

New York Times Bestselling Author
ROBERT SPENCER

AN INQUIRY INTO
ISLAM'S OBSCURE ORIGINS

DID
MUHAMMAD
EXIST?

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

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“As always, Robert Spencer dares to go where almost no one does and this book is no exception. Why are so few asking these essential questions with regards to Islam’s inception? The answer becomes evident as you read this fascinating, well-researched book—which in turn raises an abysmal question: could it be that the past 1400 years were based on a mirage?”

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ROBERT SPENCER



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Opening Remarks

Foreword to the First Edition by Johannes J. G. Jansen

MUHAMMAD, THE PROPHET OF ISLAM, is strongly present in the mind of millions of Muslims. This makes it difficult to imagine that he may not have been an actual person—as real as Richard Nixon.

Muslims have a strong and vivid memory of the founder of the religious movement we now know as “Islam.” This memory appears to be so strong and so vivid that even academic professionals whose daily duties include weighing the evidence for and against Muhammad’s historicity must have days in which they think that their intellectual pursuits make no sense, since the subject of their researches simply existed like anybody else.

And they may be tempted to think that even if Muhammad is a creation of the religious imagination of the seventh and the eighth centuries, what could possibly be the relevance of this insight (even if proven to be true beyond all reasonable doubt), given the strength of the faith of large multitudes of Muslims who believe that Muhammad is not the product of the imagination but was a real human being of flesh and blood, born in ancient Arabia, and the messenger of God?

It is indeed tempting to believe that Muhammad simply existed in the same way our forefathers did, if only because he is fully alive in the mind of his followers. But a closer look at the historical evidence may soon make the skeptic envious of all those who believe Muhammad really existed. It must be a blessing indeed to be able to believe there are no problems with Muhammad’s historicity. But then, the mere existence of such problems is no proof that Muhammad did not exist, or that his standard biography is a work of pious fiction.

Logicians have repeatedly argued that non-existence cannot be proven. When the British philosopher Bertrand Russell once suggested there was no rhinoceros in the lecture room, his young Austrian pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein started to look under the desks, chairs, and tables. He was not convinced. The lesson of the story is a simple one: to offer proof of existence may sometimes be difficult, to prove non-existence is simply impossible.

Nevertheless, it is reasonable to have doubts about Muhammad's historicity because there are no convincing archeological traces that confirm the traditional story of Muhammad and early Islam. The scholars and scribes of Islam know an awful lot about the early decades of the history of Islam, but what they know and what they want us to believe finds no confirmation in physical remains of any kind from the period and places concerned. What they know is limited to stories, and to the same stories retold.

But it is not only the stories themselves that lack outside confirmation. The background that the stories about Muhammad's career imply to have existed, and against which they are set, is problematic as well. We do not know much about the general circumstances in ancient sixth and seventh century Arabia, but the picture that the Islamic tradition offers is not confirmed by what we do know. Sometimes it is worse: archeological findings occasionally contradict the traditional Islamic picture. Inscriptions, for example, suggest that the ancient Arabs were not, as Islam teaches, pagans, but rather monotheists who believed in one God, the creator of heaven and earth.

Only more archeological work in present-day Arabia and greater Syria can possibly solve the dilemmas that have arisen concerning the historicity of Muhammad, but it is not probable that the rulers of these territories will permit scholarly research that might, possibly, eventually, contradict what those in power see as religious truth. And if the outcome of the research is determined beforehand by religious necessities, scholars will not be interested in the results.

Around the year 760, an Iraqi scholar, Ibn Ishaq, wrote a book that is the basis of all biographies of Muhammad. No biographical sketches of Muhammad exist that are not dependent upon Ibn Ishaq.

If an analysis of Ibn Ishaq's book establishes that for whatever reason it cannot be seen as an historical source, all knowledge we possess about Muhammad evaporates. When Ibn Ishaq's much quoted and popular book turns out to be nothing but pious fiction, we will have to face the possibility that it is not likely that we will ever discover the truth about Muhammad.

Next to Ibn Ishaq, the Qur'an itself looks like reasonably reliable testimony about Muhammad and his career. However, if there are reasons to believe that the Qur'an as we know it today may not be an authentic reproduction of an Arabic text dictated to Muhammad in the early seventh century, and if the Qur'an took its present shape not in the seventh century, but later, or even much later, then we are in trouble when we want to reconstruct Muhammad's life and teachings from the Qur'an.

The Arabic alphabet in which the Qur'an is written did not yet exist in the early seventh century, so it is improbable that Muhammad's secretaries, if brought back to life, would be able to recognize a modern edition of the Qur'an as part of the holy text that was dictated to them in fragments during Muhammad's lifetime—that is, if such dictation occurred, which may be doubtful as well. We may know much, we may like to know even more, and we shall know more—but at the same time our ignorance is limitless.

The Hadith or Tradition collections form the third source from which Muhammad's life may be reconstructed. It is actually not one source, but rather a group of sources of unequal quality. Some of it is unreliable even according to Muslim scholarly opinion itself. This group of sources has been controversial from the very beginning of its accumulation. Muslim scribes and scholars accuse some of the transmitters of this material of fabricating their stories. It is perfectly possible to fabricate stories about real and existing persons (see any newspaper, or Facebook), but to form a picture of the life of someone as eminent as Muhammad, one would rather not make use of stories that may have been fabricated.

Few Muslims, moreover, will find consolation in the fact that it is highly unusual to fabricate stories about persons who do not exist. Whereas Western scholars are still discussing the value of the

archeological evidence concerning ancient Arabia, Ibn Ishaq, and the Qur'an, there is hardly any serious disagreement about the nature and the value of the Hadith reports.

To find out the truth about Richard Nixon was difficult and would have been impossible without the tapes. In the case of Muhammad there are no tapes. There is not much at all. There actually is so little that the gravest suspicions are justified.

Foreword to the Paperback Edition by Ibn Warraq

In *Did Muhammad Exist?*, Robert Spencer reminded us that it was time to get back to real scholarship unhampered by political correctness and the corruption of Saudi money. The reaction, however, was predictable.

On the BBC's Radio 1, host Nihal Arthanayake tried repeatedly to get Spencer to acknowledge that to write such a book was offensive, and that the inquiry was objectionable on its face. He cajoled both non-Muslim and Muslim callers to say that they found the very idea of the book offensive, and ended up with what he thought was the *coup de grace*: Spencer, he said, "quotes Muhammad, then says he doesn't exist"—as if to quote Shakespeare's Macbeth would be tantamount to affirming that the uneasy king was a historical personage.

But the BBC is to be commended: they were one of the few mainstream media outlets that dared even to acknowledge the book's existence. The contrast was stark when Reza Aslan's *Zealot*, a revisionist reading of the Gospels, appeared to a rapturous reception from a media that now congratulated itself on its willingness to grapple with difficult and controversial issues. Aslan has said in an interview that the Gospels are "testimonies of faith composed by communities of faith written many years after the events they describe."

For this, he was congratulated, celebrated, lionized, praised for his courage in confronting fervently held religious beliefs, and laden with honors; and whatever the merits of *Zealot*, it was refreshing to see historical criticism of sacred texts receive so much mainstream attention. Yet when Robert Spencer made the case that the earliest

Islamic texts were likewise testimonies of faith, not historical records, and that the earliest records of Muhammad's words and deeds don't show up until more than a century after his supposed death, the response was a gingerly refusal to confront the issue for fear of giving offense, or a dismissal of the thesis itself as intentionally provocative.

Aslan, moreover, was blazing no new trails. Less than a month before *Did Muhammad Exist?* first appeared, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman published a book with the cognate title *Did Jesus Exist?* To be sure, Ehrman was making the case for rather than against the historical Jesus. Nonetheless, his book was new testimony in the long scholarly tradition of inquiry into the historical Jesus, which enjoys mainstream acceptance in academia, while the parallel line of inquiry into the historical Muhammad is often dismissed as the preoccupation of a few "fringe" scholars who flagrantly disregard accepted scholarly norms. Islamic scholar Eric Ormsby called Spencer's title "inflammatory"; no one is recorded as having leveled a similar charge against Ehrman.

The scholars of the historicity of Muhammad do indeed disregard dogmas regarding Islam's origins that all too many academics today accept uncritically, and in *Did Muhammad Exist?*, Spencer has done an admirable job of marshaling their findings and presenting them in terms that non-specialists can easily grasp. Yet even that aspect of the book was offensive as far as Ormsby was concerned. He dismissed the book as a "tabloid simulacrum" of the scholarship of Patricia Crone, Günter Lüling, Christoph Luxenberg, and others. Ormsby is perhaps unaware that that is precisely what a popularization such as *Did Muhammad Exist?* sets out to do: make the scholarly works of such people understandable and digestible to the layman who has neither the time nor the inclination to devote years of study to the field.

Ormsby likewise misses a key point of the book when he asserts: "The lack of written documentation for the period between 632, when the Prophet supposedly died, and 691 when Umayyad coinage or such structures as the Dome of the Rock unambiguously display a Muslim identity—or even the greater gap between 632 and the time

of the Prophet's first biographers—proves nothing in itself; it is simply that, a lack of written evidence. Those who make much of this underestimate or ignore the role of memory in traditional Muslim culture; for us memory is slippery, fallible, elusive. But for those raised in an oral culture, in which the spoken word weighed more than the written, texts committed to memory were deemed superior to those consigned to mere parchment and ink.”

The point, however, is not that there was simply a lack of written evidence. The point is that even in the written evidence that does exist—the chronicles of non-Muslims who bore the brunt of the Arab conquests, and the coins and monuments that the conquerors left behind—there is not the scarcest allusion to the existence of a new prophet, a new holy book, or a new religion. Surely if the stories of Muhammad that appeared in such proliferation a century later were circulating orally during what is now considered to be the first decades of Islam, there would have been some trace of them left behind in the writings from that period that do exist: some irritable mention by a Christian chronicler of the conquering Saracens' love for the supposed prophet—*something*.

But as Spencer shows, there is nothing. Nothing at all. This is a factual point that deserves attention, rather than burial under a heap of politically correct talking points.

What was missed amid all the indignation and fear of discussing the subject at all was the fact that, in *Did Muhammad Exist?*, Robert Spencer has laid out with exemplary clarity the problems with the traditional account of the Qur'an, the rise of Islam and the life of Muhammad. In that, he has performed a valuable service.

Preface by Volker Popp

The end of the Great War marked also the end of a period of groundbreaking research in the field of Islamic studies. Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) treated early Islamic history as based on ahistorical texts in the style of the Old Testament Books of Kings.

Friedrich Schwally (1863–1919) reached the conclusion: “The theologians are not sufficiently aware of the fact, that Islam is a part of Church history.”¹

Both men were eminent theologians and Orientalists.

Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) delivered a speech at a congress for the history of religion in Paris (1900) entitled “Islamisme et Parsisme,” pointing to the Iranian traditions in early Islam, e.g. the welcome presence of dogs in the mosque, the five times of prayer, the murmuring of prayers, Zamzam, now the name of the source of water next to the Kaaba, the use of the toothstick, etc. This was the fruit of his studies of Islamic traditions (hadith).

Paul Casanova (1861–1926) added the perspective of apocalypticism with his underrated work *Muhammad et la Fin du Monde* (1911–1921).

Arthur Jeffery’s article “The Quest of the Historical Muhammad” brought an end to the illusion that a life of the Arabian prophet in the style of the lives of Jesus could be gained from Islamic literature.² The seemingly biographical sira literature aims at explaining the reception of a holy scripture that was no longer understood.

At the same time, great progress was made in the field of archaeology of sites of Islamic history. Ernst Herzfeld excavated Samarra in Mesopotamia and discovered remnants of an Islamic civilization that had perpetuated the Iranian and Hellenistic heritage. Vast collections of Islamic coins were amassed and stored in museums, together with other testimonies of the Islamic past. Hundreds of lead bullae from the postal service of the early Arab masters were found near Haifa during Ottoman railway construction. To this day they are rotting away in the basement of the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul. One specimen was published by Ibrahim Artuk. Since I have pointed to the Biblical and Christian content of the design, alpha and omega in the field, the piece has been declared a forgery by a leading German specialist in Islamic coins. The curator in question never held the bulla in his hand or inspected it at the museum. A reference to the Christian content was reason enough to condemn the bulla as forgery.

This is now a standard procedure among Orientalists. The material culture of an Islamic past is never judged on its own merits, but only by its usefulness for validating the Islamic myth. When early Arab coin designs show the sign of the cross, this is interpreted as a sign

of Islamic tolerance. The sign of the cross preceding the first *amir al-mu'minin* Muawiya's Greek inscription in Palestine is regarded as a Christian worker's mark, the image of the Iranian fire altar on the reverse of Muawiya's coins as a die-cutter's error. Whatever does not fit into the picture created by an undated Islamic literature is rejected. We witness the triumph of stories on paper over material evidence unearthed.

Wars of words in the seventh century are turned into names of valiant Arab heroes. An inscription on a so-called Arab-Sassanian coin was correctly read as a motto in Middle Persian and published by George C. Miles, curator of the American Numismatic Society, New York. There is nothing Islamic about these coins. They depict the bust of an Iranian ruler, have Middle-Persian inscriptions in Aramaic script in the field, and show the fire altar on the reverse side. Some are bilingual, with an additional Karshuni/Arabic wording in the margin. Miles read the legend: "PYRWC AMWR Y YAZTAN" (Victorious is the Word [*memra*] of God).

Now comes the time of the Orientalist. Heinz Gaube of the University of Tübingen, Germany, reads the name of an Arab hero taken from the account of al-Tabari into this legend: "Amr bin Laqit." He is lauded for this discovery by Claude Curiel, curator at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

We have here an example of a Hellenistic attitude still extant among Orientalists. Hellenism created personae, personifications of religious or philosophical ideas or concepts. From a very limited textual basis of a couple of seemingly fitting expressions, the concept of a prophet Zoroaster was created. From an Aramaic motto stirring up people in Eastern Iran around the year 660, calling for the rule of the MaHMaT (Turkish: Mehmet, French: Mahomet), "the Praised One," the prophet of the Arabians was made up, when the hope for an imminent *parousia* had vanished after the year 78 of the Arabs (698 CE). Once the eschatological Jesus as the Lord of the Day of Judgement had become a chiliastic concept, a lawgiver rebuilding the temple (Ka'ba), the messianic hopes were represented and personified by the concept of the "Mahdi," the "Promised One."

Such insights cannot be gained without overcoming various hindrances. The MaHMaT/MaHMaD inscription was published as a coin legend for “Muhammad” by Heinrich Nützel in the Catalogue of the Islamic Coin Collection of the Königl. Museen Berlin, 1898. When I wanted to verify the reading, I was turned away and told that the museum staff regards the Oriental coins as an unwanted luxury. They had to focus on coins of Prussia and Saxony, and had no time to bring forward an Oriental coin for inspection. Even the intervention of Werner Sundermann on my behalf did not change their attitude.

Fortunately, we do not have to rely on the help of museum staff in Berlin anymore. Many specimens of the MaHMaT/MaHMaD/MuHaMmaD coinage have since the beginning of hostilities in Afghanistan found their way into the London art market, where they are sold by specialized auction houses. We now have specimens which have an Aramaic Middle Persian MaHMaT/MaHMaD in the field and MuHaMmaD in Arabic letters in the margin.

It didn't take long before the Orientalist David Sears of the American University of Beirut, published the new discoveries as issues of a brother of Abd al-Malik, the second *amir al-mu'minin* by the name Muhammad of Abd al-Malik. This brother is mentioned by the literature on Islamic beginnings. Why does he have no patronym as part of his assumed coin legend? We know that Arabs of today are proud of their lineage. But mottoes and slogans have spiritual fathers only. We have Jesus, son of Mary, but we do not have Christ, son of Joseph. For this reason, “Muhammad” is an honorific title of the one who will come with fire to act as a judge and will carry the sword at the end of days.

As long as the oil reserves in the Middle East last, lip service will be paid by the West to the present concept of the prophet of the Arabians. Only a few independent minds will dare to challenge the policy of appeasement towards a concept of a brotherhood of so-called Abrahamic Religions. The author of this book, Robert Spencer, does not shy away from an uphill struggle. May he find many co-travelers willing to join him on his trek through the desert of intellectual sterility of our time.

