhammad fell to his knees, trembling all over. He dragged himself to Khadija, his beloved and trusted wife, saying: "Wrap me up! Wrap me up!" Then he remained covered up until his terror passed. Another time the presence announced the same thing to Muhammad, causing him to become so distraught and frightened that he was about to throw himself off a high cliff. Then it appeared again, announcing that Muhammad was God's apostle and that the speaker was the angel Gabriel. According to a Qur'anic passage that describes the apparition, the angel was

one terrible in power, very strong; he stood poised, being on the higher horizon, then drew near and suspended hung, two bows'-length away, or nearer, then revealed to his servant that he revealed. (53:5-10)

Later Gabriel came to Muhammad while he was sleeping. Covering him with a brocaded coverlet on which there was some writing, he commanded Muhammad: "Recite!" "I am unable to recite!" responded Muhammad. Gabriel pressed down the cover very hard on Muhammad, so that he thought he was about to die. Again Gabriel ordered him: "Recite!" Once again confessing his inability, Gabriel pressed down even harder, bringing Muhammad near death. A third time he commanded him to recite, whereupon Muhammad cried out, "What shall I recite?" in order to save himself from the pressure. Gabriel replied:

Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created,
created Man of a blood-clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous,
who taught by the Pen,
taught man that he knew not. (Qur'an 96:1-5)

These are the first verses of the Qur'an to be revealed. The word *qur'an* means "recitation," and it refers to individual passages as well as to the entire collected body of recitations that Muhammad was to receive, starting with that terrible day in Ramadān until his death more than twenty years later.

Muhammad the prophet came into being when he was about forty years of age. Muhammad the person was born around 570 C.E., according to traditional dating; he was certainly born sometime between then and 580. We have little reliable information about his family background, except that he was a member of the tribe of Quraysh—a powerful tribe in Mecca—and of the clan of Banū Hāshim, one of the less prominent groups, although well regarded. Muhammad's father died before he was born, and his mother died when he was only six. As with many boys in those days, Muhammad was sent out to a wet nurse in a Bedouin tribe in the desert, in order to strengthen him and expose him to the purest Arabic language. After his birth, his grandfather 'Abd al-Muttalib acted as Muhammad's guardian and did so lovingly, taking over his rearing when his mother died. But Muhammad's grandfather died only two years later, leaving the boy in the care of his uncle, Abū Tālib, who protected Muhammad in later years when as prophet he began to threaten the polytheistic Meccan oligarchy's sense of well-being.

Legends

Such are the outlines of Muhammad's early years. There also are hagiographical stories. One legend has it that the Prophet's mother, Amina, heard a voice when she was pregnant with him, which stated:

You are pregnant with the Lord of this people and when he is born say, "I put him in the care of the One from the evil of every envier; then call him Muhammad" [meaning "laudable"].⁵

During her pregnancy Amina saw a light emanate from her body by which she could see certain castles in far-off Syria. Another legend tells of a remarkable happening when Muhammad was traveling on a caravan to Syria that his uncle was leading.⁶ The company stayed at Bostra in Syria, a major center of Monophysite Christianity. A monk there named Bahira had studied a certain book that foretold the coming of a prophet, whose advent would be accompanied by certain signs. Bahira had never before paid any attention to the Meccan merchants, but he noticed, as this caravan approached, that one of the people was overshadowed by a cloud. When that person, the young Muhammad, pulled up under a shady tree, the shadow followed him, though otherwise the sun shone. Bahira then did an extraordinary thing: he invited the Qurayshite group to eat with him. He looked for the special person, who would have a mark on him. Not finding him among the

diners, he inquired if all the troop had come to partake of the meal. They told him that all were present except for a youth who was guarding the baggage. Bahira thus had Muhammad brought in, whereupon he proceeded to question him about a number of things.

Muhammad's answers (dealing with such matters as his sleeping habits, details of his person, and so forth) accorded with the old book that the monk had studied. Looking at his back, Bahira discovered the sign of prophethood, which was said to be like the mark of a cupping glass. Bahira then asked Abū Tālib who the boy was. When Muhammad's uncle replied that he was his son, the old monk saw through him, and so Abū Tālib confessed that he was his nephew and that the boy's father had died before he was born. Bahira agreed and then warned Abū Tālib to take Muhammad back home quickly, adding that he should be protected from the Jews, who would do something evil to him if they discovered the truth about his special nature. Muhammad then grew up into manhood under the protection of God.

Some stories even tell of Muhammad's being prevented in interesting ways from leaving his flocks to go into Mecca for a "night on the town." Once he is said to have been distracted from such a goal by a rustic wedding being held on the outskirts. Joining in the festivities, he soon fell asleep. Muslims view Muhammad as sinless and remember such stories as evidences of God's providential arrangement for Muhammad's innocent youth and manhood until he was ready to begin his prophetic career. Whatever the facts may have been, Muhammad early achieved a reputation as an honest and reliable person, as his nickname, al-Amīn ("The Trustworthy"), indicates.

Muhammad grew up in very modest circumstances and had to work hard, most likely in trade, as he grew into adulthood, although he was a shepherd in his youth. When he was in his twenties Muhammad entered the service of a wealthy widow named Khadija, as a manager of her caravan. He succeeded admirably in turning a good profit for his employer. Because of his success and his generally excellent character and bearing, Khadija proposed marriage to him. This was a significant turn for the better in Muhammad's fortunes, and the marriage did much to foster his further development. When they were married, Khadija is said to have been forty years old, or fifteen years older than her new husband. This would have been around 595; but it is possible that Khadija was somewhat younger because she bore at least six children to Muhammad: four daughters and two sons. Neither of their sons survived childhood.

Muhammad and Khadija effectively became business partners through their marriage, but we do not know much about that side of their lives. It is possible that Muhammad again traveled to Syria. He did take more and more to a contemplative posture which apparently included brooding over the low level of moral and social life in Mecca. Muhammad felt sympathy with other people, especially orphans, widows, outcasts, and the poor. He was horrified by such practices as the burying alive of infant daughters which was still practiced in certain locales in Hejaz. This was done partly for economic reasons, but also, it seems likely, to

forestall the possible dishonor that might come to a man through his daughter's foolishness. Later, the Qur'an prophesied that at the Last Judgment the girl buried alive would be asked "for what sin she was slain?" (81:9).

Muhammad the Prophet

Muhammad's call to be a prophet occurred after he had apparently become a highly disciplined spiritual seeker. That is, the vision and the call to "Recite!" did not confront a simple camel driver and small businessman. A telling detail in the main Qur'anic account of the encounter with the apparition on the horizon is that "his [Muhammad's] eye swerved not, nor swept astray. Indeed, he saw one of the greatest signs of his Lord." (53:17-18). Muhammad was able to look straight at the apparition, and the commentators agree that this was without either fright or impudence. This singular experience ushered in the prophetic era of Arabian history when Muhammad began to receive revelations through a special process known in Arabic as *wahy*, a sort of auditory inspiration.

Actual visions were extremely rare in Muhammad's career as prophet, being limited to the initial call by Gabriel, the miraculous ascension to heaven and the presence of God later on, and one or two others from legendary sources. The verses of the Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad little by little, and he was distinctly aware that they were not of his own conceiving. This point is crucial for Muslims, who regard the Qur'an as being entirely the product of God and not at all of a human being, except for its arrangement, verse numbering, and the names of the sūras (chapters), which were assigned within a generation after his death. Muhammad clearly distinguished what was from God and what was his own opinion throughout his life as prophet.