Foreword to the Revised and Expanded Edition

By Jay Smith

IN 1995 AT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY, I did a debate with Dr. Jamal Badawi (considered at the time as one of the leading apologists for Islam in the English-speaking world). My questions centered on whether we could trust the ninth- and tenth-century traditional sources for the history of early Islam, as they were the earliest sources we had, but compiled centuries too late.

Dr. Badawi's sole reply to the evidence I gave was that "I was arguing from silence," and he was correct...I had nothing from the seventh century to support my conclusions; but then, neither did he.

This has been the dilemma for all of us who seek to critique Muhammad's late biography, leaving us with only one narrative concerning early Islam and the life of Muhammad in the seventh century—a narrative which was not written down by anyone living close to him (such as an eyewitness), nor even from someone living in his century, but from compilers of his biography (Ibn Hisham just prior to 833 AD), and writers of his sayings (Al Bukhari just prior to 870 AD), which are 200 to 300 years too late. What's more, everything they employed to write their biographies and sayings were obtained from oral tradition, a vehicle open to embellishment, accretions, and deletions.

Yet few in academia seem concerned with these difficulties, choosing instead to write their tomes on the prophet's life with hardly a word concerning whether any of it was true, or historical.

That was, until eight years ago when Robert Spencer published his second major book on Muhammad, entitled *Did Muhammad Exist?* It was one of the first books to publicly question the very existence of the man almost two billion Muslims look to as their paradigm for life today.

So, why have so few dared to go where Spencer went eight years ago? The answer is simple. To do so would have labelled them as “hate-preachers” or “Islamophobes” and closed the doors to any future books or positions within academic institutions.

No other religion attaches the word “phobic” to those who dare question it like Islam does, suggesting it uniquely needs protection from criticism, unlike Christianity, which has been attacked and vilified for centuries now, yet needs no protection from such attacks.

Yet, the “argument from silence” has continued to haunt us. It begins with the notion that just because there is an “absence of evidence,” that doesn’t necessarily assume that there is “evidence of absence,” a clever ditty which suggests that if given enough time something somewhere will come to light which will prove this man did live and die in the central part of Arabia, or that he received the Qur’an in twenty-two years and began one of the largest and fastest-growing religions found in the world today.

Spencer’s 2012 riposte to this argument was to find and tabulate evidence from the very century Muhammad should have lived, in the form of coins, rock inscriptions, buildings, mosques, and written letters to prove that the later ninth- and tenth-century traditional Muhammad was the wrong man at the wrong place doing the wrong things at the wrong time. But still not too many people paid attention.

And then 2020 rolled around, a year which will probably be best remembered as the year of the debilitating pandemic and the US elections. But for those of us who are interested in the history of Islam, 2020 will be better remembered as the year when the Qur’an took a real “beating” due to a single twenty-five-minute interview between a Muslim scholar (Dr. Yasir Qadhi) and a notorious Muslim blogger (Mohammed Hijab). It was in that interview that the now infamous line “The standard narrative has holes in it” was introduced, referring to the thirty official and different Arabic ‘Qira’at’

Qur'ans, admitting on the most public of platforms (YouTube) that not every Qur'an is the same, with tens of thousands of different words and letters between them.

Simultaneously, other new “holes in the narrative” were being uncovered by numerous scholars around the world concerning the historical authenticity of Muhammad as well. These included approximately 30,000 rock inscriptions suggesting pretty clearly that prior to 690 AD, there are no references to Muhammad, nor his religion, nor to his city Mecca, nor to his book, the Qur'an. New coins were being uncovered suggesting that the Arabs living in the seventh century were either Christians in the West, or Zoroastrians in the East, proving yet again an absence of any evidence for early Islam.

The supposed letters of Muhammad, as well as the references to him by late-seventh century Christian clerics were all found to be either ninth or sixteenth-century frauds, or references to someone similar to him, yet carrying out the wrong acts at the wrong places when compared to the Muhammad we read about in the later traditions.

In fact, so much new evidence confronting Muhammad's existence in the seventh century has been uncovered since 2012 that Spencer was asked by his publishers to rewrite his book on Muhammad—which he did immediately—adding over 25 percent newer and more convincing arguments to those he had introduced eight years earlier.

This book then, is the result of those new and improved arguments, forcing those who still believe in the Muhammad of the later ninth and tenth centuries to provide even one piece of evidence for that later Muhammad in the seventh century, which to date, they simply cannot.

Ironically, the onus is no longer on us. It is now on them to convince us that indeed their Muhammad is historical; otherwise, it is they, and not us, who now “argue from silence.”

Author's Preface:

The Return of *Did Muhammad Exist?*

Muhammad Strikes Back

THE EMAIL SHOWED UP IN my inbox in late July 2015. "I suppose you're going to have to retract your book *Did Muhammad Exist?* and withdraw it from circulation," it read. "The new Qur'an manuscript discoveries disprove everything you wrote about the late origins of the Qur'an."

The email writer was referring to a discovery that made international headlines and generated considerable excitement at that time. The BBC reported: "What may be the world's oldest fragments of the Koran have been found by the University of Birmingham. Radiocarbon dating found the manuscript to be at least 1,370 years old, making it among the earliest in existence."¹

Qur'an fragments that date from no later than AD 645 were indeed a momentous find. Dr. Muhammad Isa Waley, an expert on Qur'an manuscripts for the British Library, predicted that Muslims would "rejoice" over this "exciting discovery."²

Susan Worrall of the University of Birmingham said that when the Qur'an fragments were carbon-dated, no one among the staff of researchers thought "in our wildest dreams" that they would turn out to be so ancient. Said Worrall: "Finding out we had one of the oldest fragments of the Koran in the whole world has been fantastically exciting."³

University of Birmingham professor David Thomas said that these fragments “could well take us back to within a few years of the actual founding of Islam....The person who actually wrote it could well have known the Prophet Muhammad. He would have seen him probably, he would maybe have heard him preach. He may have known him personally—and that really is quite a thought to conjure with.”⁴

Thomas added that “the parts of the Koran that are written on this parchment can, with a degree of confidence, be dated to less than two decades after Muhammad’s death.”⁵ As far as he was concerned, the fragments concerned the canonical story about the origins of the Qur’an: “These portions must have been in a form that is very close to the form of the Koran read today, supporting the view that the text has undergone little or no alteration and that it can be dated to a point very close to the time it was believed to be revealed.”⁶

Return of the Skeptics

All that may be. But the BBC also states that “these tests provide a range of dates, showing that, with a probability of more than 95 percent, the parchment was from between 568 and 645.”⁷

According to the standard, mainstream Islamic version of the origins of the religion, a version that most historians accept as generally reliable, Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, was born in 569 or 570. Around the year 610, he was visited by the angel Gabriel, who ordered him to recite messages from Allah that were later collected into the Qur’an. Over the next twenty-three years, Muhammad’s recitations of what Gabriel told him were memorized by his followers, with some writing them down. After Muhammad’s death in 632, they were collected together to form the Qur’an, which Muslims consider to be the perfect, immutable word of Allah, a perfect copy of the book that he has had with him in Paradise forever.

If the fragments could date from between 568 and 610, then they might not be an early copy of the Qur’an at all, much less a copy owned by someone who knew Muhammad. If they date from that period between 568 and 610, these Qur’an fragments predate the

time in which the Qur'an could even possibly have been written, because they were written before Muhammad began to receive any revelations. In that case, *they would predate Islam itself*.

How can there be a Qur'an before there is an Islamic religion? While David Thomas and other scholars around the world hailed the discovery as confirmation that the Qur'anic text "has undergone little or no alteration," and the fellow who emailed me thought the discovery destroyed my entire thesis in *Did Muhammad Exist?*, another possibility occurred to me: Could these newly-discovered fragments actually come from a text that was one of the sources used in the compilation of the Qur'an? Were they not actually confirmation that the Qur'an has undergone little or no alteration, but rather confirmation that it was not a series of revelations given to Muhammad by Gabriel, but a book compiled by a committee working from existing material and adapting that material for their own purposes?

I wrote the first edition of *Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry Into Islam's Obscure Origins* back in 2010 and 2011, but when those manuscripts came to light, it became clear to me that much more needed to be said. Now at last I have had the opportunity to do so. In this new revised and expanded version, I examine discoveries that have been made since I wrote it, other important research that because of restrictions of space and time I was not able to include in the first edition, and further evidence to support the hypotheses I initially presented.

The question of Islam's origins is more gripping, more full of surprising twists and turns, and more exhilaratingly complex than the best adventure novel. I'm grateful to have been given the opportunity to revisit this all-important topic. I hope that this present volume will contribute to illuminating it, and will lead to further fruitful explorations.

—**Robert Spencer**

Chronology of Key Events

IN THIS CHRONOLOGY, INCIDENTS that rest on less than firm historical ground than is ordinarily assumed are marked in *italics*.

610	<i>Muhammad receives his first revelation of the Qur'an from Allah, through the angel Gabriel</i>
610–632	<i>Muhammad periodically receives revelations of the Qur'an</i>
632	<i>Muhammad dies</i>
632–634	<i>Caliphate of Abu Bakr</i>
632–633	<i>Wars of Apostasy</i>
632	<i>December: Battle of Yamama, death of many who had memorized portions of the Qur'an; according to Islamic tradition, this was the impetus for the first collection of the Qur'an</i>
633	Arabian invasion of Iraq
634–644	<i>Caliphate of Umar</i>
636–637	Arabian conquest of Syria and Palestine
Late 630s	Christian document is published that mentions an unnamed and still-living Arabian prophet "armed with a sword"
639	Arabian conquest of Armenia and Egypt
Early 640s	Thomas, a Christian priest, mentions a battle between the Byzantines and the "Taiyaye of Muhammad" east of Gaza in 634
644	Arabian conquest of Persia
644–656	<i>Caliphate of Uthman</i>
640's–650s	Coin struck in Palestine bearing the inscription "Muhammad" but depicting a figure holding a cross
650's–660s	Arabian conquest of North Africa
651	Muawiya, governor of Syria, writes to the Byzantine Emperor

	Constantine calling on him to renounce Jesus and worship the God of Abraham
653	<i>Uthman collects the Qur'an, standardizes its text, has variants burnt, and distributes his version to all the Muslim provinces</i>
654	Arabian conquest of Cyprus and Rhodes
656–661	<i>Caliphate of Ali</i>
661–680	Caliphate of Muawiya
660s/670s	Coin depicts Muawiya holding cross topped with crescent
660s/670s	Armenian Bishop Sebeos writes a semi-historical, semi-legendary account of Mahmet, an Arab preacher who taught his people to worship the God of Abraham, and how he led 12,000 Jews along with Arabs to invade Palestine
662	Bathhouse in Palestine dedicated with official inscription mentioning Muawiya and bearing cross
674	<i>First Arabian siege of Constantinople</i>
680	Anonymous chronicler identifies Muhammad as leader of the “sons of Ishmael,” whom God sent against the Persians “like the sand of the sea-shores”
680-683	Caliphate of Yazid I
Early 680s	Coins apparently depicting Yazid feature a cross
685	Abd Allah ibn az-Zubayr, rebel ruler of Arabia, Iraq and Iran, mints coins proclaiming Muhammad as prophet of Allah
685–705	Caliphate of Abd al-Malik
690	Nestorian Christian chronicler John Bar Penkaye writes of Muhammad’s authority and the Arabians’ brutality
690s	Coptic Christian bishop John of Nikiou makes the first extant mention of “Muslims” (although the earliest available edition of his work dates from 1602 and may have been altered in translation)
691	Dome of the Rock inscription declares that “Muhammad is the servant of God and His messenger” and that “the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God,” and features an amalgamation of Qur’an quotes
696	First coins appear that do not feature an image of the sovereign, and that do feature the Islamic confession of faith (<i>shahada</i>)
690s	According to a variant Islamic tradition, Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, governor of

	Iraq, collects the Qur'an, standardizes its text, has variants burnt, and distributes his version to all the Muslim provinces
690s	Hajjaj ibn Yusuf introduces Qur'an reading into mosque worship, according to a later Islamic tradition
690s	Hajjaj ibn Yusuf adds diacritical marks into the text of the Qur'an, enabling the reader to distinguish between various Arabic consonants, thereby enabling the reader to make sense of the text
711–718	Muslim conquest of Spain
730	Christian writer John of Damascus refers to Islamic theology in detail, and to suras of the Qur'an, although not to the Qur'an by name
732	Muslim advance into Western Europe stopped at the Battle of Tours
740s–750s	Collection of biographical material and publication of first biography of Muhammad by Ibn Ishaq, which only now exists in a ninth-century recension
750s–760s	Malik ibn Anas compiles the first hadith collection
830s–860s	The six major hadith collections are compiled and published, providing voluminous detail about Muhammad's words and deeds

Muhammad and His Family, According to Islamic Tradition

Muhammad was the son of Abdullah and Amina.

Muhammad's paternal grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, had a son, Abbas. His son, Abdullah ibn Abbas, was Muhammad's cousin. Many hadiths are attributed to his as the ultimate source.

Abdullah's brother Abu Talib was Muhammad's guardian after the deaths of Abdullah and Amina. He was also the father of Ali ibn Abi Talib, who was Muhammad's cousin and the founding figure of Shi'ite Islam.

Muhammad and his first wife Khadija had three daughters: Fatima, Zaynab, and Ruqayya.

Fatima married Ali ibn Abi Talib and had five children, including the Shi'ite heroes Hasan and Husayn, who was killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680 that sealed the split between the Sunnis and the Shi'ites.

Ruqayya married Uthman, who became the third caliph after Abu Bakr and Umar.

Ali succeeded to the caliphate when Uthman was murdered. When Ali was murdered, Muawiya, Uthman's cousin, became caliph.

CHAPTER 1

The Full Light of History?

“In place of the mystery under which the other religions have covered their origins, [Islam] was born in the full light of history; its roots are on the surface. The life of its founder is as well known to us as that of any sixteenth-century reformer. We can follow year by year the fluctuations of his thought, his contradictions, his weaknesses.”

—ERNEST RENAN, “Muhammad and the Origins of Islam” (1851)

Shadows and Light

Did Muhammad exist?

It is a question that few have thought to ask, or dared to ask.

For most of the fourteen hundred years since the prophet of Islam is thought to have walked the earth, almost everyone has taken his existence for granted. After all, his imprint on human history is enormous.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* dubbed him “the most successful of all Prophets and religious personalities.” In his 1978 book *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, historian Michael H. Hart put Muhammad in the top spot, explaining: “My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world’s most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular level.”¹

Other historians have noted the extraordinarily rapid growth of the Arabian empire in the period immediately following Muhammad’s death. The Arabian conquerors, evidently inspired by his teaching,

created an empire that in fewer than one hundred years stretched from the Iberian Peninsula to India. Not only was that empire immense, but its cultural influence—also founded on Muhammad's teaching—has been enduring as well.

Moreover, Islamic literature contains an astounding proliferation of biographical material about Muhammad. In his definitive two-volume English-language biography of Muhammad, *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (1956), the Scottish historian W. Montgomery Watt argues that the sheer detail contained in the Islamic records of Muhammad, plus the negative features of his biography, make his story plausible.²

However sharply people may differ on the virtues and vices of Muhammad, and on the value of his prophetic claims, virtually no one doubts that he was an actual person who lived in a particular time and a particular place, and more to the point, who founded one of the world's major religions.

Could such a man have never existed at all?

There is, in fact, considerable reason to question the historicity of Muhammad. Although the story of Muhammad, the Qur'an, and early Islam is widely accepted, on close examination the particulars of the story prove elusive. The more one looks at the origins of Islam, the less one sees.

This book explores the questions that a small group of pioneering scholars has raised about the historical authenticity of the standard account of Muhammad's life and prophetic career. A thorough review of the historical records provides startling indications that much, if not all, of what we know about Muhammad is legend, not historical fact. A careful investigation similarly suggests that the Qur'an is not a collection of what Muhammad presented as revelations from the one true God but was actually constructed from already existing material, mostly from the Jewish and Christian traditions.

The nineteenth-century scholar Ernest Renan confidently claimed that Islam emerged in the "full light of history." But in truth, the real story of Muhammad, the Qur'an, and early Islam lies deep in the shadows. It is time to bring it into the light.

Historical Scrutiny

Why embark on such an inquiry?

Religious faith, any religious faith, is something that people hold very deeply. In this case, many Muslims would regard the very idea of applying historical scrutiny to the traditional account of Islam's origins as an affront. Such an inquiry raises questions about the foundational assumptions of a belief system that guides more than one billion people worldwide.

But the questions in this book are not intended as any kind of attack on Muslims. Rather, they are presented as an attempt to make sense of the available data, comparing the traditional account of Islam's origins against what can be known from the historical record.

Islam is a faith rooted in history. It makes historical claims. Muhammad is supposed to have lived at a certain time and preached certain doctrines that he said God had delivered to him. The veracity of those claims is open, to a certain extent, to historical analysis. Whether Muhammad really received messages from the angel Gabriel may be a faith judgment, but whether he lived at all is a historical one.

Islam is not unique in staking out its claims as a historical faith or in inviting historical investigation. But it is unique in *not* having undergone searching historical criticism on any significant scale. Both Judaism and Christianity have been the subject of widespread scholarly investigation for more than two centuries. The nineteenth-century biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen's *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel*), a textual and historical analysis of the Torah, revolutionized the way many Jews and Christians looked at their origins of their Scriptures and religious traditions.

By the time Wellhausen published his study in 1882, historical criticism of Judaism and Christianity had been going on for over one hundred years. The eighteenth century marked the beginning of the scholarly "quest for the historical Jesus," although that historical criticism, or higher criticism, took off during the following century. The

German theologian David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) posited in his *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, 1835) that the miracles in the Gospels were actually natural events that those anxious to believe had seen as miracles. Ernest Renan (1823–1892) in his *Vie de Jésus* (*The Life of Jesus*, 1863) argued that the life of Jesus, like that of any other man, ought to be open to historical and critical scrutiny. Later scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) cast strong doubt on the historical value of the Gospels. Some scholars asserted that the canonical Gospels of the New Testament were products of the second Christian century and therefore of scant historical value. Others suggested that Jesus of Nazareth had never even existed.³

Eventually, higher critics who dated the Gospels to the second century became a minority of scholars. The consensus that emerged dated the Gospels to within forty or sixty years of the death of Jesus Christ. From that gap between the life of their protagonist and their publication, many scholars concluded that the Gospels were overgrown with legendary material. They began trying to sift through the available evidence in order to try to determine who Jesus was and what he really said and did.

The reaction within the Christian world was mixed. Many Christians dismissed the higher criticism as an attempt to undermine their faith. Some criticized it for excessive skepticism and one-sidedness, regarding historical-critical investigations of the Gospels and the historicity of Christ as the critics' effort to justify their own unbelief. But others were more receptive. Large Protestant churches such as the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists ultimately abandoned Christian dogma as it had hitherto been understood, espousing a vague, nondogmatic Christianity that concentrated on charitable work rather than doctrinal rigor and spirituality. Other Protestant denominations (including splinters of the three named above) retreated into fundamentalism, which in its original formulation was a defiant assertion of the historicity of the virgin birth of Christ, his resurrection, and more in the face of the higher critical challenge.

Pope Leo XIII condemned the higher criticism in his 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, but nine years later he established the Pontifical Biblical Commission, which was to use the tools of higher criticism to explore the scriptures within a context respectful to Catholic faith. In 1943 Pope Pius XII encouraged higher critical study in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. The Catholic Church ultimately determined that because its faith was historical, historical study could not be an enemy of faith, provided that such investigations did not simply provide a cover for radical skepticism.

The higher criticism clearly transformed the Christian world, changing the course of several major Christian communions and radically altering how others presented the faith. Similarly, investigations into the origins of Judaism and the historical material contained within the Hebrew scriptures have affected the Jewish tradition. In Judaism as in Christianity, traditions developed that rejected literalism and reevaluated numerous elements of traditional orthodoxy. Reform Judaism, like the liberal Protestant denominations, generally rejected traditional understandings and the literalism that underlay them.

Yet Judaism and Christianity still live, and in many areas they thrive. They have survived the challenge. Can Islam survive the same historical-critical challenge?

No one knows, for it has never received this treatment on nearly the same scale.

Why should Islam and its leading figure be exempt from the scrutiny that has been applied to other religions?

The Power of Legend

As a personality, Muhammad fairly leaps from the pages of the earliest available Islamic texts. What mortal hand or eye could frame this fearsome man? Who would dare to create such an outsize character, so immense in his claims, his loves, his hates?

In addition, there is little doubt that the political unification of Arabia took place around the time Muhammad is assumed to have lived. Scholars generally agree that the Arabian warriors swept out of Arabia beginning in the second quarter of the seventh century and

within a hundred years had subdued much of the Middle East, North Africa, and Persia, and had entered India and Spain.

Finally, of course, Muhammad has undeniably made a lasting impact as teacher and example to the Islamic world.

Given these three points—the richly detailed portrait of Muhammad found in the Islamic literature, the way he seemingly inspired his successors to found a vast empire, and his enduring legacy as founder of a religion that today claims more than one billion adherents—few have thought to question Muhammad’s existence. Muslims and non-Muslims alike take it for granted that he did live and that he originated the faith we know as Islam. I understand the influence the traditional account has, for I spent more than two decades studying Islamic theology, law, and history in depth before seriously considering how much we can really know for certain about the historical reliability of what the early Islamic sources say that the prophet of Islam said and did.

But the more I examined the evidence gathered by scholars who bothered to apply the historical-critical method to Islam’s origins, the more I recognized how little there was to confirm the canonical story. In 2006 I wrote in my book *The Truth About Muhammad*, a biography based on the earliest available Muslim sources, that “from a strictly historical standpoint, it is impossible to state with certainty even that a man named Muhammad actually existed, or if he did, that he did much or any of what is ascribed to him.” Nonetheless, I said for a variety of reasons that “in all likelihood he did exist.”⁴ All these years later, I stand by that conclusion: in all likelihood, someone who claimed to be a prophet of some kind and was active among the Arabs in the seventh century.

That is, however, by no means the same thing as saying that the prophet of Islam as we come to know him in the biographical literature of Islamic tradition is a historical figure. Even the pillars used to support the traditional account begin to crumble upon close scrutiny. True enough, beginning in the seventh century, Arabian conquerors went out and created an immense empire. But as this book will show, historical and archaeological records cast serious doubt on the claim that they did so under the sway of what was

already a fully formed religion with a revealed book as its centerpiece and a revered prophet as its model for conduct.

Likewise, Muhammad's tremendous impact on history does not in itself provide irrefutable evidence of the accuracy of the portrait that the earliest available Islamic sources paint of him. Many legendary or semilegendary figures have inspired magnificent achievements by real people. One need only consider, for example, the Crusader literature such as *The Song of Roland* and *The Poem of El Cid*, which romanticized historical figures and presented them as larger-than-life heroes, and which in turn inspired other warriors to new feats of bravery and heroism. Muhammad's great influence in providing the impetus for a remarkably resilient culture need not depend on his having been a historical figure; a historical legend, believed fervently, could account for the same effect.

The vividness of the picture of Muhammad that emerges from the Islamic sources is no guarantee of his reality, either. Literature is full of compelling, believable portraits of men who never existed but whose personalities are fully formed on the page, such that if the fictional narratives were mistaken for historical accounts, no one would take it amiss. Macbeth, the king of Scotland, is in Shakespeare's play easily as coherent and compelling a character as Islam's prophet. Macbeth was a real king, but the available historical records depict a figure far different from Shakespeare's troubled antihero. Sir Walter Scott's historical novel *Ivanhoe* depicts many historical events accurately, but the primary story it tells is fictional. Robin Hood may have been an actual person, but his real exploits are shrouded in the mists of folklore. Take away Robin's robbing of the rich and giving to the poor, his merry men, Friar Tuck, Sherwood Forest, and the rest as legendary accretions, and what is left? Perhaps some kernel of what gave rise to these legends, or perhaps nothing much at all. We will probably never know.

A careful look at the available historical evidence suggests, or at least opens up the possibility, that the case of Muhammad may be similar. Some early accounts do assert that a man named Muhammad existed, but what they say about him bears little resemblance to the Muslim prophet, the guiding light and inspiration

of the army of Arabian nomads that stormed out of Arabia in the 630s and embarked on a stunningly successful string of conquests. The oldest records that tell us anything about this man, if they're definitely talking about him in the first place, differ sharply from the story told by the earliest Islamic texts, which date from many decades after Muhammad's reported death.

What's more, the available historical records contain a surprising number of puzzles and anomalies that strongly suggest that the standard Muslim story about Muhammad is more legend than fact. Muhammad, it appears, was much different from the perfect man of Islamic hagiography—if he existed at all.

Many people have asked me how I could go from writing a biography of Muhammad—*The Truth About Muhammad*—to then questioning his very existence. The question seems to me to arise from a failure to grasp a simple distinction: the canonical texts of Islam supply us with a great deal of biographical material about Muhammad. *The Truth About Muhammad* is a portrait of what Muslims believe about their prophet as he is depicted in those sources. This present volume, by contrast, is an evaluation of whether or not, and to what extent, those sources have any historical value and give us information about an actual person.

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

In writing this book I do not intend to break new ground. Instead, I aim to bring to wider public attention the work of a small band of scholars who have dared, often at great personal and professional risk, to examine what the available historical data reveal about the canonical account of Islam's origins.

This book is the fruit of my researches into the writings of scholars of earlier generations, including, among others, Ignaz Goldziher, Arthur Jeffery, Henri Lammens, David S. Margoliouth, Alphonse Mingana, Theodor Nöldeke, Aloys Sprenger, Joseph Schacht, and Julius Wellhausen, as well as modern-day scholars such as Suliman Bashear, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Dan Gibson, Ibn Warraq, Johannes J. G. Jansen, Judith Koren, Christoph Luxenberg, Günter

Lüling, Yehuda Nevo, Volker Popp, Ibn Rawandi, David S. Powers, and John Wansbrough.

Some of the bold scholars who have investigated the history of early Islam have even received death threats. As a result, some publish under pseudonyms, including scholars of the first rank such as those who go by the names Christoph Luxenberg and Ibn Warraq. Such intimidation is an impediment to scholarly research that even the most radical New Testament scholar never had to deal with.

The investigation of Islam's origins, despite the obscurity in which the endeavor has been shrouded, is actually almost as old as the comparable investigations of Judaism and Christianity. The German scholar Gustav Weil (1808–1889) first attempted a historical-critical evaluation of the earliest Islamic sources in *Muhammad der Prophet, Sein Leben und Sein Lehre (Muhammad the Prophet, His Life and His Teaching*, 1843), but he had only limited access to those sources. Weil noted in another work on Islam that “reliance upon oral traditions, at a time when they were transmitted by memory alone, and every day produced new divisions among the professors of Islam, opened up a wide field for fabrication and distortion.”⁵

Ernest Renan, for all his enthusiasm about the historicity of Muhammad, actually approached the Islamic sources with something of a critical eye. Writing of the Qur'an, he pointed out that “the integrity of a work committed to memory for a long time is unlikely to be well preserved; could not interpolations and alterations have slipped in during the successive revisions?” But Renan himself did not investigate that possibility. He retreated into the unsupported assertion that “the veritable monument of the early history of Islam, the Koran, remains absolutely impregnable, and suffices in itself, independently of any historical accounts, to reveal to us Muhammad.”⁶

The Scottish historian William Muir (1819–1905) published his massive work *A Life of Mahomet and History of Islam to the Era of the Hegira* in four volumes between 1858 and 1862. Muir expressed skepticism about some of the material about Muhammad in Islamic tradition, asserting that “even respectably derived traditions often

contained much that was exaggerated and fabulous.”⁷ Nonetheless, in his huge biography of Muhammad he took the early Islamic sources essentially at face value, discarding little or nothing as “exaggerated and fabulous.”

More skeptical was Wellhausen (1844–1918), whose studies of the five books of Moses led him to posit that those books were the product not of a single hand but of four separate sources that had been combined by later editors. He applied the same analysis to the sources of Islamic hadith. The Hadith, literally “reports,” are the collections of Muhammad’s words and deeds that form the foundation for Islamic law and practice. Wellhausen attempted to distinguish reliable transmitters of hadiths from those who were less reliable.⁸

The Austrian scholar Aloys Sprenger (1813–1893) contributed mightily to the study of Islam’s origins by unearthing Islamic texts long thought to have been lost, including Ibn Hisham’s ninth-century biography of Muhammad. Sprenger likewise doubted the historical accuracy of some of the hadiths.

The pioneering Hungarian scholar Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) took such investigations even further. He determined that the lateness of the Hadith collections relative to the time Muhammad was supposed to have lived, together with the widespread Muslim tendency to forge stories about Muhammad that supported a political position or religious practice, made it virtually impossible to regard the Hadith, which fill many volumes, as historically reliable.

It is noteworthy that Goldziher, although he never converted to Islam, had a deep and abiding love for the Islamic faith. As a young man he sojourned to Damascus and Cairo, and came to admire Islam so fervently that he wrote in his diary: “I became inwardly convinced that I myself was a Muslim.” In Cairo he entered a mosque and prayed as a Muslim: “In the midst of the thousands of the pious, I rubbed my forehead against the floor of the mosque. Never in my life was I more devout, more truly devout, than on that exalted Friday.”⁹

It may seem strange, then, that Goldziher would cast scholarly doubt on the historicity of the entire corpus of the Hadith. But he did

not intend his conclusions to be corrosive of Islamic faith. Instead, he hoped that they would lead to a critical evaluation of the Hadith as what they actually were: not as sources of historical information, which they had been always assumed to be, but as indications of how Islamic law and ritual practice developed. He hoped, in other words, that his scholarly findings would lead to a fuller understanding of Islam's origins and thereby positively affect its present character.

Likewise dubious about the historical legitimacy of the early Islamic texts was the Italian scholar of the Middle East, Prince Leone Caetani, Duke of Sermoneta (1869–1935). Caetani concluded that “we can find almost nothing true on Muhammad in the Traditions [i.e., hadiths], we can discount as apocryphal all the traditional material that we possess.”¹⁰ His contemporary, Henri Lammens (1862–1937), a Flemish Jesuit, made a critical study of the Islamic traditions about Muhammad, casting doubt on, among other things, the traditional dates of Muhammad's birth and death. Lammens noted “the artificial character and absence of critical sense” in the compilation of the earliest biographies of the prophet of Islam, although he warned that “there can be no question of rejecting the whole en bloc.”¹¹

Joseph Schacht (1902–1969), the foremost scholar of Islamic law in the Western world, wrote a study of the origins of Islamic law in which he observed that “even the classical corpus” of Hadith “contains a great many traditions which cannot possibly be authentic. All efforts to extract from this often self-contradictory mass an authentic core by ‘historic intuition,’ as it has been called, have failed.” He backed up Goldziher's finding that “the great majority of traditions from the Prophet are documents not of the time to which they claim to belong, but of the successive stages of development of doctrines during the first centuries of Islam.”

Schacht, however, went beyond even Goldziher's arguments, concluding, for instance, that “a great many traditions in the classical and other collections were put into circulation only after Shafii's time [the Islamic jurist ash-Shafii died in 820]; the first considerable body of legal traditions from the Prophet originated towards the middle of the second century”; and “the evidence of legal traditions carries us

back to about the year 100 a.h. only”—that is, to the first decade of the eighth century, not any closer to the time Muhammad is supposed to have lived.¹²

John Wansbrough (1928–2002), an American historian who taught at the University of London, amplified the work of earlier scholars who doubted the historical value of the early Islamic texts. In his groundbreaking and complex work, Wansbrough postulated that the Qur'an was developed primarily to establish Islam's origins in Arabia and that the Hadith were fabricated in order to give the Arabian empire a distinctive religion so as to foster its stability and unity.