It should be pointed out that his followers tended very early to regard Muhammad's own pronouncements as also being very weighty. A natural question may be raised: Did people come to believe and obey his message because of its self-evident authority or because of Muhammad's charismatic nature? Probably because of both working simultaneously and synergistically as what one scholar called the "prophetic-revelatory event."⁷ This is even more likely when the "divine saying" (*ḥadīth qudsī*) is considered. This is a type of utterance believed to have come from God to Muhammad, but not as a *qur'ān* or "recitation." Rather, it is between a *qur'ān* and what Muhammad might have said on his own authority. An example of a divine saying is the preceding one about the Arabs' cursing of time.

After Muhammad's call to prophecy, there was a period when the contacts with his divine source did not recur. This *fātra*, as it is known, continued for a long enough time for Muhammad to feel abandoned and depressed. It is useful to compare this "dark night of the soul" with the experiences of other visionaries and mystics who have been plunged into grave doubt and distress after having reached an exalted state of spiritual awareness. It is a common pattern.

But after a while the revelations resumed with the following words:

By the white forenoon and the brooding night!
Thy Lord has neither forsaken thee nor hates thee and the Last shall be better for thee than the First.
Thy Lord shall give thee, and thou shalt be satisfied.
Did He not find thee an orphan, and shelter thee?
Did He not find thee erring, and guide thee?
Did He not find thee needy, and suffice thee? (Qur'an 93:1-8)

The biographical elements of this passage are obvious. In fact, the best original source for Muhammad's knowledge is the Qur'an, which is doubtlessly authentic and from the Prophet's mouth. The problem is that the Qur'an is not a consciously historical or autobiographical record, nor does it provide any kind of narrative structure. That must be derived from other sources. But we do get from the Qur'an a vivid and reliable sense of Muhammad's religious experience and world view. The soul of Muhammad is revealed throughout, regardless of whether one accepts the Muslim view of revelation or the view that the Prophet somehow composed the text himself.

Khadija was the first to become a Muslim, and her support and comfort of Muhammad during these trying times were of critical importance. Her cousin, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, either a Christian or a *hanif*, was consulted when Muhammad had doubts right after his first experience with the angel. Waraqa knew something of the older scriptures and declared that what had come upon his cousin's husband was none other than what had previously descended upon Moses, the *nāmūs*. This term seems to have been understood by the Arabs as meaning an angelic messenger, especially Gabriel, but it is a corruption of the Greek *nomos*, meaning "law," or Torah. Waraqa also predicted difficult times for Muhammad, because peoples had in the past always tended to reject their prophets. He died not long afterward and so was not on hand to support Muhammad.

The Qur'an

The early message of the highly oracular Qur'an centers on the themes of God's coming judgment of humankind at the end of the world. On the last day the dead will be raised from their graves to stand trial and will be granted eternal felicity in heaven or eternal punishment in hell. Each will receive what he or she has earned, for God is depicted as just. He is also all-powerful, majestic, and holy and is thus deserving of worship and praise. God demands moral behavior from his creatures and especially emphasizes generosity toward others, particularly the poor, the orphaned, the weak, and the outcast. Not only awe and obedience are required; gratitude is just as important.

As time passed, God's compassion and mercy came also to be emphasized. They balance and temper but do not replace God's justice. Yet the divine justice is not impersonal or mathematical in proportion to humankind's deeds. It is expressed in a personal, intentional, and yet inscrutable way. Unlike the Hindu and

Buddhist *karma*, in Islam, God's divine justice is subject to forgiveness and erasure, in a relationship with humans that is both mutual and spontaneous. The Qur'an, in fact, continued Judaism's and Christianity's message of ethical monotheism. The Muslim's, too, have a strong sense of covenant with God.

The one unforgivable sin, according to the Qur'an, is *shirk*, the "associating" of anything with God (4:48). One who does this is a *mushrik*, an "idolater." The ancient pagan Arabs, of course, fell into this category, but they, as well as all others, were given the chance to turn toward God as Muslims. The Qur'an regards the Jews and the Christians as "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*) who, although they possess authentic scriptures from God, have over the generations twisted and corrupted their messages and split up into sects. But some of them accepted the revelation to Muhammad and so would be rewarded (3:199). Generally, the Jews and Christians are invited to become Muslims so as to renew and perfect the religion that was first revealed to Abraham. Otherwise they are to be treated justly (as long as they do not oppose Islam) and in no case forced to convert.

Throughout the Qur'an runs the theme of God's unity, and it is the compromising of this oneness that constitutes the greatest sin. The unity of God is to be reflected in the unity and uniformity of his religion and in unanimity in his community of worshipers. All that the Muslim does is to reflect God's greatness and unity. The most pointed and forceful statement of this central theme is in the Sūra of Sincerity:

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
Say: "He is God, One, God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one." (112)

The reference to begetting is obviously a major difference from the Christian view of God, but it also refers—probably more immediately—to the ancient Arabian notion of gods' giving birth to gods, as in the case of the "daughters of Allah." For a very brief period, Muhammad acknowledged the worship of these three goddesses alongside Allah, but later he realized, by means of revelation, that the permission to do so had come from Satan.

Have you considered El-Lat and El-'Uzza and Manat the third, the others? [The following words in italics are the so-called satanic verses, which were later nullified and removed from the Qur'an:] *These are the intermediaries exalted, whose intercession is to be hoped for. Such as they do not forget.* [The proper ending came to be as follows:] That were indeed an unjust division. They are naught but names yourselves have named. . . . God has sent down no authority touching them. (53:19-23)

Muhammad evidently was very intent on attracting the Meccan merchants to his new religion, and the compromise indicated in the satanic verses seemed a good way to do it. He learned a lesson, it appears. According to the old belief, God's having only daughters suggested a deficiency in virility, and by implication, Muhammad was similarly afflicted: the Meccans could taunt in inventively malicious ways.

The First Muslims

'Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was the first male convert to Islam. He later became important as the fourth caliph, or "deputy," to succeed the Prophet as leader of the Muslim community and as first imām of Shi'ism. 'Ali was a spiritual person who himself gained a reputation for religious knowledge and guidance. He was married to Fātima, a daughter of Muhammad and Khadija. Then Abū Bakr, who became Muhammad's father-in-law and the first caliph, converted to Islam. In the early years there were only a few Muslims, and they were from the humbler classes, with the exception of 'Uthmān, the sole convert from Mecca's oligarchy in the Meccan years. He became the third caliph.