Influenced by this, the historians Patricia Crone, a protégée of Wansbrough, and Michael Cook, a protégé of the eminent historian of the Middle East Bernard Lewis, published the wildly controversial book *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (1977). Like their predecessors, Crone and Cook noted the lateness and unreliability of the bulk of the early Islamic sources about Muhammad and the origins of Islam. Their objective was to reconstruct the birth and early development of the religion by examining the available historical, archaeological, and philological records about early Islam, including coins minted in the region during the seventh and eighth centuries and official inscriptions dating from that period. “We have set out with a certain recklessness,” they wrote, “to create a coherent architectonic of ideas in a field over much of which scholarship has yet to dig the foundations.”¹³

Crone and Cook posited that Islam arose as a movement within Judaism but centered around Abraham and his son Ishmael through his concubine Hagar—as many of the earliest non-Muslim sources refer to the Arabians not as “Muslims” but as “Hagarians” (or “Hagarenes”). This movement, for a variety of reasons, split from Judaism in the last decade of the seventh century and began developing into what would ultimately become Islam.

In 1987, Crone published *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, in which she demonstrated that one of the principal foundations of the canonical Islamic biography of Muhammad—its Arabian setting, with Mecca as an important center for trade—were not supported by contemporary records. The records indicate, she showed, that

Mecca was not a major trade center at all. Crone, like Wansbrough, saw Islam's Arabian setting as read back into the religion's literature at a later date for political purposes.

Nearly three decades after the publication of *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Canadian researcher Dan Gibson's groundbreaking *Early Islamic Qiblas* supported Crone's findings regarding Mecca by demonstrating that the earliest mosques do not face Mecca for prayer, as all mosques that have been constructed since the late ninth century do. The *qibla* is the direction that Muslims face to pray. According to the canonical Islamic account, it has been set toward Mecca ever since the revelation of Qur'an 2:144, which tells Muslims to pray facing the Masjid al-Haram, the Forbidden Mosque, which is traditionally identified as the Great Mosque in Mecca.

However, Gibson demonstrates that the first mosques faced Petra in Jordan rather than Mecca, suggesting, as does Crone's research about the actual size and importance of Mecca at the time Muhammad is supposed to have lived, that Islam's origins were not in southwestern Arabia, but elsewhere.

Meanwhile, agreeing with these findings that the Qur'an's origins are as murky as those of its putative author or prophetic conduit, other modern-day scholars have undertaken a close critical examination of the Qur'anic text itself. The German theologian Günter Lüling maintains that the original Qur'an was not an Islamic text at all but a pre-Islamic Christian document. Close examination of textual oddities and anomalies in the Qur'an finds many signs of that Christian foundation. Lüling believes that the Qur'an reflects the theology of a non-Trinitarian Christian sect that left traces on Islamic theology, notably in its picture of Christ and its uncompromising unitarianism.

The pseudonymous scholar Christoph Luxenberg, although he differs in many ways with Lüling's methods and conclusions, agrees that the Qur'an shows signs of containing a Christian substratum. Luxenberg argues that many of the Qur'an's puzzling words and phrases become clear only by reference to Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic that was the literary language of the region at the time the

Qur'an was assembled. Through this method he has come to numerous startling conclusions. Some of his findings have won international notoriety. Most notably, the famous Qur'anic passages promising virgins in Paradise to Islamic martyrs do not, in his reading, actually refer to virgins; the word usually translated as "virgins" is more accurately rendered as "raisins" or "grapes," he argues.

For this book, I have relied primarily on the recent authors, particularly Crone, Gibson, Luxenberg, Lüling, Popp, and Powers, with frequent recourse to the work of older scholars as well, especially Goldziher.

Reaction from Muslims to the revisionist reconstruction of early Islamic history has varied. Some have attempted to refute the various findings of the revisionist historians.¹⁴ For example, Professor Ahmad Ali al-Imam has published a book-length examination of the variants in the text of the Qur'an. He explains those variants by pointing to Islamic traditions that detail the Qur'an's seven styles of recitation; he concludes that "the Qur'an's completeness and trustworthiness has been shown."¹⁵

Other Muslims have indicated a greater openness to the evidence. In November 2020, the Saudi journalist Osama Yamani asserted in the Saudi publication *Okaz* that the al-Aqsa mosque was not actually located in Jerusalem. He was not, of course, referring to the structure that is called the al-Aqsa Mosque and is on the Temple Mount. He is referring to the al-Aqsa Mosque that is mentioned in the Qur'an: "Exalted is he who took his servant by night from the al-haram mosque [the Great Mosque of Mecca] to al-aqsa mosque ["the farthest mosque"], whose surroundings we have blessed, to show him of our signs. Indeed, he is the Hearing, the Seeing" (17:1).¹⁶

Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem had not yet been built when this verse is supposed to have been revealed to Muhammad. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad died in 632, while al-Aqsa Mosque was built in 705. Either the Qur'an passage refers to a different "farthest mosque," or the passage itself was written long after Muhammad is supposed to have died, or both. Of the traditional

Islamic account, Yamani wrote: “There are stories influenced by political considerations that served purposes of that time, and sometimes claims are made that they have nothing to do with faith or following religious dictates.”¹⁷

Professor Muhammad Sven Kalisch, a German convert to Islam and the first professor of Islamic theology in Germany, examined the work of the historical critics of Islam and determined that Muhammad never existed in the form in which the Islamic texts depict him.¹⁸ He revealed in 2010 that as a result, he had left Islam.¹⁹ In contrast, Khaled Abou El Fadl, a professor of law at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), has reacted to historical criticism of Islam with fury, calling it “bigotry.” Abou El Fadl terms Ibn Warraq a “pitiful figure,” as well as “an inanity, and an utter intellectual bore.” This is not the language of a dispassionate scholar, but of a man lashing out as his core assumptions are threatened; Abou El Fadl’s response to Ibn Warraq gives off a good deal of heat, but sheds no light on the question at hand.

Abou El Fadl accuses scholar Daniel Pipes, in recounting the work of the critics approvingly, of “discharging the White Man’s Burden.” He even claims that “revisionism, like all forms of incipient or established bigotry, rests on several peculiar assumptions. Assumption number one is that Muslims invariably lie...and can hardly distinguish fiction from fact.”²⁰

That is not actually the case at all. The scholarly inquiries into Islam’s origins do not rest on the assumption that Muslims were unable to distinguish fiction from fact. The issue is whether legend supplemented a historical record to the extent that it was no longer possible to determine what was legend and what was history. That accretion of legendary detail is not a phenomenon peculiar to Muslims; it has taken place regarding the lives of numerous historical figures, whose actual deeds are forgotten but who have become the heroes of legends that are told and retold to this day.

The scholars who are investigating the origins of Islam laid the foundations for the explorations in this book. They have been motivated not by hatred, bigotry, or racism but by a desire to discover the truth. Opponents of these theories and hypotheses

have a curious tendency to criticize them on the basis of the claim that these findings will make people think ill of Islam. David A. King, author of *World-Maps for Finding the Direction and Distance to Mecca: Innovation and Tradition in Islamic Science* and numerous articles on qiblas, attempts to refute Dan Gibson's discoveries about the qiblas of early mosques. In this course of a heated polemic, King writes: "I am well aware of the potential damage Gibson has done/can do to our field. But more seriously, Gibson's writings are guaranteed to contribute to Islamophobia amongst those who have no idea about the one and only civilization which really took orientations seriously for over 1,400 years."²¹

In a similar vein, in his passionate evisceration of *Quranic Studies* by John Wansbrough and *Hagarism* by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, R. B. Serjeant claims to find "both these books pervaded by prejudice against Islam."²² He complains that "in Wansbrough's early chapters on revelation, canon and prophethood one has the sense of a disguised polemic seeking to strip Islam and the Prophet of all but the minimum of originality."²³ *Hagarism* he finds "not only bitterly anti-Islamic but also anti-Arabian."²⁴ King, echoing Serjeant in another critique of Gibson's work, calls *Early Islamic Qiblas* also "bitterly anti-Islamic and anti-Arabian in purpose."²⁵ Maybe it is, maybe it isn't, but is it accurate?

In a similar vein, in her book *The Lives of Muhammad*, Boston University Professor Kecia Ali evaluates and compares biographies of Muhammad, ancient and modern, favorable and unfavorable, arguing that the emphases of these life histories reflect the concerns of the age in which they were written. This is an intriguing and potentially fruitful line of inquiry, but Ali is generally disdainful of biographies that are critical of Muhammad. Her chief complaint, for example, about my own book *The Truth about Muhammad* is that while it provides "reasonably accurate information," it is "framed and interpreted in relentlessly negative ways."²⁶ Conversely, she characterizes authors of positive biographies such as Karen Armstrong and Tariq Ramadan as "public intellectuals." She describes me, on the other hand, as a "professional polemicist" and the "grand pooh-bah of the legion of American Islamophobes."²⁷

That once again may or may not be so (I myself do not believe it is), but either way, it is completely irrelevant to the question of whether or not the material I present in this book, further exploring the material I've briefly described above, is accurate. Similarly, Ali's use of the propaganda neologism "Islamophobe" to tar Muhammad's critics mars the academic value of her work. Her preference for admirers of Muhammad frequently clouds her ability to evaluate the data.

That kind of analysis is not genuine academic inquiry. It is Islamic apologetics. Charges of this kind have no place in honest intellectual exploration. Even if it were true that Gibson, Wansbrough, Crone, Cook (and I) were motivated by distaste for Islam, this would no more negate the value of their discoveries any more than another scholar's admiration for or even adherence to Islam would negate opposing findings. King also asserts that Gibson "has no qualifications to correctly interpret the available data."²⁸ This is simply an argument from authority, which is the weakest of all arguments. Gibson's arguments, like King's and everyone else's, are not proven or disproven by his qualifications, but by their truth or falsehood. Opposition to Islam, or simply to jihad violence, no more disqualifies one from honest academic inquiry any more than love for Islam does.

One of the core afflictions of the academic world today is that the massive bias shared by many, if not most, professors is masked as dispassionate intellectual objectivity, when it is nothing of the kind. In reality, everyone has biases. But is what they say true or false? Does the available evidence support what they say, or not? That is all that matters.

CHAPTER 2

The Man Who Wasn't There

The Sources

One may assume that the first and foremost source for information about Muhammad's life is the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. Yet that book actually reveals little about the life of Islam's central figure. In it, Allah frequently addresses his prophet and tells him what to say to the believers and unbelievers. Commentators and readers generally assume that Muhammad is the one addressed in these cases, but that—like so much else in this field—is not certain.

The name Muhammad actually appears in the Qur'an only four times, and in three of those instances it could be used as a title—"the praised one" or "chosen one"—rather than as a proper name. By contrast, Moses is mentioned by name 136 times, and Abraham seventy-nine times. Even Pharaoh is mentioned seventy-four times. Meanwhile, "messenger of Allah" (*rasul Allah*) appears in various forms 300 times, and "prophet" (*nabi*) forty-three times.¹ Are those all references to Muhammad, the seventh-century prophet of Arabia? Perhaps. Certainly they have been taken as such by readers of the Qur'an through the ages. But even if they are, they tell us little to nothing about the events and circumstances of his life.

Indeed, throughout the Qur'an, there is essentially nothing about this messenger beyond insistent assertions of his status as an emissary of Allah and calls for the believers to obey him. Three of the four times that the name Muhammad is mentioned, nothing at all is disclosed about his life. In the third chapter, or sura, of the Qur'an, we are told that, "Muhammad is nothing but a messenger. Messengers have passed on before him" (3:144). The Qur'an later

says that “The Messiah, son of Mary, was nothing but a messenger. Messengers have passed on before him” (5:75).² The identical language suggests the possibility that in both 3:144 and 5:75, the same person is being spoken about. That would mean that in 3:144, Jesus is the figure being referred to as “the praised one”—that is, the *muhammad*.

In sura 33 we read that “Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but the messenger of Allah and seal of the prophets. And ever is Allah, of all things, knowing” (33:40). This is almost certainly a specific reference to the prophet of Islam, and not simply to a prophetic figure being accorded the epithet “the praised one.” It is also an extremely important verse for Islamic theology: Muslim scholars have interpreted Muhammad’s status as “seal of the prophets” to mean that Muhammad is the last of the prophets of Allah, and that anyone who pretends to the status of prophet after Muhammad is of necessity a false prophet. This doctrine accounts for the deep antipathy, often expressed in violence, that traditional Islam has toward later prophetic movements that arose within an Islamic milieu, such as the Baha’is and Qadiani Ahmadis.

Less specific is Qur’an 47:2: “And those who believe and do righteous deeds and believe in what has been sent down upon Muhammad—and it is the truth from their Lord—He will remove from them their misdeeds and amend their condition.” In this verse, “Muhammad” is someone to whom Allah has given revelations, but this could apply to any of the Qur’an’s designated prophets as well as to Muhammad in particular.

Qur’an 48:29, meanwhile, probably refers only to the prophet of Islam: “Muhammad is the messenger of Allah; those with him are ruthless against the disbelievers, merciful among themselves.” While “the praised one” here could conceivably refer to some other prophet, the language “Muhammad is the messenger of Allah” (*Muhammadun rasulu Allahi*) within the Islamic confession of faith makes it more likely that 48:29 refers specifically to the prophet of Islam.

That is all, as far as Qur’anic mentions of Muhammad by name go. In the many other references to the messenger of Allah, this

messenger is not named, and little is said about his specific actions. As a result, nothing can be gleaned from these passages about Muhammad's biography. Nor is it even certain, on the basis of the Qur'anic text alone, that these passages refer to Muhammad, or did so originally.

Abundant detail about Muhammad's words and deeds is contained in the Hadith, the dizzyingly voluminous collections of Islamic traditions that form the foundation of Islamic law. The Hadith detail the occasions for the revelation of every passage in the Qur'an. But, as we will see in the next chapter, there is considerable reason to believe that the bulk of the hadiths about Muhammad's words and deeds date from a period considerably after Muhammad's reported death in 632.

Then there is the *Sira*, the biography of the prophet of Islam. The earliest even partially extant biography of Muhammad was written by Ibn Ishaq (d. 773), who wrote in the latter part of the eighth century, almost a century and a half after the death of his protagonist, in a setting in which legendary material about Muhammad was proliferating. And Ibn Ishaq's biography doesn't even exist as such; it comes down to us only in the quite lengthy fragments reproduced by an even later chronicler, Ibn Hisham, who wrote in the first quarter of the ninth century, and by other historians who reproduced and thereby preserved additional sections. Other biographical material about Muhammad dates from even later.

Muhammad, a.k.a. Qutham

This material is full of curiosities, beginning with the very name of Muhammad himself. Lammens notes that "at his birth Muhammad had received the name Qutham, but since the Book of Allah had given him the name Ahmad and Muhammad, the Tradition, with a slightly apologetic ulterior motive, wants to hear of no other."³ In support of this, Lammens cites, among others, the twelfth-century historian and jurist Ibn al-Jawzi, a thirteenth-century historian with the quite similar name of Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzi, and an even later historian, Ahmad ibn Ali al-Maqrizi.⁴

These are all quite late sources, much later than a superabundance of material that gives only Muhammad as the name of the prophet of Islam. But even so, it would be unwise to discount them entirely, for they raise the question of why a factoid such as Muhammad originally having been named something else was invented in the first place, if everyone had known for centuries, without any question at all, that the prophet was named Muhammad and Muhammad alone.

If the figure of Muhammad the prophet had been put together from a variety of sources, and the stories about him were in whole or part originally about other people, then it would make perfect sense that the idea that Muhammad originally had another name would have taken root and persisted: stories about this Qutham were incorporated into the Muhammad legend, and then the explanation that Muhammad was originally named Qutham was invented in order to explain away any uncomfortable questions from those who may have remembered that these stories had originally been told about someone else. This is much easier to accept than the idea that Muhammad had always been known by that name and no other, until centuries later, someone decided to invent, for no discernable reason, the notion that he had at some time been called something else.