Muhammad's early preaching was warning, and the Qur'an gives one of his titles as "warner." His warnings of the coming judgment and of the woes of those who refused to believe and do good works were apparently received at first with good-natured indifference. But when Muhammad began attacking the Meccan divinities and, through them, the old religious establishment, which was as profitable as it was deeply rooted, the situation became increasingly tense. This seems to have happened after Muhammad was inspired to change the Qur'anic verses pertaining to the three goddesses, which we quoted earlier. From this time onward, the emphasis on God's unity is pronounced. Life became difficult enough for the Muslims that a number of them who were being persecuted were sent to Abyssinia. As a standard source expresses it: "This was the first hijra ["emigration"] in Islam."⁸

Muhammad and his family were spared intense persecution because of his uncle Abū Tālib's protection as head of the Hāshim clan. But others, especially of the lower classes, were given harsh treatment. They were beaten, imprisoned, deprived of food and water, exposed to the midday heat, and otherwise tortured. Bilāl, a black slave who had become a Muslim, was put in the hottest part of the day on his back with a heavy rock on his chest. Then his evil master announced: "You will stay here till you die or deny Muhammad and worship Al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā." Then Bilāl repeated over and over while undergoing such agony: "One, one!"⁹ referring to God's unity. Abū Bakr finally reprimanded Bilāl's owner for such inhumane treatment, and he traded a "heathen" black slave of his own for Bilāl. Eventually Abū Bakr freed Bilāl, who became the prophet's chief *mu'adh-dhin*, the one who calls the Muslims to prayers. The Quraysh even attempted to have the emigrants forcibly returned from Abyssinia, but the Negus, or ruler of that country, refused to turn them over to Meccan agents.

The move to Abyssinia occurred in about 615 C.E. Those Muslims remaining in Mecca were still being persecuted, and in 619 there was a crisis when Abū Tālib, Muhammad's uncle and clan protector, died. Leading up to this unsettling turn of events was a prolonged boycott of the Hāshim clan by the majority of the Quraysh tribe. The Muslims did not give in, nor did their pagan protector, Abū Tālib. But after his death, his brother and successor as clan chief, Abū Lahab, a prosperous merchant, withdrew the clan's full protection of Muhammad, and he forced him to admit that his deceased uncle, not having embraced Islam before he

died, was now in hell. This was regarded as disrespectful by Abū Lahab (and by the established custom of Quraysh) and deserving of punishment. It seems that Abū Lahab also wanted Muhammad to stop preaching Islam. At any rate, Muhammad began seeking a new site for his community. He visited the town of Tā'if, but the people there rejected and mistreated him. On his return to Mecca, he had to wait on the outskirts until he could find someone to protect him. Muhammad's troubles increased in the same year with the death of his beloved Khadija, who had always been his mainstay and comforter to whom he confided his innermost thoughts.

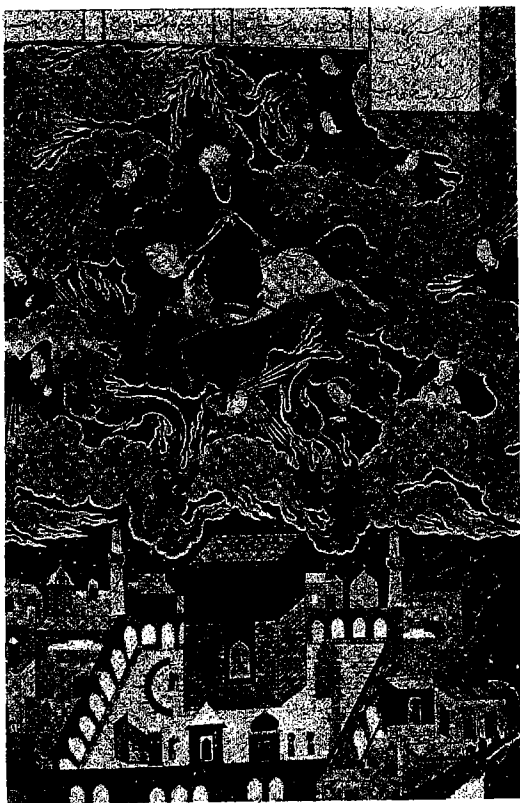
The Development of Islam

By this time the basic features of Islam were fairly well developed but it still lacked the kind of community integrity and authority in governmental, judicial, and military matters that it would have in Medina after the great Hijra in 622. The Arabic word *islām* means "submission" or "surrender" to almighty God, and one who submits is called a *muslim* (or *muslima* if female). Islam is an act and not a thing, and it continues in time as a relationship between the servant and his or her master. Each Muslim is an '*abd*, "slave" or "servant" of God. The proper way to commune with God is in worship and praise. The various acts of worship are known collectively as '*ibādāt* (pl.), which is from the same root as '*abd* is and can be translated as "services," in the sense of the work that slaves do for their masters. But in the Islamic context, '*ibāda* means worship. It is significant that all three Abrahamic religions attach the meaning of work to worship: the ancient Hebrew '*avodah*, "service" (and an obvious cognate of '*ibāda*), and the Latin '*opus Dei*, "work of God," which means prayer and praise, especially in the strictly regulated monastic context.

At the heart of Muslim devotion is the *ṣalāt*, or "prayer service," consisting of several cycles of postures culminating in full bodily prostration with the forehead touching the ground. This seems to have been practiced from the beginning as a distinctive aspect of the new movement. The little Muslim group prayed together at night, in houses, but also out in public sometimes during the day, which occasionally brought ridicule and persecution. Praise and thanksgiving seem to have accompanied the prostrations. The gradually increasing amount of revealed recitation (Qur'an) comprised the Muslims' "prayer book." In the Near East, public worship has often been a sign of one's commitment to a party or a program, and it has also been a symbol of submission to authority. Thus, the Muslims, when they prayed publicly, were participating in that old form of allegiance. So were the Meccan leaders when they lined up to pray with Muhammad and the Muslims during the period when the "daughters of Allah" were still worshiped. When the formula was changed in accordance with God's demand that he alone be worshiped, the pagan Meccans' public participation was cut off. From then on the Muslim *salat* was a badge of difference and independence. As soon as a new convert was made, that person immediately performed the *salat* with his or her new brothers and sisters.

Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascent into Heaven

Muhammad and his followers continued to observe certain aspects of the old Ka'ba cult in the Meccan sanctuary. One night when Muhammad was sleeping near the holy Ka'ba itself, as he sometimes did when observing a prayer vigil, a remarkable event took place. It is not certain whether it was originally considered to be a spiritual, dreamlike experience or an actual happening.¹⁰ An angel, presumably Gabriel, came to the sleeping Prophet and split open his chest and belly from the throat to the groin, from which he drew out Muhammad's heart and bowels. These were then washed in a golden basin filled with faith (another version has Zamzam water, from the famous spring beneath the Ka'ba shrine) and replaced in Muhammad's body, which was then closed up. Then a small steed



The Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey (isrā') and Ascent (mi'rāj) to Heaven, as depicted in a central Asian manuscript illumination by 'Abd al-Razzāk, ca. 1500. (Courtesy The British Library)

was brought, whose name was Burāq. This marvelous animal, often depicted with the head of a woman and the body of a horse, could travel with each gallop as far as the eye can see.

Gabriel then led Muhammad, who was seated on Burāq, through the sky to Jerusalem, where he prayed a two-prostration prayer at the "farthest mosque," as the Qur'an calls the temple there. Then Gabriel led Muhammad up through the seven heavens into the very presence of God. This was the greatest of all of Muhammad's spiritual experiences and gave him the sort of standing among the Muslims that certain other prophets had achieved before him, like Enoch, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, all of whom had had a personal and direct meeting with God. In later Islamic history, as we shall see, the Sufis, or mystics, placed great importance on Muhammad's night journey (*isrā'*) to Jerusalem and his ascent (*mi'rāj*) above the seventh heaven to God. Later spiritual guides traced their doctrines and authority back through a chain of *shaykhs*, or masters, to Muhammad, who had met with God. It was of course one thing, and marvelous, to have had revelation *descend* from God to Muhammad; it was quite another, and more wonderful and auspicious, for God to have caused Muhammad to *ascend* to his presence.

The Establishment of Muhammad's Role in Islam

For some time Muhammad was not regarded as what he was—a prophet and warner—but as a poet (*shā'ir*), a *kāhin*, or just a plain madman (*majnūn*). This is because the role of prophet was not as well established among the ancient Arabs as were those other roles. When people called Muhammad a poet or seer, they were not denying his supernatural knowledge and power; rather they were identifying in traditional ways his gift of inspiration. As indicated in the preceding chapter, the vocations of poet and *kāhin* were prestigious in pre-Islamic Arabia.

There are two terms that apply to Muhammad as prophet: *nabī* and *rasūl*. The first means "prophet," that is, one to whom God has spoken. The second means "apostle" or "messenger," who is charged with communicating what God has told him to others, usually a specific community. All *rasūls* are *nabīs*, but the reverse is not the case. Muhammad and a relatively few others before him were both *nabī* and *rasūl*. The Qur'an names some twenty-five prophets, of whom five are notable: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Muhammad is regarded as the "seal" (*khātām*) of the prophets, in the sense that he is the last and also that he validates the history of prophecy, like an official seal on a document. The Qur'an regards all previous prophecy as complete and perfect, but the peoples to whom the messages were communicated have distorted and corrupted them. Therefore, Muhammad came to transmit the old true message anew and established through it a universal community, which in Medina was known as the *umma*.

It is important to understand that the main task of both Muhammad and the Qur'an was to restore the primordial monotheistic religion of Abraham, which had degenerated in Arabia over the centuries. Thus Islam is the original and true religion for humankind. This is not to be confused with specific historical details

of the Islamic movement introduced in Arabia through the Prophet and the Qur'an. That religion is "name brand" Islam (with a capital I). But all true religion is "surrender" to God and, thus, *islām*, in the "generic sense" (with a small i). Several Qur'anic passages establish Abraham's primacy:

People of the Book [that is, Jews and Christians]! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham? The Torah was not sent down, neither the Gospel, but after him. What, have you no reason? . . . Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim and one of pure faith [*ḥanīf*]; certainly he was never of the idolaters. Surely the people standing closest to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet [Muhammad], and those who believe; and God is the Protector of the believers. (3:65, 67-68)

The essential unity of the divine message through the generations of prophets is clearly stated in a following passage. (The command "Say" in this, as in many other Qur'anic verses, is addressed by God to Muhammad and his people.)

Say: "We believe in God, and that which has been sent down on us, and sent down on Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the Tribes, and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and the Prophets, of their Lord; we make no division between any of them, and to Him we surrender [that is, are "Muslims"]." Whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him; in the next world he shall be among the losers. (3:84-85)

The Qur'an restored the purity of the original message from God. Earlier prophets and their books were authentic, but the message had become corrupted and obscured by the followers of the Jewish and Christian religions.

The Qur'an's Divine Message

Throughout the Meccan years of Muhammad's ministry, the Qur'an moved from simple and dramatic warnings of the Judgment to stories of earlier prophets, mostly from the biblical tradition, who struggled with their peoples and were persecuted. The record of previous peoples whom God warned—and punished—was laid forth for the unruly and perverse Meccans as a sort of salvation history in which a few persons and groups persevered in the way of God. The manner in which biblical figures and events are woven into the highly oracular Qur'anic text suggests to critics that Muhammad did not know the Bible firsthand. Differences between the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament and the Qur'an do not necessarily imply imperfect knowledge of the Bible. Rather, Muslims are convinced that the Qur'an came directly from God and that it corrects the Bible when necessary. There were also Jewish teaching stories that differed in certain respects from the Bible versions. The only sustained narrative in the Qur'an is the Sūra of Joseph (12), as we noted earlier.

The Qur'an considers itself to be the last divine message to descend. The Arabians had never had a "book," as did the Jews and Christians and others. Through Muhammad, the idolatrous Arabs were introduced to true religion by means of a prophetic message composed in a "clear Arabic tongue." This meant that there

would be no excuse for missing the point of God's warning and judging. Looked at in another way, the Arabian Qur'an was a gracious and miraculous gift bestowed on God's highly esteemed people, the Muslims, who are called in one place "the best umma (community) ever brought forth for humankind, bidding to honor, and forbidding dishonor, and believing in God" (3:110). The contents of the Qur'an are complete with God on a "preserved tablet," also known as the "mother of the book" (*umm al-kitāb*) (43:4). It is in heaven.

The Conversion of 'Umar

A final major conversion occurred while Muhammad and the Muslims were still in Mecca. 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, "a strong, stubborn man whose protégés none dare attack,"¹¹ according to the standard description, was one day striding forth with his sword in order to kill Muhammad. This dangerous prophet had split his tribe, mocked their traditions, and preached that their gods were worthless, and so 'Umar was determined to rid Mecca of this pest. There was a meeting in progress attended by Muhammad, Abū Bakr, 'Alī, and the Prophet's uncle, Hamza, who himself had only recently become a Muslim—to the great benefit of the community because of his character and powerful physical bearing. A fellow tribesman named Nu'aym—a secret Muslim for fear of reprisal—intercepted 'Umar and told him that he would never get away with killing Muhammad. Instead he should put his own house in order by disciplining and punishing his sister Fātima, who together with his brother-in-law and nephew were at that moment in another house listening to a man recite the Qur'an.

'Umar heard the chanting as he approached the house and was furious as he stormed in. Laying hold of his brother-in-law, Fātima rose to defend her husband, whereupon 'Umar struck her in the ear, seriously hurting her. The group then confessed that they were indeed Muslims. 'Umar, suddenly remorseful for his violent attack, demanded to look at the sheet from which the man had been reading, which Fātima had hidden under her thigh. Fātima said that 'Umar could not handle the sheet of Qur'anic passages because he was unclean, being a polytheist. 'Umar then washed himself and was handed the sheet, which contained a portion of the sūra known as TāHā. Unlike most others in Hejaz, including the Prophet, 'Umar could read. After looking at the sheet for a moment he said:

"How fine and noble is this speech." When he heard that, Khabbāb emerged [from his hiding place in another room, too frightened to confront 'Umar] and said, "O 'Umar, by God, I hope that God has singled you out by His prophet's call, for but last night I heard him saying, 'O God, strengthen Islam by Abū'l-Ḥakam b. Hishām or 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. 'Come to God, come to God, O 'Umar.'" At that 'Umar said, "Lead me to Muhammad so that I may accept Islam."¹²

'Umar strapped on his sword once again and headed for the house where Muhammad and his companions were meeting. One of them saw 'Umar approaching and warned the rest. Hamza counseled Muhammad to let 'Umar in to see what he wanted. If 'Umar started something violent, they would kill him with his own sword. (Hamza was the only one of the Muslims who could say a thing

like that and be believed.) 'Umar entered and was surprised to be met by an angry Muhammad who seized him and dragged him along the floor berating him for his continuing persecution of the Muslims. Then 'Umar replied that he had come at that very moment to "believe in God and His apostle and what he had brought from God." Muhammad then gave thanks to God in such a loud voice that he could be heard by everyone in the house.