Similarly, the ninth-century historian and biographer of Muhammad, Abu Abdallah Muhammad Ibn Sa'd (d. 845) recounts that the angel who originally visited Muhammad to begin giving him Qur'anic revelations was not Gabriel, as Islamic tradition otherwise holds with virtual unanimity (although the angel is not given a name in the earliest account in the hadith of the first revelation).⁵ Ibn Sa'd writes: "Verily the Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, was commissioned to prophethood when he was forty years old. Saraphel was with him for three years, then he was replaced by Gabriel who remained with him, at Makkah for ten years, and at the city of his migration, al-Madinah, for ten years."⁶ However, no sooner does Ibn Sa'd mention this than he dismisses it: "Verily the learned and those versed in Sirah literature say: From the time the revelations commenced till he

(Prophet), may Allah bless him, breathed his last none except Gabriel was with him.”⁷

Very well. But then how and why did the tradition about Saraphel begin to circulate at all?

There are numerous other curiosities in the material that makes up the glare of the “full light of history” in which Ernest Renan said that Muhammad lived and worked. One of the chief of these is the fact that arguably none of the biographical details about Muhammad dates to the century in which his prophetic career was said to have unfolded.

The Earliest Records of an Arabian Prophet

Yet surely there are abundant mentions of this man who lived and worked in the “full light of history” in contemporary records written by both friends and foes alike.

That is, at least, what one might expect. After all, he unified the hitherto ever-warring tribes of Arabia. He forged them into a fighting machine that, only a few years after his death, stunned and bloodied the two great powers of the day, the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire and the Persian Empire, rapidly expanding into the territory of both. It would be entirely reasonable to expect that seventh-century chroniclers among the Byzantines and Persians, as well as the Muslims, would note the remarkable influence and achievements of this man.

But the earliest records offer more questions than answers. One of the earliest apparent mentions of Muhammad comes from a document known as the *Doctrina Jacobi*, which was probably written by a Christian in Palestine between 634 and 640—that is, at the time of the earliest Arabian conquests and just after Muhammad’s reported death in 632. It is written in Greek from the perspective of a Jew who is coming to believe that the Messiah of the Christians is the true one, and hears about another prophet who has arisen in Arabia:

When the *candidatus* [a member of the Byzantine imperial guard] was killed by the Saracens [*Sarakenoi*], I was at Caesarea and I

set off by boat to Sykamina. People were saying “the candidatus has been killed,” and we Jews were overjoyed. And they were saying that the prophet had appeared, coming with the Saracens, and that he was proclaiming the advent of the anointed one, the Christ who was to come. I, having arrived at Sykamina, stopped by a certain old man well-versed in scriptures, and I said to him: “What can you tell me about the prophet who has appeared with the Saracens?” He replied, groaning deeply: “He is false, for the prophets do not come armed with a sword. Truly they are works of anarchy being committed today and I fear that the first Christ to come, whom the Christians worship, was the one sent by God and we instead are preparing to receive the Antichrist. Indeed, Isaiah said that the Jews would retain a perverted and hardened heart until all the earth should be devastated. But you go, master Abraham, and find out about the prophet who has appeared.” So I, Abraham, inquired and heard from those who had met him that there was no truth to be found in the so-called prophet, only the shedding of men’s blood. He says also that he has the keys of paradise, which is incredible.⁸

In this case, “incredible” means “not credible.” One thing that can be established from this is that the Arabian invaders who conquered Palestine in 635 (the “Saracens”) came bearing news of a new prophet, one who was “armed with a sword.” But in the *Doctrina Jacobi* this unnamed prophet is still alive, traveling with his armies, whereas Muhammad is supposed to have died in 632. What’s more, this Saracen prophet, rather than proclaiming that he was Allah’s last prophet (cf. Qur’an 33:40), was “proclaiming the advent of the anointed one, the Christ who was to come.” This was a reference to an expected Jewish Messiah, not to the Jesus Christ of Christianity (“Christ” is “Messiah” in Greek).

It is noteworthy that the Qur’an depicts Jesus as proclaiming the advent of a figure whom Islamic tradition identifies as Muhammad: “And when Jesus, the son of Mary, said, ‘O children of Israel, indeed I am the messenger of Allah to you confirming what came before me of the Torah and bringing good tidings of a messenger to come after

me, whose name is Ahmad” (61:6). The name “Ahmad” means “the praised one,” whom Islamic scholars identify with Muhammad: the name Ahmad is a variant of Muhammad, as they share the trilateral root H-M-D. It may be that the *Doctrina Jacobi* and Qur’an 61:6 both preserve in different ways the memory of a prophetic figure who proclaimed the coming of “the praised one” or “the chosen one”—*ahmad* or *muhammad*.

The prophet described in the *Doctrina Jacobi* “says also that he has the keys of paradise,” which, we’re told, “is incredible.” But it is not only incredible; it is also completely absent from the Islamic tradition, which never depicts Muhammad as claiming to hold the keys of paradise. Jesus, however, awards them to Peter in the Gospel according to Matthew (16:19), which may indicate (along with Jesus being the one who proclaims the coming of Ahmad in the Qur’an) that the figure proclaiming this eschatological event had some connection to the Christian tradition, as well as to Judaism’s messianic expectation. Inasmuch as the “keys of paradise” are more akin to Peter’s “keys to the kingdom of heaven” than to anything in Muhammad’s message, the prophet in the *Doctrina Jacobi* seems to be more akin to a Christian or Christian-influenced messianic millennialist than to the prophet of Islam as he is depicted in Islam’s canonical literature.

Was That Muhammad?

In light of all this, can it be said that the *Doctrina Jacobi* refers to Muhammad at all? It is difficult to imagine that it could refer to anyone else, as prophets who wielded the sword of conquest in the Holy Land—and armies acting on the inspiration of such prophets—were not thick on the ground in the 630s. The document’s departures from Islamic tradition regarding the date of Muhammad’s death and the content of his teaching could be understood simply as the misunderstandings of a Byzantine writer observing these proceedings from a comfortable distance, and not as evidence that Muhammad and Islam were different then from what they are now.

At the same time, there is not a single account of any kind dating from around the time the *Doctrina Jacobi* was written that affirms the

canonical Islamic story of Muhammad and Islam's origins. One other possibility is that the unnamed prophet of the *Doctrina Jacobi* was one of several such figures, some of whose historical attributes were later subsumed into the figure of the prophet of Islam under the name of one of them, Muhammad. For indeed, there is nothing dating from the time of Muhammad's activities or for a considerable period thereafter that actually tells us anything about what he was like or what he did.

One apparent mention of his name can be found written, oddly enough, in a Syriac copy of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark that dates from the sixth century. Sometime after the Arab conquests of the 630s began, someone wrote in the flyleaf of this manuscript (the material in the curly brackets has been added by scholar Robert Hoyland to make the writing coherent at places where it is unreadable):

In January {the people of} Homs took the word for their lives and many villages were ravaged by the killing of {the Arabs of} Muhmd and many people were slain and {taken} prisoner from Galilee as far as Beth...

On the tw{enty-six}th of May the Saq{īlā}ra went {...} from the vicinity of Homs and the Romans chased them {...}

On the tenth {of August} the Romans fled from the vicinity of Damascus {and there were killed} many {people}, some ten thousand. And at the turn {of the ye}ar the Romans came. On the twentieth of August in the year n{ine hundred and forty-}seven there gathered in Gabitha {a multitude of} the Romans, and many people {of the R}omans were kil{led}, {s}ome fifty thousand.⁹

The battle of "Gabitha" is commonly thought to refer to the battle of Yarmouk of the year 636, a massive victory for the Arabs over the forces of the Eastern Roman Empire, and thus this inscription likely dates from around that time. Is "Muhmd" the prophet of Islam, Muhammad? He certainly could be, but according to Islamic tradition, Muhammad had been dead for four years when the Arabs defeated the Byzantines at Yarmouk. Thus as an early witness to the existence of the prophet of Islam, this fly-leaf inscription is decidedly

ambiguous, and certainly worlds away from the detailed picture of the prophet that is given in the Hadith.

The same ambiguity is present in a mention of “Mhmt” in a diverse collection of writings in Syriac that are generally attributed to a Christian priest named Thomas (commonly known as Thomas the Presbyter) and dated to the early 640s. There is some indication that these writings were revised in the middle of the eighth century, and so this may not be an early reference to Muhammad at all.¹⁰ In any case, Thomas refers to “a battle between the Romans and the *tayyaye d-Mhmt*” east of Gaza in 634.¹¹ The *tayyaye*, or *Taiyaye*, were nomads; other early chroniclers use this word to refer to the conquerors. Thus one historian, Robert G. Hoyland, has translated “*tayyaye d-Mhmt*” as “the Arabs of Muhammad,” and this translation and similar ones are relatively common. Syriac, however, distinguishes between *t* and *d*, so it is not certain (although it is possible) that by *Mhmt*, Thomas meant *Mhmd*—Muhammad.

Even if “Arabs of Muhammad” is a perfectly reasonable translation of *tayyaye d-Mhmt*, we are still a considerable distance from the prophet of Islam, the polygamous warrior-prophet, recipient of the Qur’an, wielder of the sword against the infidels. Nothing in the writings or other records of either the Arabians or the people they conquered dating from the mid-seventh century mentions any element of his biography: at the height of the Arabian conquests, the non-Muslim sources are just as silent as the Muslim ones about the prophet and holy book that were supposed to have inspired those conquests.

The author of the inscription on the Syriac Gospel flyleaf and Thomas the Presbyter may also have meant to use the word “Muhmd” or “Mhmt” not as a proper name but as a title, “the praised one” or “the chosen one,” with no certain referent. In any case, the person to which they refer does not with any certainty share anything with the prophet of Islam except the name itself, and even that identification is not absolutely certain.

Sophronius and Umar

No one who interacted with those who conquered the Middle East in the middle of the seventh century ever seems to have gotten the impression that a prophet named Muhammad, whose followers burst from Arabia bearing a new holy book and a new creed, was behind the conquests.¹²

Consider, for example, a seventh-century Christian account of the conquest of Jerusalem, apparently written within a few years of that conquest (originally in Greek but surviving in a translation into Georgian). According to this account, “the godless Saracens entered the holy city of Christ our Lord, Jerusalem, with the permission of God and in punishment for our negligence.”¹³ A Coptic homily from the same period characterizes the “Saracens” as “oppressors, who give themselves up to prostitution, massacre and lead into captivity the sons of men, saying: ‘We both fast and pray.’”¹⁴

Sophronius, the patriarch of Jerusalem who turned the city over to the caliph Umar after the Arabian conquest in 637, lamented the advent of “the Saracens who, on account of our sins, have now risen up against us unexpectedly and ravage all with cruel and feral design, with impious and godless audacity.”¹⁵ In a Christmas sermon in 634, Sophronius declares, “We, however, because of our innumerable sins and serious misdemeanours, are unable to see these things, and are prevented from entering Bethlehem by way of the road. Unwillingly, indeed, contrary to our wishes, we are required to stay at home, not bound closely by bodily bonds, but bound by fear of the Saracens.” He laments that “as once that of the Philistines, so now the army of the godless Saracens has captured the divine Bethlehem and bars our passage there, threatening slaughter and destruction if we leave this holy city and dare to approach our beloved and sacred Bethlehem.”¹⁶

It is not surprising that a seventh-century Christian like Sophronius would refer to the invaders as “godless.” After all, even if those invaders had come brandishing the holy book of the deity they proclaimed as the sole true creator of all things, Sophronius denied that god’s existence. Still, he makes no mention, even in the heat of the fiercest polemic, of the conquerors’ god, their prophet, or their holy book.

In all his discussion of the “Saracens,” Sophronius shows some familiarity with their disdain for the cross and the orthodox Christian doctrines of Christ, but he never calls the invaders “Muslims” and never refers to Muhammad, the Qur’an, or Islam. In a sermon from December 636 or 637, Sophronius speaks at length about the conquerors’ brutality, and in doing so he makes some references to their beliefs:

But the present circumstances are forcing me to think differently about our way of life, for why are [so many] wars being fought among us? Why do barbarian raids abound? Why are the troops of the Saracens attacking us? Why has there been so much destruction and plunder? Why are there incessant outpourings of human blood? Why are the birds of the sky devouring human bodies?

The invaders are not randomly vicious, but apparently have a particular contempt and hatred for Christianity:

Why have churches been pulled down? Why is the cross mocked? Why is Christ, who is the dispenser of all good things and the provider of this joyousness of ours, blasphemed by pagan mouths (*ethnikois tois stomasi*) so that he justly cries out to us: “Because of you my name is blasphemed among the pagans,” and this is the worst of all the terrible things that are happening to us.

Sophronius’s sermon coincides with the Islamic rejection of the cross—a rejection that also made its way into the Qur’an, which asserts (4:157) that the Jews “did not kill him, nor did they crucify him...they did not kill him, for certain”—that is, Jesus. And in speaking of the blaspheming of Christ by pagan mouths, Sophronius could be referring to the denial of Christ’s divinity and salvific sacrifice—which denials are part of Islamic doctrine.

Sophronius sees the Saracens as the instrument of God’s wrath against Christians who have grown lax, although he describes the Saracens themselves as “God-hating” and “God-fighters,” and their unnamed leader as the “devil.” It is unclear whether Sophronius refers to the devil himself, or to the caliph Umar, who conquered

Jerusalem, or to Muhammad, or to someone else. Sophronius declares:

That is why the vengeful and God-hating Saracens, the abomination of desolation clearly foretold to us by the prophets, overrun the places which are not allowed to them, plunder cities, devastate fields, burn down villages, set on fire the holy churches, overturn the sacred monasteries, oppose the Byzantine armies arrayed against them, and in fighting raise up the trophies [of war] and add victory to victory. Moreover, they are raised up more and more against us and increase their blasphemy of Christ and the church, and utter wicked blasphemies against God. Those God-fighters boast of prevailing over all, assiduously and unrestrainably imitating their leader, who is the devil, and emulating his vanity because of which he has been expelled from heaven and been assigned to the gloomy shades. Yet these vile ones would not have accomplished this nor seized such a degree of power as to do and utter lawlessly all these things, unless we had first insulted the gift [of baptism] and first defiled the purification, and in this way grieved Christ, the giver of gifts, and prompted him to be angry with us, good though he is and though he takes no pleasure in evil, being the fount of kindness and not wishing to behold the ruin and destruction of men. We are ourselves, in truth, responsible for all these things and no word will be found for our defence. What word or place will be given us for our defence when we have taken all these gifts from him, befouled them and defiled everything with our vile actions?¹⁷

Such descriptions of violence and brutality are hard to reconcile with the better-known accounts of the Arabian conquest of Jerusalem. Those accounts depict Umar meeting Sophronius and treating him respectfully, even magnanimously declining to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, so that his followers will not be able to seize the church and convert it into a mosque.¹⁸ Umar and Sophronius conclude a pact in which the Christians are not allowed to build new churches, carry arms, or ride on horses, and must pay a

poll tax, *jizya*, to the Muslims, but are generally allowed to practice their religion and live in relative peace.¹⁹ This is the foundation of the Islamic legal superstructure of dhimmitude, which denies equality of rights to non-Muslims in the Islamic state and is oppressive in numerous ways by modern standards, but which in the seventh century was comparatively tolerant.

This “Pact of Umar,” however, is of doubtful historical authenticity.²⁰ The earliest reference to it comes in the work of the Muslim historian Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, who died nearly three centuries later, in 923. According to Tabari, Umar wrote to the neighboring provinces about how he was treating the newly conquered people in Jerusalem:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is the assurance of safety (*aman*) which the servant of God, Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, has granted to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and the healthy of the city, and for all the rituals that belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited [by Muslims] and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted. No Jew will live with them in Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem must pay the poll tax (*jizya*) like the people of the [other] cities, and they must expel the Byzantines and the robbers. As for those who leave the city, their lives and property will be safe until they reach their place of safety; and as for those who remain, they will be safe. They will have to pay the poll tax like the people of Jerusalem. Those of the people of Jerusalem who want to leave with the Byzantines, take their property, and abandon their churches and their crosses will be safe until they reach their place of safety.... If they pay the poll tax according to their obligations, then the contents of this letter are under the covenant of God, are the responsibility of His Prophet, of the caliphs, and of the faithful.²¹

The atmosphere of this purported letter from Umar and the writings of Sophronius couldn't be more different. Umar promises to preserve the churches and to allow the Christians to travel freely and even take their property and leave his domains, although he is not wholly tolerant, saying he will restrict the Jews from Jerusalem. Sophronius, on the other hand, laments the destruction of the churches and the restrictions on the Christians' ability to travel. The most striking difference is that the caliph's letter is unmistakably written within the Islamic milieu; it begins with the familiar Islamic invocation of Allah the compassionate and merciful, and refers matter-of-factly to "His Prophet." By contrast, Sophronius, writing at the time that Umar actually conquered Jerusalem, shows no awareness that the Arabians had a prophet at all or were even Muslims.