The conversion of 'Umar, and Hamza before him, made it safe for the first time for the Muslims to worship at the Ka'ba. Before that, they had been brutally mistreated there by the Qurayshī polytheists. But no one wanted to tangle with Hamza or 'Umar or with anyone connected with them, for they had loyal and able comrades, too. 'Umar soon learned how difficult the new road was upon which he had embarked. He was insulted and abused by his kinsmen, but he stood firm. Later he became the second caliph and the architect of Islam's great empire: a figure in world history who does not suffer by comparison with Alexander, Caesar, Kublai Khan, or, on a far smaller territorial scale but nonetheless of great importance, Joshua, son of Nun.

As the years went by and 'Umar's simplicity of life and relative poverty became known, people came to follow Muhammad because the intrepid 'Umar recommended him. When 'Umar entered an assembly, people fell silent from respect and fear. He once harshly punished his son who had been caught drinking wine. When the son cried out to his father, "You have killed me!" 'Umar answered, "Then go and tell Allah how your father enforces his punishments."¹³ ('Umar had been a heavy drinker before his conversion.) There are many legends about 'Umar that Muslims delight in telling: "His riding whip was feared more than the sword of the tyrants: his conversion was the victory of Islam and an act of God's mercy toward his people." As Islam attracted more and more strong people, it demonstrated its superiority over the old value system, which lacked both the vision and the binding force of a new communal order based on faith rather than kinship and which offered the reward of heaven. Later, the Medinan phase proved this beyond all doubt.

The Hijra

During the pilgrimage season of 620, Muhammad met a party of men at one of the fairs near Mecca.¹⁴ They were from Yathrib, a large agricultural oasis settlement nearly three hundred miles north of Mecca. Yathrib, also known as Medina—which became its usual name because of the phrase *madīnat al-nabī*, "city of the Prophet," although it had also been known as Medina before Islam—had experienced many years of tension and bloody fighting between two major Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj. The earlier Jewish settlers had become outnumbered and occupied an uneasy position between the larger communities. Around 618 a fierce battle had taken place at Bu'āth between the two tribes. Yathrib had evolved over the generations into an urban type of region, and the old tribal patterns of leadership and order, based partly on the vendetta and law of retaliation, were disastrous in such a heavily populated, socially complex setting. Some sort

of stable and evenhanded government was urgently needed. The men with whom Muhammad met were greatly impressed with him, whom they had heard about and wanted to meet. They returned the following year with others, representing most of the groups in Yathrib, and they agreed to become Muslims and to obey the Prophet. A pledge was concluded to this effect. This development must have seemed providential to the beleaguered Muslims.

The following year a large group of seventy-five traveled down from Medina and pledged themselves to fight in Muhammad's cause, if necessary. This was in the early summer of 622. Muhammad then invited his followers in Mecca to begin emigrating north to Medina, which they did in small, inconspicuous groups, totaling around seventy by September. A few stayed behind in Mecca, and so did Muhammad, Abū Bakr, and 'Alī, planning to move north when all was ready there.

Finally, Mecca became so dangerous for the Prophet that he decided to make his move. A band of Quraysh was plotting to kill him while he slept, all to share in the bloodguilt so that it would be impossible to retaliate. But 'Alī was sleeping in his father-in-law's bed when they came, and they realized they had been tricked. They did not harm 'Alī, and meanwhile Muhammad and his chief assistant, Abū Bakr, had hidden in a cave, where they stayed for three days. Passing by this cave in search of their quarry (according to one legend), the Qurayshī assassins were again fooled by a web that had just been spun across the cave entrance by a providentially positioned spider. "No one is in there, surely," they agreed.

Later, Muhammad and Abū Bakr traveled together to Medina by back roads, reaching the outskirts on September 24, 622. 'Alī also arrived safely. This year later was officially recognized as the beginning of the Islamic lunar calendar—not the day of Muhammad's arrival but the start of that year, which had been July 16, 622. This is the Hijra, best translated as "emigration." (The older Western spelling is Hegira, and the still-common translation "flight" is incorrect.) The Muslims were embarking on a fateful venture, going to something positive more than leaving something negative.

Careful preparations had been made, and many Medinans had already professed their belief in Islam. They were henceforth known as the "helpers" (*anṣār*), and those who made the Hijra were called "emigrants" (*muhājirūn*). Muhammad, demonstrating political insight, arrived last and was greeted by an already-established, loyal constituency. So as not to play favorites in his adopted city, which he was now about to serve as a just outside arbitrator and religious leader, he let his camel roam loose and named its eventual resting place as the site of his home. The land was duly purchased and a large open mosque built, with a couple of small huts for Muhammad's now two wives, with whom he took turns lodging.

Medina

In Medina Muhammad was by no means a ruler, at least in the early years. But by the time he died, in 632, he was the unchallenged leader in both that city and virtually all of Arabia. In Mecca Muhammad was the inspired head of a religious

sect; in Medina he transformed the little Muslim movement into an incipient world religion, whose universal appeal was demonstrated over the next several centuries by the massive conversions of non-Arab peoples.

A valuable document has been preserved since Medinan times, which is often called the "Constitution of Medina."¹⁵ In it is spelled out the organization and structure of the newly reformed political and social life of the troubled oasis community of Yathrib. Although the document is clearly a composite text, written over a number of years, certain generalizations can be made about it. All parties were to cooperate together for their mutual defense, with Muhammad acknowledged as the chief arbitrator under God's guidance. All were to obey God and his Prophet. The Jews were to be considered a religious community (*umma*) alongside the Muslims, sharing in the privileges as well as duties of life in a secure society. The remarkable thing about the Constitution of Medina is that it transformed Yathrib's warring and fractious tribes and clans into a kind of super-tribe, bound together not by kinship but by a common religious faith. This was a revolution in the social and political history of Arabia and made possible the eventual unification of the whole peninsula under the banner of Islam. Even though kinship solidarity was not wiped out or even diminished, at least people were beginning to recognize the advantages and opportunities that large-scale cooperation could provide. Islam afforded a transcending allegiance structure with a higher ethical level combined with more adequate safeguards against the destructive traditions of the vendetta and the law of retaliation.

The emigrants needed to find suitable work in Medina, but they were at a disadvantage because of their lack of experience in agriculture, the city's main occupation. They did find manual labor jobs, but those did not appeal greatly. Therefore Muhammad directed their talents and energies toward the old occupation of raiding. He did this in a controversial way, breaking the traditional truce months during which the ancient Arabs refrained from warfare with one another. A number of his followers, dispatched with sealed orders, attacked a caravan bound from Yemen to Mecca, which required a long and circuitous journey. The guards were overwhelmed, and the caravan was diverted all the way to Medina. There was some criticism, mostly because of the threat from an angry Mecca under which the Medinans would now be living, but also because of the break with tradition. Muhammad received a revelation to the effect that although breaking the truce was indeed sinful, the Meccan persecution of Islam was even more so.

They will question thee concerning the holy month, and fighting in it. Say: "Fighting in it is a heinous thing, but to bar from God's way, and disbelief in Him, and the Holy Mosque, and to expel its people from it—that is more heinous in God's sight; and persecution is more heinous than slaying." (Qur'an 2:217)

This passage is a good example of how a higher allegiance came to substitute for the older way of behaving. The old truce idea was still maintained, but as subordinate to the new prophecy. This kind of compromise and cooptation or preemption

was characteristic of Muhammad's immense skill in dealing with the Arabian peoples and their customs. He did not seem to be taking away, so much as rearranging, refocusing, and even restoring. The last was seen especially in the Medinan years, with the gradual arabization of Islam, which was viewed as the restoration of the archetypal religion of Abraham, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian. Other raids later were mounted, both by the Meccan emigrants and their Medinan helpers.

The Jews in Medina. Not many weeks before things came to a head with the aroused Meccans, a significant event occurred in Medina. The Jews, who were viewed increasingly as less than fully cooperative with Muhammad and the Islamic venture and in fact as potentially refractory and even dangerous, were suddenly and dramatically cut off. Up until this time, the Muslims and Jews had prayed together, facing Jerusalem. But during a Friday worship service in February of 624, Muhammad received an inspiration to turn 180 degrees and face Mecca. He and the Muslims did so and the new *qibla* (direction of prayer) led to the aforementioned thorough arabization of Islam. Muhammad apparently considered his former ingratiating incorporation of Jewish worship practices to have been misguided and futile. Thereafter, relations with the Jews of Medina became more difficult until a few years later the Jews were either driven out of the oasis altogether or, in one tragic case, the men were executed for treachery in a battle.

The Battle of Badr

A huge and rich caravan was reported to be en route home to Mecca from Palestine. A large group of helpers and emigrants set out to intercept it at Badr, a group of wells near Medina. Anticipating trouble of this sort, the Meccans had sent north a large force of about nine hundred men to protect the caravan on the final leg of its journey. Muhammad's three hundred-man force was outnumbered, but in an amazing display of courage and initiative, it totally outfought the large opposing army. Many prominent Meccans were killed, including the leader of the expedition. The helpers and the emigrants involved were, as a result, more closely unified, and they both took home a great amount of booty.

The Battle of Badr was the turning point in the history of Islam as a political and military as well as an expanding religious movement. It has been compared with the Jewish Passover and Exodus as a definitive experience for the Muslims, when their self-confidence and sense of destiny as a people of God were firmly established. Setbacks were yet to occur, some serious, but the Muslims' faith and determination were never seriously shaken after Badr.

As the Qur'an itself reflected on the event, the true magnitude of the Meccan forces was hidden from Muhammad by means of a dream, lest the Muslims become frightened and discouraged (8:43). The Qur'an saw the conflict as having been entirely God's contriving and concluding and as providing the Muslims with confidence and the feeling that God's people could not fail:

O Prophet, God suffices thee, and the believers who follow thee. O Prophet, urge on the believers to fight. If there be twenty of you, patient men, they will overcome two hundred; if there be a hundred, they will overcome a thousand unbelievers, for they are a people who understand not. (8:65)

In another place (8:9), God told Muhammad that a thousand angels stood behind the Muslims as they fought at Badr. This was in March of 624, during the second year of the Hijra.

Within the next three years two massive Meccan punitive expeditions were launched against Medina. In 625 came the Battle of Uhud, named for the mountain where the fighting took place. Oddly, the Meccans, after gaining a decisive victory, gathered together their forces and went home. Uhud, then, was a mixed success for both sides. Muhammad continued to launch raids against various Arab targets, and during the Medinan years he was regarded as a major force by the Bedouin tribes, which concluded many treaties and covenants with him. Muhammad became the center of a congeries of direct relationships with tribes and their leaders, whose lines of submission and agreement radiated outward from him in all directions. Some of the parties to the agreements remained pagan, but it was clearly Muhammad's aim to incorporate them eventually into the umma of Islam. Muhammad had a knack for compromise and delay, pressing his advantage only when all the conditions were ripe.

The Battle of the Trench

In 627 (A.H.5) an enormous force of up to ten thousand men marched forth from Mecca in what was intended to be an Arabian Armageddon. The Medinans could muster only about three thousand defenders, but a Persian convert suggested to Muhammad that they dig a large trench so as to withstand a long siege. The "Battle of the Trench" turned out to be a stalemate, because the Meccans—and the Arabs in general—did not have a tradition of siege warfare and did not like the long wait involved, preferring attack tactics and speedy, decisive outcomes, in part because of the lack of sufficient forage for their beasts. The Meccans finally retreated and went home after two weeks. The Jewish clan of Qurayza were found out to have been planning a rear attack with the Meccans, and so after the invaders had gone back home, the Jews were attacked in their Medinan stronghold. When the Jews surrendered, the men were executed and the women and children sold as slaves. But this sorrowful conclusion should not be interpreted as anti-Jewish, for it was essentially a response to behavior regarded as treason. The Constitution of Medina had clearly spelled out the Yathrib people's defense responsibilities and the extent of mutual loyalty.

Islam thus became firmly established, and Muhammad was recognized as the greatest single power broker in Arabia. Mecca's prestige visibly waned after the Battle of the Trench. The details of Islamic religious and community life became established, as can be seen in the accumulation of Qur'anic passages that dealt more and more with ritual, legal, practical, and communal matters. This is the great difference between the Meccan period of Qur'anic revelation and the Medi-

nan years. The former were concerned with the central issues of God's nature and the relations between him and his creatures, with the coming judgment prominently featured. The stories of the ancient prophets were repeated in such a manner as to comment on Muhammad's relations with a hostile Meccan environment. In Medina, however, the contents were more prosaic and practical. But it would be wrong to regard the Medinan revelations as less concerned with "religious" matters; the scope of what was *Islamically* religious simply had expanded as the project developed from a minority sect into a substantial new community, sometimes labeled a *theocracy*. From Medinan times, Islam was considered both *din wa dawla*, "religion and political order."

Mecca

In the spring of 628 Muhammad led a host of pilgrims to Mecca. The pre-Islamic Medinans were accustomed to participating in the Mecca pilgrimage, but this was the first time that the young Muslim community of Medina had attempted it. As usual the Medinans were prepared for battle but wished to enter Mecca peacefully. They were met by the Meccans at the gateway to the sacred precincts known as al-Hudaybiya. Muhammad then decided not to lead his people on the lesser pilgrimage (*'umra*) that year, although his idea had been basically peaceful—a sort of testing of the waters. Much to the displeasure of some of his supporters, Muhammad concluded a treaty with the Meccans. Although he returned home that year without making the pilgrimage, the following year he and the Medinans came back for the sacred rites, and the city of Mecca was evacuated for three days so as to avoid a conflict. Muhammad thus demonstrated his goodwill and his adherence to a sacred ritual structure that both the pagan and the Muslim Arabians were dedicated to maintaining. Muhammad had come a long way by the time of the Treaty of al-Hudaybiya, but so had the Meccans, who now acknowledged his great prestige and power in Arabia.