A Monothelite Christian writing in Syriac between 662 and 680 likewise displays no indication that the Arabs had brought with them a new religion that was transforming the culture of the area. He notes rather blandly that "the Arabs [*Tayyaye*] appeared and took control of Syria and many other areas," and later states that "the land was in control of the Arabs."²²

Pagan Arabians?

Arabia before Muhammad was pagan; the Arabians were polytheists. Islam, of course, is supposed to have ended all that. Muhammad, according to the standard account, united and Islamized Arabia. Shortly after his death some of the Arabians rebelled, leading to the Wars of Apostasy in 632 and 633, but the Muslims won these. Arabian polytheism and paganism quickly became a relic of history.

Here again, however, contemporary accounts paint a significantly different picture. In 676, a Nestorian synod declared in Syriac of the Christians in the "islands of the south"—that is, Arabia—that "women who once believed in Christ and wish to live a Christian life must keep themselves with all their might from a union with the pagans [*hanpé*]....Christian women must absolutely avoid living with pagans."²³

Many later Christian writers referred to Muslims as pagans, and some historians have taken this as an early example of such usage. There are telling indications, however, that when seventh-century Christian writers referred to “pagans,” they meant exactly that, and not Muslims. The Nestorian synod stipulated that “those who are listed among the ranks of the faithful must distance themselves from the pagan custom of taking two wives.” Islam, of course, allows a man to take as many as four wives, as well as slave girls as concubines (Qur’an 4:3). This synodal instruction may therefore be an imprecise reference to Islamic polygamy—or a precise reference to a pagan custom. In addition, the synod directs that “the Christian dead must be buried in a Christian manner, not after the manner of the pagans. Now, it is a pagan custom to wrap the dead in rich and precious clothing, and to make...loud lamentations regarding them...Christians are not permitted to bury their dead in silk cloth or in precious clothing.”²⁴ None of this has anything to do with Islam as we know it, which does not allow for burial in rich clothing, eschews silk, and frowns on loud lamentations for the dead.

It appears, therefore, that the Nestorian synod was talking about real pagans, forty years after they were supposedly cleared from Arabia.

Another telling indication comes from Athanasius II, the Monophysite Patriarch of Antioch (683–686), the Syrian city that was at that time the fourth most important See in Christendom. Athanasius laments that Christians “take part unrestrainedly with the pagans in their festivals,” and “some unfortunate women unite themselves with the pagans.” He describes practices that sound more genuinely pagan than Islamic: “In short they all eat, making no distinction, any of the pagans’ [sacrificial] victims, forgetting thus... the orders and exhortations of the Apostles...to shun fornication, the [flesh of] strangled [animals], blood, and food from pagan sacrifices.”²⁵

This is a reference to the apostles’ instructions to Gentile converts from paganism to “abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20), but Athanasius doesn’t seem to be simply repeating this as a

formulaic prohibition. The pagans he is concerned about seem to be engaging in at least some of these practices, as Athanasius continues: “Exhort them, reprimand them, warn them, and especially the women united with such men, to keep themselves from food [derived] from their sacrifices, from strangled [meat], and from their forbidden congregations.”²⁶

Muslims do sacrifice animals once a year, on the feast of Eid ul-Adha, marking the end of the time of the Hajj, the great pilgrimage to Mecca; they do not, however, strangle the animals thus sacrificed. It is thus extremely unlikely that Athanasius had Islam or Eid ul-Adha in mind, and much more probable that there were actual pagans in the precise areas from which Islam is supposed to have eradicated paganism fifty years earlier.

It may be that the conquerors themselves were more pagan than Muslim—not because they had recently converted to Islam and retained some of their old practices, but because Islam itself, as we know it today, did not exist. In any case, whether it existed or not, neither the Arabians nor the people they conquered mentioned the fact. Historian Fred M. Donner explains: “Christian literary sources from the early Islamic period that actually mention Muhammad (most do not) generally do not call him prophet, but rather refer to him with terms like ‘leader,’ ‘teacher and guide,’ or ‘king,’ or note that he was a merchant, or that he called people to the worship of one God. Only a century or more after Muhammad’s death do we begin to find Christian sources noting that his followers call him prophet and apostle.”²⁷

Other mainstream historians have also noticed this conspicuous omission. The historian and archaeologist Stefan Heidemann tries to explain it by observing that “during the conquest, the *futuh*, the Islamic religion possessed only a rudimentary theology, which was probably even more basic among military units. At that time Islam would almost certainly not have been perceived as a new and equal religion by outsiders, especially when compared with the sophisticated and diverse Christian theology and all other contemporary religious systems such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, or the pagan pantheon in its late neo-Platonic form.”²⁸

Yet the Qur'an contains an abundance of rebukes of Christianity and Judaism, and includes Zoroastrians ("Magians") among the People of the Book (22:17) who are repeatedly challenged in the Qur'an (cf. 2:89, 98:6) over their failure to accept the new prophet and his new revelation. These rebukes are presented from a position of superiority, from the standpoint of one who is certain of his correctness and of the error of those who are being challenged. The possessors of this new revelation don't appear to be in the slightest degree intimidated by the "sophisticated and diverse" nature of Christian theology, as opposed to the "rudimentary theology" of the invaders. If the Arab invaders had heard these rebukes of the older faiths as they heard their new holy book being recited, why didn't they repeat them to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians when they encountered them?

This "rudimentary theology" was clear enough in its declaration of its own superiority over the other religions: "Allah witnesses that there is no deity except Him, and the angels and those of knowledge—maintaining in justice. There is no deity except Him, the Exalted in Might, the Wise. Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam. And those who were given the Scripture did not differ except after knowledge had come to them—out of jealous animosity between themselves. And whoever disbelieves in the verses of Allah, then indeed, Allah is swift in account" (Qur'an 3:18–19). "And whoever desires other than Islam as religion—never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers" (Qur'an 3:85).

If the Arab conquerors had access to these texts and so many others like them that can readily be found in the Qur'an, why was their religion not "perceived as a new and equal religion by outsiders"? The Qur'an seems anxious above virtually all other considerations to distinguish its message from those of outsiders. Yet Heidemann is right: the early decades of Islam are conspicuous by the absence of Islam. The alternative to believing that this was because the Muslims were intimidated by religions that are resoundingly rejected and refuted in the Qur'an is that Islam didn't

actually exist at all at the time of the Arab conquests of North Africa and the Middle East.

Seeing More than There Is to See

When examining the origins of Islam, many historians tend to see more than is actually there. In attempting to demonstrate that skepticism about the historicity of Muhammad and the general accuracy of the canonical Islamic account of the religion's origins is unjustified and has been debunked, the German historian Gregor Schoeler touts "Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Gabban's discovery in 1999 of one of the oldest Islamic inscriptions to date, the graffito of Qa al-Mutadil (north-west Arabia). After the *basmalah*, it runs... 'I, Zuhayr, wrote [this] at the time of Umar's death in the year 24 [644–645].'"²⁹

Schoeler states: "Interestingly enough, the author already uses the *hijrah* dating, only a few years after its introduction (between 634 and 644)."³⁰ The *hijra* in Islamic tradition is Muhammad's emigration (which is what the Arabic word means) from Mecca to Medina, which is traditionally dated to around AD 622. That event is the beginning of the Islamic calendar, in which the year is recorded as AH, *Anno Hegirae*, or the year since the hijra. Schoeler is thus seeing the graffito as confirmation that there was a hijra, and hence believing Muslims, as early as twelve years after Muhammad's death in 632.

Schoeler sees even more than that in the inscription: "More interestingly, even sensationally, the graffito mentions Umar (undoubtedly the second caliph), with the exact year of his death. Hitherto, scholars have assumed that there was no evidence for any of the Prophet's companions in external sources; Muawiyah was regarded as the first caliph to be safely attested as a historical figure by such testimonies, both epigraphical and manuscript (in papyri)."³¹ He also points to the "two earliest known papyri with a *hijrah* dating, both of which originated in the year 22/643."³²

However, a point that Crone and Cook made in *Hagarism* still holds: "The *muhajirun* are those who take part in a *hijra*, an exodus. In the Islamic tradition the exodus in question is from Mecca to Medina, and its date is identified with the inception of the Arab era in 622. But no early source attests the historicity of this exodus."³³

Crone and Cook suggest instead that the date of the marks “the emigration of the Ishmaelites from Arabia to the Promised Land,” since the Islamic account portrays the *muhajirun*, or emigrants, as the leaders of the Muslim community at the time of the invasion of Palestine, which is traditionally dated to around fifteen years after the *hijra*, not to the community as a whole. Yet when writing about the invaders, Greek and Syriac writers refer to them as “Magaritai” and “Mahgraye,” words derived from *muhajirun*, when discussing the entire invading force and attendant community. If the emigration had taken place fifteen years before and not everyone who was now entering Palestine had been among those emigrants, it is less likely that they would all be referred to as “Emigrants” than if the emigration in question were the present one.

Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Gabban apparently disproves *Hagarism*’s thesis here, for if the *hijra* in Islamic tradition actually referred to a movement of Arabs into Palestine, this would require it to have taken place a decade and a half before the actual Arab invasion and conquest of Jerusalem and its environs. However, Crone and Cook also note that “the Islamic tradition preserves examples of the use of *hijra* and related terms in contexts where the emigration is not within Arabia but from Arabia to the conquered territories. There is even a tradition which by implication narrows the destination to Palestine: there will be *hijra* after *hijra*, but the best of men are to follow the *hijra* of Abraham.”³⁴

Indeed, a hadith depicts Muhammad as saying: “There will be emigration [*hijra*] after emigration and the people who are best will be those who cleave most closely to places which Abraham migrated. The worst of its people will remain in the earth cast out by their lands, abhorred by Allah, collected along with apes and swine by fire.”³⁵

If there was more than one *hijra* and this fact was acknowledged even in Islamic tradition, then the graffito of Qa al-Mutadil appears less momentous. He clearly acknowledges what has become the standard date of the Islamic *hijra*, as well as the date of the death of the caliph Umar, but this hardly brings us any closer to historical evidence for the life and career of Muhammad the prophet of Islam,

and the Islamic identity of the Arab conquerors, than we were before. Crone and Cook specify that “the inner Arabian biography of the Prophet (Mecca, Quraysh and the battle of Badr, but with a slightly deviant chronology) is first attested in a papyrus of the late Umayyad period,” and that “no seventh-century source identifies the Arab era as that of the *hijra*.”³⁶

Crone and Cook also point out that while years are numbered from this event early in the 620s, “the Arabic material (coins, papyri, inscriptions) consistently omits to name the era,” that is, to identify it as the age of the *hijra* at all, and that a tombstone that bears the date “year twenty nine of the *hijra*” is actually “known only from a late literary source.”³⁷ Greek and Syriac sources speak of the era of the Arabs, but this is unlikely to refer to the *hijra*: “The only clue to the nature of the event which constituted its starting-point is the dating of two Nestorian ecclesiastical documents of 676 and 680 by the year of ‘the rule of the Arabs.’”³⁸ That rule began later than the traditional date of the *hijra* that marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

However, even if Qa al-Mutadil’s inscription has all the significance Gregor Schoeler invests in it, it still does nothing to establish the existence or character of the founder of the new religion that the caliph Umar ostensibly followed. And other material from roughly the same period makes the absence of any information about this mercurial and charismatic prophet all the more conspicuous. Records dating from the years of the early Arab conquests are more striking for what they don’t say than for what they do.

No Muslims

In 639, the Monophysite Christian patriarch John I of Antioch held a colloquy with the Arabian commander Amr ibn al-As; it survives in a manuscript dating from 874.³⁹ In it, the author refers to the Arabians not as Muslims but as “Hagarians” (*mhaggraye*)—that is, the people of Hagar, Abraham’s concubine and the mother of Ishmael. The Arabic interlocutor denies the divinity of Christ, in accord with Islamic teaching, but neither side makes any mention of the Qur’an, Islam, or Muhammad.⁴⁰

Similarly, in 647, Ishoyahb III, the patriarch of Seleucia, wrote in a letter about the “Tayyaye” and “Arab Hagarians” who “do not help those who attribute sufferings and death to God, the Lord of everything.”⁴¹ In other words, the Hagarenes rejected the divinity of Christ. Here again, there is no mention of Muslims, Islam, the Qur’an, or Muhammad the Islamic prophet. Ishoyahb’s account agrees with the disputation from eight years earlier in saying that the Arabian conquerors denied Christ’s divinity, but it says nothing about any new doctrines they might have been bringing to their newly conquered lands.

When the early non-Muslim sources do mention Muhammad, their accounts, like the *Doctrina Jacobi*, diverge in important ways from the standard Islamic story. A chronicle attributed to the Armenian bishop Sebeos and written in the 660s or 670s portrays a “Mahmet” as a merchant and preacher from among the Ishmaelites who taught his followers to worship the only true God, the God of Abraham. So far, so good: that sounds exactly like the prophet of Islam. But other elements of Sebeos’s account have no trace in Islamic tradition. The bishop’s chronicle begins with the story of a meeting between Jewish refugees and the Ishmaelites in Arabia, after the Byzantine reconquest of Edessa in 628:

They set out into the desert and came to Arabia, among the children of Ishmael; they sought their help, and explained to them that they were kinsmen according to the Bible. Although they [the Ishmaelites] were ready to accept this close kinship, they [the Jews] nevertheless could not convince the mass of the people, because their cults were different.

At this time there was an Ishmaelite called Mahmet, a merchant; he presented himself to them as though at God’s command, as a preacher, as the way of truth, and taught them to know the God of Abraham, for he was very well-informed, and very well-acquainted with the story of Moses. As the command came from on high, they all united under the authority of a single man, under a single law, and, abandoning vain cults, returned to the living God who had revealed Himself to their father Abraham.

Mahmet forbade them to eat the flesh of any dead animal, to drink wine, to lie or to fornicate. He added: "God has promised this land to Abraham and his posterity after him forever; he acted according to His promise while he loved Israel. Now you, you are the sons of Abraham and God fulfills in you the promise made to Abraham and his posterity. Only love the God of Abraham, go and take possession of your country which God gave to your father Abraham, and none will be able to resist you in the struggle, for God is with you."

Then they all gathered together from Havilah unto Shur and before Egypt [Genesis 25:18]; they came out of the desert of Pharan divided into twelve tribes according to the lineages of their patriarchs. They divided among their tribes the twelve thousand Israelites, a thousand per tribe, to guide them into the land of Israel. They set out, camp by camp, in the order of their patriarchs: Nebajoth, Kedar, Abdeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadar, Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah [Genesis 25:13–15]. These are the tribes of Ishmael....All that remained of the peoples of the children of Israel came to join them, and they constituted a mighty army. Then they sent an embassy to the emperor of the Greeks, saying: "God has given this land as a heritage to our father Abraham and his posterity after him; we are the children of Abraham; you have held our country long enough; give it up peacefully, and we will not invade your territory; otherwise we will retake with interest what you have taken."⁴²

It is extraordinary that one of the earliest accounts of Muhammad as a prophet that contains any detail at all depicts him as insisting on the Jews' right to the Holy Land—even if in the context of claiming that land for the Ishmaelites, acting in conjunction with the Jews. Many elements in Islamic tradition do show Muhammad proclaiming himself a prophet in the line of the Jewish prophets and enjoining various observances adapted from Jewish law upon his new community. He even originally had the Muslims praying toward the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, before the revelation came from Allah that they should face Mecca instead. It is odd, however, that this

account gives no hint of any of the antagonism toward the Jews that came to characterize Muhammad and the Muslims' posture toward them; the Qur'an characterizes Jews as the worst enemies of the Muslims (5:82).

Of course, Sebeos's account here is wildly unhistorical. There is no record of twelve thousand Jews partnering with Arabians to invade Byzantine holdings. Nonetheless, the mention of Muhammad is one of the earliest on record, and it corresponds with Islamic tradition both in depicting Muhammad as a merchant and in recording that, at least at one point in his career, he fostered an alliance with the Jews. Yet from Sebeos's account, one gets the impression that as late as the 660s, the Muslims and the Jews were spiritual kin and political allies. This doesn't correspond to anything in Islamic tradition or the conventional account.

If this does reflect, even in a radically distorted way, an actual historical incident, it is certain that the Jews who entered into this alliance did not think of it as what modern-day ecumenists term "Muslim-Jewish engagement." There is still no mention of Muslims or Islam. As we have seen, the contemporary chroniclers from the lands they invaded called them "Hagarenes," "Saracens," or "Taiyaye." Donner notes that these Arab conquerors "used two terms to refer to themselves: *mu'minun* (Believers) and *muhajirun*."⁴³ The latter term, *muhajirun*—"emigrants"—would eventually take on a particular significance within Islam, but that at this time preceded any clear mention of Islam as such. Greek-speaking writers would sometimes term the invaders "Magaritai," an apparent adaptation of *muhajirun*. But conspicuously absent from the stock of terms that invaded and conquered people used to name the conquering Arabians was "Muslims."

Sebeos also records that Muawiya, governor of Syria and later caliph, sent a letter to the Byzantine Emperor Constantine "the Bearded" in 651. The letter calls on Constantine to renounce Christianity—in favor not of Islam but of a much vaguer Abrahamic monotheism:

If you wish to live in peace...renounce your vain religion, in which you have been brought up since infancy. Renounce this Jesus and convert to the great God whom I serve, the God of our father Abraham....If not, how will this Jesus whom you call Christ, who was not even able to save himself from the Jews, be able to save you from my hands?⁴⁴

Islam's contempt for the idea of Christ crucified is evident, but once again, no Muhammad, no Qur'an, no Islam as such. Muawiya's call to Constantine to convert to the religion of "the God of our father Abraham" recalls the Qur'an's quasi-creedal formulation: "We have believed in Allah and what has been revealed to us and what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the descendants and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims to Him." (2:136). But this Qur'an passage is itself noteworthy for not mentioning the new revelations purportedly delivered to the prophet who was reciting that very book, and who was supposed to confirm the message that the earlier prophets brought.

It is also odd that Sebeos makes no mention of the Ishmaelite merchant *Mahmet* in connection with Muawiya's letter; maybe this mysterious Arabian leader was not as central to this Abrahamic religion as he would later become.

And so the earliest accounts depict an Arabic monotheism, occasionally featuring a prophet named Muhammad, who situated himself in some way within the religion of Abraham, but there is little else to go by. An anonymous non-Muslim chronicler writing around the year 680 identifies Muhammad as the leader of the "sons of Ishmael," whom God sent against the Persians "like the sand of the sea-shores." He specifies the Ka'ba, the cubed-shaped shrine in Mecca, as the center of the Arabians' worship, identifying it with Abraham, "the father of the head of their race." But he offers no details about Muhammad's particular teachings, and like all other early chroniclers, he never mentions the Qur'an or uses the words "Muslim" or "Islam."⁴⁵

Writing ten years later, in 690, the Nestorian Christian chronicler John bar Penkaye writes of the authority of Muhammad and the Arabians' brutality in enforcing that authority, but still knows of no new holy book among the conquerors. He also paints a picture of a new religious practice that is far closer to Judaism and Christianity than Islam eventually became:

The Arabs...had a certain order from the one who was their leader, in favour of the Christian people and the monks; they held also, under his leadership, the worship of one God, according to the customs of the Old Covenant; at the outset they were so attached to the traditions of Muhammad who was their teacher, that they inflicted the pain of death upon any one who seemed to contradict his tradition....Among them there were many Christians, some from the Heretics, and some from us.⁴⁶

The First Use of the Term *Muslim*?

Also in the 690s, a Coptic Christian bishop, John of Nikiou, makes the first mention of Muslims:

And now many of the Egyptians who had been false Christians denied the holy orthodox faith and lifegiving baptism, and embraced the religion of the Muslims, the enemies of God, and accepted the detestable doctrine of the beast, that is, Mohammed, and they erred together with those idolaters, and took arms in their hands and fought against the Christians, And one of them...embraced the faith of Islam...and persecuted the Christians.⁴⁷

There is, however, reason to believe that this text as it stands is not as John of Nikiou wrote it. It survives only in an Ethiopic translation from the Arabic, dating from 1602. The Arabic was itself a translation from the original Greek or some other language. There is no other record of the terms "Muslim" and "Islam" being used either by the Arabians or by the conquered people in the 690s, outside of the inscription on the Dome of the Rock, which itself has numerous questionable features, as we shall see. Thus it seems likely that

John of Nikiou used other terms—Hagarian? Saracen? Ishmaelite?—which a translator ultimately rendered as “Muslim.”⁴⁸

If the term “Muslim” was used in the 690s, it wasn’t in as widespread usage as “Hagarian,” “Saracen,” “Muhajirun,” and “Ishmaelite.” In 708 the Christian writer Jacob of Edessa is still referring to *Mahgrayé*—that is, a Syriac rendering of *Muhajirun*, or “emigrants”:

That the Messiah is of Davidic descent, everyone professes, the Jews, the *Mahgrayé* and the Christians....The *Mahgrayé* too, though they do not wish to say that this true Messiah, who came and is acknowledged by the Christians, is God and the Son of God, nevertheless confess firmly that he is the true Messiah who was to come....On this they have no dispute with us, but rather with the Jews....[But] they do not assent to call the Messiah God or the Son of God.⁴⁹

Jacob’s statement demonstrates that by the first decade of the eighth century, the *Muhajirun* were known to confess belief in Jesus but denied his divinity—echoing the depiction of Jesus in the Qur’an as a prophet of Islam but not as divine.

John of Damascus on the Hagarenes, Ishmaelites, or Saracens

Around 730, the renowned Christian theologian John of Damascus published *On the Heresies*, a smorgasbord of nonmainstream Christianity from the perspective of Byzantine orthodoxy. He included a chapter on the strange new religion of the people he identified by three names: Hagarenes, Ishmaelites, and Saracens. John writes of a “false prophet” named Muhammad (*Mamed*) who, “having happened upon the Old and the New Testament and apparently having conversed, in like manner, with an Arian monk, put together his own heresy. And after ingratiating himself with the people by a pretence of piety, he spread rumours of a scripture (*graphe*) brought down to him from heaven. So, having drafted some ludicrous doctrines in his book, he handed over to them this form of worship.”⁵⁰

John repeats some details of the Saracens’ beliefs that correspond to Islamic doctrine—specifically, its critique of Christianity. “They call

us,” he says, “associators (*hetairiastas*) because, they say, we introduce to God an associate by saying Christ is the Son of God and God.... They misrepresent us as idolaters because we prostrate ourselves before the cross, which they loathe.” In responding to this he also demonstrates some familiarity with Islamic practice: “And we say to them: ‘How then do you rub yourselves on a stone at your Ka’ba (*Chabatha*) and hail the stone with fond kisses?’”⁵¹

Likewise John shows some familiarity with at least some of the contents of the Qur’an, although he never names it as such, referring instead to particular suras by their names. “Women” is the title of the fourth sura of the Qur’an, and John writes: “This Muhammad, as it has been mentioned, composed many frivolous tales, to each of which he assigned a name, like the text (*graphe*) of the Woman, in which he clearly prescribes the taking of four wives and one thousand concubines, if it is possible.” This sura does indeed allow a man four wives as well as the use of slave girls, “those your right hand possesses” (4:3), although it doesn’t specify a thousand, or any number of these. That may simply be John indulging in a bit of polemical hyperbole or using a thousand to indicate a virtually unlimited number of concubines.

John also refers to “the text of the Camel of God, about which he [that is, Muhammad] says that there was a camel from God”—a story that appears three times in the Qur’an, albeit told elliptically each time (7:77; 11:64-65; 91:11–14). Moreover, John notes that “Muhammad mentions the text of the Table,” a vestigial account of the Christian Eucharist found in Qur’an 5:112–115, and “the text of the Cow,” which is the title of the Qur’an’s second sura, “and several other foolish and ludicrous things which, because of their number, I think I should pass over.”⁵²

John demonstrates a detailed knowledge of the Qur’an’s teaching about Jesus Christ, ascribing them to Muhammad. Note that the material in brackets below has been added by the translator, generally referring to Qur’an verses; it does not appear in John’s original. John writes:

He [that is, Muhammad] says that Christ is the Word of God and His Spirit [cf. Qur'an 9:171], created [3:59] and a servant [4:172, 9:30, 43:59], and that he was born from Mary [3:45 and cf. Isa ibn Maryam], the sister of Moses and Aaron [19:28], without seed [3:47, 19:20, 21:91, 66:12]. For, he says, the Word of God and His Spirit entered Mary [19:17, 21:91, 66:12], and she gave birth to Jesus, a prophet [9:30, 33:7] and a servant of God. And [he says] that the Jews, acting unlawfully, wanted to crucify him, but, on seizing [him], they crucified [only] his shadow; Christ himself was not crucified, he says, nor did he die [4:157]. For God took him up to heaven to Himself....And God questioned him saying: "Jesus, did you say that 'I am son of God and God'"? And, he says, Jesus answered, 'Mercy me, Lord, you know that I did not say so' [5:116].⁵³

This is an impressive summary of the Qur'an's teaching on Jesus, but note again that the verse citations have been added by the translator into English; John does not cite sura and verse, and his summary contains small but significant departures from the actual Qur'anic text. In the Qur'an as we have it (5:116), for example, Allah does not ask Jesus whether he called himself the Son of God and God, as John states, but rather: "O Jesus, Son of Mary, did you say to the people, 'Take me and my mother as deities besides Allah?'" Also, Jesus does not respond as John quotes the text before him as saying: "Mercy me, Lord, you know that I did not say so." Instead, the canonical Qur'an text has Jesus saying: "Exalted are you! It was not for me to say that to which I have no right. If I had said it, you would have known it. You know what is within myself, and I do not know what is within yourself. Indeed, it is you who are knower of the unseen."

Maybe John was just summarizing the text. Or possibly the text before him simply did not correspond to the Qur'an of today. These discrepancies, plus the fact that John leaves out of his summary significant things the Qur'an says about Jesus that would have been of interest to him as a Christian theologian (particularly Jesus' apparent prophecy of the coming of Muhammad in 61:6), give rise to

the possibility that John was working not from an actual copy of the Qur'an, but from oral tradition or some text that was later adapted as part of the Qur'an.

Another reason to suggest that John was not summarizing from a Qur'an that he had open in front of him is the fact that he never refers to the book by name. Instead he gives the impression that the "text of the Woman" and the "text of the Camel of God" and the "text of the Cow" are all separate documents rather than parts of a single collection. "Women" (not the singular "Woman," as John has it) and "The Cow" are titles of two Qur'anic suras (four and two, respectively); "Camel of God" is not. It seems more likely that John is working from what the Hagarenes or those who had contact with them may have told him, and not from a written text, or at least not a written text exactly like the Qur'an as we know it.

It is also possible that this manner of citation is simply an idiosyncrasy of John's, with no larger significance. In any case, John betrays considerably more knowledge, and more accurate knowledge, of actual Islamic teaching than did earlier non-Muslim writers who took up the subject of the beliefs of their Arabian conquerors. But note that he is writing a century after the purported revelation of the Qur'an and establishment of Islam.

And even at this point, nearly a hundred years after the reported death of Muhammad, the image of the prophet of Islam remained fuzzy. Indeed, a full-blown picture of Muhammad, recipient through the angel Gabriel of Allah's revelations of the Qur'an, living and working in the "full light of history," would not appear for several more decades. Accordingly, Fred M. Donner, after examining the traditional account of Muhammad's life and activities as the prophet of Islam, concludes: "The problem is that this detailed picture of Muhammad's career is drawn not from documents or even stories dating from Muhammad's time, but from literary sources that were compiled many years—sometimes centuries—later. The fact that these stories are so much later, and shaped with very specific objectives in mind, means that they often do not tell us many things about which we would like to know more....There is also reason to suspect that some—perhaps many—of the incidents related in these

sources are not reliable accounts of things that actually happened but rather are legends created by later generations of Muslims to affirm Muhammad's status as prophet, to help establish precedents shaping the later Muslim community's ritual, social, or legal practices, or simply to fill out poorly known chapters in the life of their founder, about whom, understandably, later Muslims increasingly wished to know everything."⁵⁴

CHAPTER 3

Jesus, the Muhammad

Muhammad: A Late Arrival on the Scene

Non-Muslim chroniclers who were writing at the time of the early Arabian conquests made no mention of the Qur'an, no mention of Islam, no mention of Muslims, and scant mention of Muhammad.

The situation is no different when one turns to the contemporary Muslim artifacts of the time. The Arabian invaders who swept into North Africa in the 650s and 660s and besieged Constantinople in the 670s were energized, in the traditional view, by the Qur'an and Muhammad's teaching and example. But in fact, they made no mention of what was supposed to be their primary inspiration. References to Qur'anic passages and Islam do not appear until near the end of the seventh century, and when the Arabian invaders mentioned Muhammad, they did so in ways that departed significantly from the canonical Islamic account.

For example, in 677 or 678, during the reign of the first Umayyad caliph, Muawiya (661–680), a dam was dedicated near Ta'if in Arabia. (The Umayyads were the dynasty that ruled the Near East from the middle of the seventh to the middle of the eighth centuries.) The official inscription reads:

This is the dam [belonging] to the Servant of God Muawiya
Commander of the Faithful. Abdullah bn Saxr¹ built it
with God's permission in the year 58.
Allah! Forgive the Servant of God Muawiya,

Commander of the Faithful, confirm him in his position and help him and

let the faithful

rejoice in him. Amr bn Habbab/Jnab wrote it.²

Muawiya is the “Commander of the Faithful,” but the nature of the faith, besides being faith in Allah, is left undefined. There is no hint of the Islamic religious culture that would soon and ever after be all-pervasive in inscriptions like this one and other official proclamations. Contrast this with an inscription on a mosque in Medina, dating from the year 752:

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate!

There is no God but Allah alone, He has no *sarik* [companion in worship].

Muhammad is the servant of Allah and His messenger.

He it is who sent His messenger with the Guidance and the religion of Truth, to make it victorious over every other religion, even in the face of the *musrikun*’s [polytheists] dislike and hatred!

The Servant of God, Commander of the Faithful, has ordered to fear Allah and to obey Him

which is to act according to Allah’s *kitab* [book] and the *sunnah* [accepted practice] of the Prophet....³

Exactly what Muawiya did believe in is unclear, but if he believed that Muhammad was the prophet of Allah and the Qur’an was Allah’s book delivered to mankind by means of that prophet, he gave no indication of it.

Likewise the official inscription on a canal bridge in Fustat in Egypt, dating from the year 688, reads: “This is the arch which Abd al-Aziz bn Marwan, the Emir, ordered to be built. Allah! Bless him in all his deeds, confirm his authority as You please, and make him very satisfied in himself and his household, Amen! Sa’d Abu Uthman built

it and Abd al-Rahman wrote it in the month Safar of the year 69.”⁴ Here again, no Muhammad, no Qur’an, no Islam.

The Strange Affair of Early Islamic Coinage

One of the best records of the worldview of the conquerors is found in the coins they struck. Coins carry official sanction and bear inscriptions that generally reflect the foundational principles of the polity that struck them. In the Islamic world today it is difficult to go very long through any given day without encountering some mention of Islam, Muhammad, or the Qur’an. The *shahada*, the Islamic confession of faith, is featured on the Saudi flag. Coins all over the Islamic world carry inscriptions containing some Islamic element. The most obvious and proudly held aspect of the Islamic world is that it is *Islamic*. But in the earliest days of Islam, that is the one element most conspicuously lacking.