Muhammad's forces probably could have carried out a successful attack on Mecca during that first visit that ended at Hudaybiya, but Muhammad was patient and statesmanlike. The Medinans did complete their pilgrimage the following year, and it remained peaceful. The following year a killing occurred between the major parties, breaching the treaty, and so the Medinans decided to attack Mecca. Muhammad assembled ten thousand men, an enormous force, and marched south. But the leader of the Meccans, Abū Sufyān, who was, ironically, Muhammad's father-in-law—ventured forth from the city to submit to the Medinans. Muhammad accepted the surrender. Only a few Meccans resisted and the rest were allowed to go free under an amnesty, provided they adopted Islam. A few dissidents were put to death, but on the whole the conquest of Mecca was bloodless. Likewise it was a spiritual more than a military conquest, with no significant loss of face by the vanquished. No booty was allowed, and those few Meccans who were relieved of their possessions by aggressive Medinans were indemnified. Mecca was converted to a Muslim city with an Islamic government: Muhammad's first important act after entering the city was to go to the Ka'ba and purify

it by smashing the polytheistic idols. Thus the sacred sanctuary was rededicated to the original monotheism of Abraham, for according to the Qur'an as well as older Arabian legend, the Ka'ba had originally been built by Abraham and Ishmael as a temple dedicated to the worship of the one true God. But in the intervening centuries the people had degenerated into polytheism and wickedness. Allah had been relegated to a marginal position as merely the "high god" of the Arabians. But with the career of Muhammad, the mysterious Allah had returned to call back his creatures to the pure religion of the *hanifs*.

Beyond Arabia

After the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad began to look beyond Arabia, but he first was generally successful in solidifying his hold on the Bedouin tribes, who were mixed in their feelings because of the loss of regional independence that Islamic community life required. The Bedouin as a whole never took to Islam with the loyalty and drive of the more settled and even urban peoples, who were the most important recruits for the new religion. Contrary to romantic Western notions, Islam was not a religion of the desert, if by that it is meant the daring and dashing Bedouin. Islam was a religion of settled life, and any *hijra* to the places where people lived together in interdependence and mutual trust was regarded as a religious act. It is true, however, that the merchant classes that adopted Islam in great numbers did have a stake in maintaining good relations with the fierce and mobile Bedouin, because the latter made indispensable partners in transporting goods over long distances. The agriculturalists fared less well under Islamic rule, although there was never a strong feeling that working the soil was beneath the dignity of the Muslims as a whole. But to the extent that the nomadic Arabs, or Arabian Muslims relatively recently removed from the old camel-breeding and raiding life, dominated in Islamic affairs, the more agricultural peoples found themselves regarded as somehow inferior in their life-style, if not in their essential humanity.

Muhammad's Later Life

Little has been said about Muhammad himself in the Medinan years. His personal life was strongly influenced by events, but these in turn were to a considerable measure formed by the strengths and insights of his continually deepening religious life. Muhammad seems to have acquired an inward serenity, which provided stability and patience in difficult times. The discipline that the complex and energetic Medinan career demanded from him was developed during his years of persecution and testing in Mecca. Throughout the Medinan years Muhammad had a full but sometimes trouble-prone family life. After losing Khadija, Muhammad finally married ten more wives and took two concubines. Some of these marriages were political, but others were merciful caring for otherwise bereft and unwanted women. (The battles of Islam took many victims from the time of Muhammad onwards through the generations of conquest far and wide.)

'A'isha

After Khadija, 'A'isha was the favored wife of Muhammad. A lively and attractive person, she left us more reports (*hadith*) about the Prophet than anyone else did. She lived long after her husband's death and figured prominently in some of the main events of the umma's post-Muhammadan years. She told some charming stories about Muhammad, revealing him as a loving and warm person of good humor and delicacy in human relationships. She even told about how her husband could beat her in footraces—only after she had become fat.¹⁶ The Prophet once told 'A'isha how he could tell when she was angry with him. She would answer a question with "no, by Abraham's Lord," whereas when she was pleased, she would say, "no, by Muhammad's Lord."¹⁷ When 'A'isha wanted to watch the Abyssinian soldiers playing their martial games with spears in the mosque courtyard, Muhammad would stand before the window of her house with his cloak spread so as to conceal her. Being the Prophet's wife, she should not be looked upon unveiled. And men's games were not for women's eyes, either: "He would then stand for my sake till I was the one who departed; so estimate the time a young girl eager for amusement would wait."¹⁸

Zaynab

But Muhammad's household was not always tranquil. His wives sometimes found it difficult to get along peaceably with one another, and Muhammad himself had to be careful to treat each kindly and justly. One especially trying period came when Muhammad became emotionally involved with his own daughter-in-law, Zaynab.¹⁹ She immediately felt his interest one day when he showed up looking for Zayd, his adopted son and Zaynab's husband. Muhammad left abruptly when she told him he was not there, even though as father and father-in-law he had every right to enter the house even when Zaynab was there alone. Zaynab was beautiful, and she and her husband had apparently not been very happy together. After hearing of his father's strange behavior, Zayd sensed its cause and quickly offered to divorce Zaynab so that Muhammad might have her as his own.

This affair over Zaynab caused a great commotion among Muhammad's followers, who regarded such a union as incest, because of the custom of considering adopted children as blood relatives. But God revealed to his prophet that he would permit Muhammad to marry Zaynab, in what became a controversial verse (33:37). 'A'isha was not pleased, and some of those in Muhammad's community already suspected him of withholding certain verses of the revelation for personal reasons. In an oblique reference to this, 'A'isha reportedly declared: "If the Prophet had concealed anything of the revelation, it would have been those [the verses granting permission to marry Zaynab] he ought to have kept hidden."²⁰ When the Prophet had happily informed 'A'isha of God's decree, she is said to have replied: "Truly thy Lord makes haste to do thy pleasure."²¹

These anecdotes are included here not to cast aspersions on the Prophet or the Muslims. Rather, they are included for their intrinsic interest and as an illustration of some of the source material available to the historian, material that has not

been censored or changed. Western non-Muslim readers have sometimes used such material to discredit Islam, but they have taken it out of context and thus lost sight of the original situation. Indeed, Muhammad's contemporaries were not at all scandalized by their leader's human passions. In fact, one legend has Muhammad endowed with the capacity to satisfy all of his wives in a single evening. For Muslims, sexual vigor exercised within legal relationships is a great gift from God, to be enjoyed and used often. Instead, it was the social situation that disturbed people, that is, the violation of custom. But Muhammad's repetition of what God had revealed regarding the matter of Zaynab is what the historian must accept if the larger situation is to be appreciated fully. When the traditional Arabs were convinced that in this case it was acceptable for Muhammad to violate the tradition concerning marriage to adopted daughters, it was a mighty display of charismatic authority by Muhammad. Through him God was intervening and the people were responding.

Muhammad's Personal Life

We have a few descriptions of what Muhammad looked like, his characteristic dress, the foods he ate, and other personal matters. He was, as 'Alī reported:

neither very tall nor excessively short, but was a man of medium size, he had neither very curly nor flowing hair but a mixture of two, he was not obese, he did not have a very round face, but it was so to some extent, he was reddish-white, he had black eyes and long eyelashes, he had protruding joints and shoulder-blades, he was not hairy but had some hair on his chest, the palms of his hands and feet were calloused, when he walked he raised his feet as though he were walking on a slope, when he turned [for example, to someone] he turned completely, between his shoulders was the seal of prophecy and he was the seal of the prophets, he had a finer chest than anyone else, was truer in utterance than anyone else, had the gentlest nature and noblest tribe. Those who saw him suddenly stood in awe of him and those who shared his acquaintanceship loved him. Those who described him said they had never seen anyone like him before or since.²²

Muhammad ate little, and in fact together with his family, even in later years in Medina, often went without food because of the people's neglect to bring the household provisions, and it was beneath a prophet's dignity to engage in trade or begging. ('Ā'isha once reportedly said that her husband loved three things in this world: women, perfume, and food but that he succeeded in getting only two of them: women and perfume.) Muhammad mended his own sandals and otherwise looked after his own personal maintenance chores. He always granted people requests and gifts, to the extent of his ability. Once when he was asked to curse the polytheists, he answered: "I was not sent as one given to cursing; I was sent only as a mercy."²³ He took no personal vengeance, but when someone defied God, his activism was stirred up in God's behalf. His tendency to pardon and forgive is best seen in the way he treated the Meccans. The superior Arab of old times was the one who possessed and exercised *hilm*, which is the forbearance of the stronger and morally superior toward the guilty and weaker. Few people pos-

sessed this virtue, and it could not be faked in a violent, proud society such as Jāhiliya Arabia with its *machiismo* code. Thus Muhammad could have crushed Mecca and killed all of its inhabitants without suffering the censure of his fellow Arabs. "They got what was coming to them" would have been the likely verdict. But instead he forgave them in the name of God. And in the subsequent course of events that was seen to have been as just as it was merciful, a great people became Muslim, and the ancient sanctuary was rededicated for all Arabia to serve obediently and gratefully. One of the most beautiful names of God is al-Halim, "the Forbearing" (that is, exercising *hilm*). So one of the highest moral ideals of the Jāhiliya became one of the central attributes of God and his Prophet in the new age that generously (and wisely) continued so much of the old.²⁴

Muhammad's Death

The integration of pre-Islamic Arabian religious elements was completed during the pilgrimage in March of 632 (A.H. 13), which Muhammad led. In his farewell sermon, delivered from a hill overlooking the plain of 'Arafāt, he recited God's words:

Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion. (Qur'an 5:3)

In June Muhammad then died in 'Ā'isha's arms and was buried beneath her house. He had completed his work: all Arabia was united by the religion of Islam, and the Muslims regarded this as the answer to Abraham's prayer, as recorded in the Qur'an:

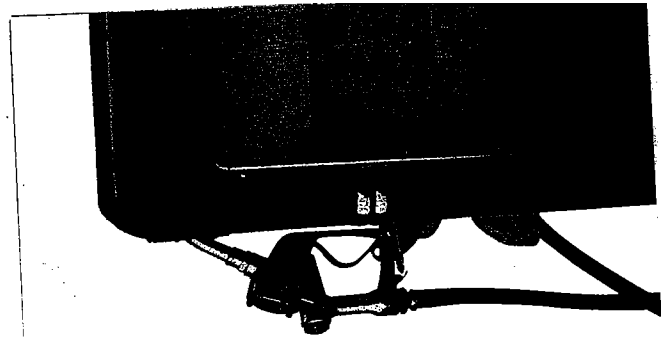
My Lord, make this land secure, and turn me and my sons away from serving idols; my Lord, they have led astray many men. Then whoso follows me belongs to me; and whoso rebels against me, surely Thou art All-forgiving, All-compassionate. Our Lord, I have made some of my seed to dwell in a valley where is no sown land by Thy Holy House [the Ka'ba]; Our Lord, let them perform the prayer, and make hearts of men yearn towards them, and provide them with fruits; haply they will be thankful. Our Lord, Thou knowest what we keep secret and what we publish; from God nothing whatever is hidden in earth and heaven. Praise be to God, who has given me, though I am old, Ishmael and Isaac; surely my Lord hears the petition. My Lord, make me a performer of the prayer, and of my seed. Our Lord, and receive my petition. Our Lord, forgive Thou me and my parents, and the believers, upon the day when the reckoning shall come to pass. (Qur'an 14:35-41)

Notes

1. Some form of afterlife belief was widespread among Arabians, according to evidence from modern archaeological excavations. See Adel Allouche, "Arabian Religions," in Mircea Eliade et al., eds. *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 366, with citations of relevant literature.
2. A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes: The First Chapter in Arabic Literature* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), pp. 86-87.

The Coming of Islam: The Prophet, His People, and God's Religion

3. For variants and notes, see William A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1977), pp. 212–213. The version of the *ḥadīth* translated here is found in *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, at the beginning of the “*Kitāb al-ʿAlfāz min al-ʿAdab*.”
4. The following sketch of Muhammad’s life relies heavily on the traditional source, *Life of Muhammad: A translation of [Ibn] Ishāq’s Sirat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 104ff.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 79–81.
7. William A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam*, chap. 1.
8. *Life of Muhammad*, p. 146.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 143–144.
10. The source I have used for this summary is al-Baghawī’s authoritative collection of traditions (*ḥadīths*), *Mishkāt al-Masābīh*, 4 vols., trans. James Robson (Lahore, Pakistan: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1965–1966), vol. 4, pp. 1264ff. (The opening of Muhammad’s breast is sometimes identified as an auspicious event of his youth, and separate from the ascension.)
11. *Life of Muhammad*, pp. 155–157.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 156–157.
13. This and the following quotation are from Tor Andrae, *Mohammad: The Man and His Faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), pp. 130–131.
14. This account of the Hijra is based on *Life of Muhammad*, pp. 198–231; and on W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1961), chap. 4.
15. It appears only in Ibn Ishāq’s *Sira*. See *Life of Muhammad*, pp. 231–233. A better translation is by W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 221–225. This document has been discussed thoroughly by R. B. Serjeant, “The Constitution of Medina,” *Islamic Quarterly* 8(1964): 3–16. (Serjeant’s dating of the document is convincing.)
16. *Mishkāt al-Masābīh*, vol. 2, p. 691.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 689.
18. *Ibid.*
19. For this summary, I have relied on Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammad* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 205–208.
20. From the Hadith collection of al-Tirmidhī, as quoted in Rodinson, *Mohammed*, p. 207.
21. As quoted in Andrae, *Mohammed*, p. 154.
22. *Mishkāt*, vol. 4, pp. 1242–1243.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 1247.
24. The relationship between *ḥilm* and *jahl* (destructive folly) is much more complex than can be summarized in a few words. I have based my interpretation principally on the discussion of Toshihiko Izutsu in his *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1963), pp. 203–219. The classic western study of *jahl* is Ignaz Goldziher’s “What is meant by ‘al-Jahiliyya’,” in his *Muslim Studies*, vol. I, translated by C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 219–208.



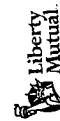
The A
The

**Stop paying
high-octane rates
for your auto insurance!**

Before he died
nance of the un
a successor to l
how to hold the
continuity. Abū
Abū Bakr as the
sion in a peremj
not without sor
move on the pa
ideas of tribal le
as a first among
bearing.

Muhammad l
sume leadership
smoothed the wa
ity. Being of the
cient, as seems t
of persons who
supporters of ‘A

the Muslim government was centered at Medina, came to claim that Muhammad had designated ‘Ali as his successor well before the Prophet’s death. This claim has never been accepted by the majority of Muslims, who eventually evolved into the Sunnis and consider themselves the mainstream of Islamic faith and practice. The Shi’ at ‘Ali, “party of ‘Ali,” developed a peculiar view of Islamic governance centering in the infallible imāms, who descended from Muhammad by way of ‘Ali and Fātima.



Compare auto insurance quotes from some of the nation's
top insurance carriers through **one easy step.**

T
d
e
f
t
t
v
v