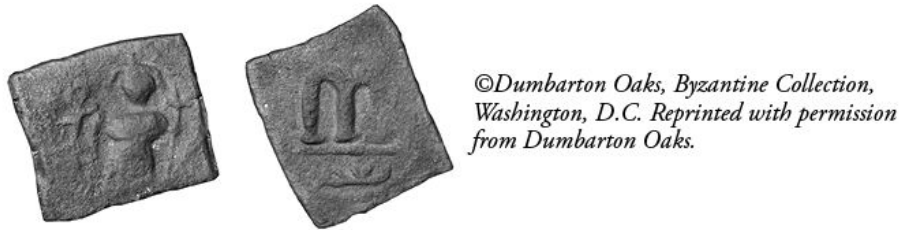
The earliest known coins that the conquerors produced bore the inscription *bismallah*, “In the name of Allah.” *Allah* is simply the Arabic word for God, used by Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians as well as by Muslims. Yet coins minted in the 650s and possibly as late as the 670s bore this inscription alone, without making any reference to Muhammad as Allah’s prophet or to any other distinctive element of Islam. This is the period of the first flush of Arabian conquest, when one would most expect the Arabians to stress the particular features of their religion, which they considered to have been made victorious over other, competing religions in the region.

Other coins dating from the same period feature inscriptions such as *bism Allah rabbi* (“In the name of Allah my Lord”), *rabbi Allah* (“My Lord is Allah”), and *bism Allah al-malik* (“In the name of Allah the King”).⁵ Conspicuously absent is coinage bearing any reference to *Muhammad rasul Allah* (“Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”).

One coin that the Arabian conquerors apparently struck in Palestine between 647 and 658 does bear the inscription “Muhammad.” And yet there is no way it can be taken as a product of pious, informed, believing Muslims: it depicts a figure, apparently of a ruler—in violation of the prohibition of images that most Islamic

sects have enforced throughout history. Even odder is the fact that the figure is carrying a cross, a symbol that is anathema to Islam.⁶

Numismatist Clive Foss explains the obverse of this coin (shown at left) as depicting a “crude standing figure with detached crown, flanked by long cross r., [محمّد], *muh[ammad]*.”⁷



Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, is supposed to have been the principal agent of a new civilizational order based on a holy book that admonished Christians that Jesus was neither killed nor crucified (Qur'an 4:157). Would the caliph, the leader of a religious group that claimed it a blasphemy for a rival religion to regard Jesus as the Son of God really place the crowning symbol of that rival religion on his public inscriptions? Would the leader of a religious group whose founding prophet claimed that Jesus would return at the end of the world and “break all crosses”—as an insult to himself and a testament to the transcendent majesty of Allah—really allow a cross to be featured on any inscription carved anywhere in his domains?⁸

Would the followers of this new prophet, whose new religious and political order was defiantly at odds with that of the “cross worshippers,” have placed any figure bearing a cross on any of their coinage? Perhaps this can be interpreted as a gesture of Islam’s tolerance, since Christians overwhelmingly populated the domains of the new Arabian empire.

Stefan Heidemann states that “in the period of Mu‘awiya, the indigenous population probably retained a strong adherence to traditional Christian symbols and may have shown a tendency to reject coins without crosses.”⁹ Yet Islamic law as codified in the ninth and tenth centuries forbade Christians to display the cross openly—even on the outside of churches—and there is no indication that the imposition of this law was a reversal of an earlier practice.¹⁰ So it is

exceedingly curious that Muslim conquerors of Christians would strike a coin bearing the central image of the very religion and political order they despised, defeated, and were determined to supplant.

Other coins from this period also bear the cross and the word “Muhammad.”¹¹



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Numismatist Volker Popp describes this as “a Syrian coin with the *muhammad* motto” which can be seen on the reverse side (right). It dates from, at the earliest, 686 or 687.¹² The obverse depicts a ruler crowned with a cross and holding another cross.¹³

The most obvious explanation is that the “Muhammad” to whom the coin refers is not the prophet of Islam. Alternatively, the figure on the coin could have evolved into the Muhammad of Islam but was not much like him at the time the coin was issued. Or it may be that the word “muhammad” is not a name at all but a title, meaning “the praised one” or “the chosen one.”

Popp, noting that some of these seventh-century cross-bearing coins also bear the legend *bismillah*—in the name of God—as well as *muhammad*, suggests that the coins are saying of the depicted ruler, “He is chosen in the name of God,” or, “Let him be praised in the name of God.”¹⁴

This could be a derivative of the common Christian liturgical phrase referring to the coming of Christ: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” In that case, the *muhammad*, the praised or blessed one, would be Jesus himself.

Supporting this possibility is the fact that the few times the Qur’an mentions Muhammad by name, the references are not clearly to the prophet of Islam but work just as well as general exhortations to obey that which was revealed to “the praised one,” who could be

someone else. Jesus is the most likely candidate, since, as we have seen, the Qur'an tells believers that "Muhammad is nothing but a messenger. Messengers have passed on before him," (3:144), using language identical to that which it later uses of Jesus: "The Messiah, son of Mary, was nothing but a messenger. Messengers have passed on before him" (5:75).¹⁵ This opens the possibility that here, as elsewhere, Jesus is the one being referred to as "the praised one," the *muhammad*.

The first important biographer of Muhammad, Ibn Hisham, lends additional support to this possibility. Recall that in Qur'an 61:6, Jesus is depicted as prophesying the coming of a new "messenger of Allah...a messenger to come after me, whose name is Ahmad." Because *Ahmad*—"the praised one"—is a variant of *Muhammad*, Islamic scholars take this passage to be a reference to the prophet of Islam. Ibn Hisham amplifies this view in his biography of Muhammad, quoting "the Gospel," the New Testament, where Jesus says that "when the Comforter [*Munahhemana*] has come whom God will send to you from the Lord's presence, and the spirit of truth which will have gone forth from the Lord's presence, he (shall bear) witness of me and ye also, because ye have been with me from the beginning. I have spoken unto you about this that ye should not be in doubt." Ibn Hisham then explains: "the *Munahhemana* (God bless and preserve him!) in Syriac is Muhammad; in Greek he is the paraclete."¹⁶

Ibn Hisham's English translator Alfred Guillaume notes that the word *Munahhemana* "in the Eastern patristic literature...is applied to our Lord Himself"—that is, not to Muhammad but to Jesus.¹⁷ The original bearer of the title "praised one" was Jesus, and this title and the accompanying prophecy was "skillfully manipulated to provide the reading we have" in Ibn Hisham's biography of Muhammad—and, for that matter, in the Qur'an itself.¹⁸

Whichever of these possibilities is correct, the weakest hypothesis is that these *muhammad* coins refer to the prophet of the new religion as he is depicted in the Qur'an and the Hadith.¹⁹ For there are no contemporary references to Muhammad, the Islamic prophet who received the Qur'an and preached its message to unify Arabia

(often by force) and whose followers then carried his jihad far beyond Arabia; the first clear records of the Muhammad of Islam far postdate these coins.

The Cross and the Crescent Together

Equally curious is a coin that was to all appearances minted officially in northern Palestine or Jordan during the reign of Muawiya. The sovereign depicted on it (it is unclear whether it is Muawiya himself or someone else) is shown not with the cross topping a globe, which was a feature of Byzantine coinage of the period, but with a cross that features a crescent at the top of its vertical bar.²⁰



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The crescent appears at the top of the cross on the obverse, at the right of the image of the sovereign. Could this unusual design be a remnant of a long-forgotten synthesis? Or was it struck at a time when the distinction between Christianity and Arabic/Islamic monotheism was not as sharp as it eventually became? Whatever the case may be, it is hard to imagine that such a coin would have been minted at all had the dogmatic Islamic abhorrence of the cross been in place at the time, as one would expect if Islam had really burst from Arabia fully formed.²¹

The Caliph and the Cross

There is another arresting item among the surviving artifacts from the reign of Muawiya: an inscription, dating from the year 662, on a bathhouse in Gadara in Palestine. (Gadara is one possible setting of the Gospel story in which Jesus casts demons out of a young man and into a herd of pigs.) The Greek inscription identifies Muawiya as “the servant of God, the leader of the protectors,” and dates the

dedication of the bathhouse to “the year 42 following the Arabs.” At the beginning of the inscription is a cross.²²

This was a public installation, bearing the official sanction of the governing authorities. Muawiya himself most likely visited there, so he probably saw this inscription and apparently did not consider it to be anything amiss.²³ Although the Umayyads were notorious (or at least so Islamic tradition tells us) for the laxity of their Islamic observance, it is one thing to be relaxed in one’s Islam and another thing to allow for the promotion of the symbols of another religion altogether—much less one that is rebuked numerous times in the Qur’an.

Unless, of course, there was no Qur’an, and no Islam, at least in the form in which we know it today, when the public baths in Gadara were dedicated, as also when the cross-bearing Muhammad coin was minted in Palestine.

Still more striking is the identification on the bathhouse inscription of the year as “following the Arabs”—that is, the “era of the Arabs,” rather than the more expected “era of Islam” or “era after the Hijra.” The Arabian conquests are a historical fact; that the Arabian conquerors actually came out of Arabia inspired by the Qur’an and Muhammad is less certain. This inscription becomes perfectly understandable if the centrality of the Hijra and Islam to the Arabian conquerors was projected back into history, but was not actually a contemporary phenomenon when the bathhouse was dedicated.

What, then, was the beginning of the “era of the Arabians”? The Arabians used a lunar calendar, and a year in the lunar calendar was ten days shorter than the solar year. So forty-two lunar years equal forty solar years, and thus the year 622 was forty-two lunar years before the dedication of the bathhouse in 662. The year 622 saw the Byzantine Empire win a surprising and decisive victory over the Persians, which led to the collapse of Persian power. Not long thereafter the Arabians filled the power vacuum and took control of the Persian empire. Soon they threatened Byzantine holdings as well. What became the date of the Hijra may have originally marked the beginning of the Arabians as a political force to be reckoned with on the global scene.

Similarly dating some momentous event to the year 622, and yet containing no specifically Islamic characteristics, is an inscription that dates itself to the year 64—that is, the Gregorian year 683, which is sixty-four lunar years from the year 622. A graffito found near Karbala in Iraq and dating from the year 683 states:

In the name of Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate
Allah [is] great in greatness and great is His Will
and prayer/praise to Allah morning, evening and a long night.
Allah! Lord of Gabriel and Michael and Asrafil,
forgive Tabit bin Yazid al-Asari [i.e., from Ashar]
his earlier transgression and his later one
and him who says aloud, Amen, Lord of Creation
and this document (*kitab*) was inscribed in
Sawal of the year 64.²⁴

Sawal is the tenth month of the Islamic calendar, as well as of the pre-Islamic lunar calendar that the pagan Arabs used. Gabriel, Michael, and Asrafil are angels in the biblical tradition; it is extremely odd, if Tabit bin Yazid al-Asari was a Muslim who revered Muhammad as the last and greatest prophet, that he invoked Allah as the Lord of these angels rather than in some more conventionally Islamic manner. Likewise it is unlikely that Tabit bin Yazid al-Asari could have been a Christian or a Jew, for the same reason: invoking God as Lord of the angels was not a common practice for either. After all, other inscriptions from roughly the same period invoke Allah as the “Lord of Musa and Isa,” that is, Moses and Jesus—but not, once again, Muhammad.²⁵

This kind of inscription may, however, have been more common among those who considered themselves to be monotheists with a kinship to Jews and Christians but nonetheless distinct from them. This would fit in with what we have seen of Muawiya’s Abrahamic but apparently creedally vague monotheism. Muawiya objected to the divinity of Christ but was apparently not hostile enough to Christianity to forbid the cross altogether, as Islam ultimately did. No surviving inscription indicates that he was aware of Muhammad or Islam, but he does mention Abraham and thus seems to have some

knowledge of the founding figures of the Hebrew scriptures. Tabit bin Yazid al-Asari, who apparently lived in Muawiya's domains during his reign, could have been one who subscribed to precisely this religious perspective—indeed, it may have been an imperative for subjects of the new Arab domains.

If the explanation for the cross on the Gadara inscription is lost in the mists of history, it is reasonable to surmise that Islamic strictures against the cross and Christianity were ignored because those strictures did not yet exist, at least in their present form. Coins that appear to depict Muawiya's successor, Yazid I (680–683), also feature a cross.²⁶

It is even possible, given these coins and the official nature of the Gadara inscription, that Muawiya and Yazid thought of themselves in some way as Christian rulers. They would have been exponents not of any form of Christianity that survives today but rather of a faith that encompassed Christianity and was not incompatible with some form of it. A clue to the nature of the Christianity to which Muawiya, Yazid, and many of their subjects may have adhered can be found in the inscriptions inside the Dome of the Rock, the imposing mosque that was constructed late in the seventh century on Jerusalem's Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, and a holy site for Christians as well.²⁷

The Dome of the Rock: The First Exposition of Islamic Theology?

Traditionally the Dome of the Rock has been understood as a manifestation of the triumph and superiority of Islam. Completed in 691, eleven years after the death of Muawiya, on the order of the caliph Abd al-Malik (685–705), the mosque contains inscriptions that appear to be taken directly from the Qur'an, although not in any orderly fashion.

Here is the text of the inscription on the southeast portion of the octagonal arcade within the Dome of the Rock. The translator, Estelle Whelan, has added in brackets material indicating where various portions of the inscription appear (and do not appear) in the Qur'an:

“In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is One. He has no associate” [this is the beginning of the *shahada*]. “Unto Him belongeth sovereignty and unto Him belongeth praise. He quickeneth and He giveth death; and He is Able to do all things” [a conflation of 64:1 and 57:2]. “Muhammad is the servant of God and His messenger” [variant completion of the *shahada*]. “Lo! God and His angels shower blessings on the Prophet. O ye who believe! Ask blessings on him and salute him with a worthy salutation” [33:56 complete]. “The blessing of God be on him and peace be on him, and may God have mercy” [blessing, not in the Qur’anic text]. “O, People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion (*dinikum*) nor utter aught concerning God save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and His Word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not ‘Three’—Cease! (it is) better for you!—God is only One God. Far be it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And God is sufficient as Defender. The Messiah will never scorn to be a servant unto God, nor will the favoured angels. Whoso scorneth His service and is proud, all such will He assemble unto Him” [4:171–172 complete]. “Oh God, bless Your messenger and Your servant Jesus son of Mary” (interjection introducing the following passage). “Peace be on him the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he shall be raised alive!” [19:33 complete, with change from first to third person]. “Such was Jesus, son of Mary, (this is) a statement of the truth concerning which they doubt. It befitteth not (the Majesty of) God that He should take unto Himself a son. Glory be to Him! When He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is” [19:34–35 complete]. Lo! God is my Lord and your Lord. So serve Him. That is the right path” [19:36 complete, except for initial “and”]. “God (Himself) is witness that there is no God save Him. And the angels and the men of learning (too are witness). Maintaining His creation in justice, there is no God save Him, the Almighty, the Wise. Lo!

religion with God (is) The Surrender (to His will and guidance). Those who (formerly) received the Book differed only after knowledge came unto them, through transgression among themselves. Whoso disbelieveth the revelations of God (will find that) lo! God is swift at reckoning” [3:18–19 complete].

Another Dome of the Rock inscription, on the outer portion of the arcade, reads this way:

“In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is One. He has no associate” [beginning of the *shahada*]. “Say: He is God, the One! God, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him” [112 complete except for the introductory *basmala*]. “Muḥammad is the Messenger of God” [completion of the *shahada*], “the blessing of God be on him” [blessing]. “In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is One. He has no associate. Muhammad is the Messenger of God” [*shahada*, complete]. “Lo! God and His angels shower blessings on the Prophet. O ye who believe! Ask blessings on him and salute him with a worthy salutation” [33:56 complete].

“In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is One” [beginning of the *shahada*]. “Praise be to God, Who hath not taken unto Himself a son, and Who hath no partner in the Sovereignty, nor hath He any protecting friend through dependence. And magnify Him with all magnificence” [17:111 complete except for the initial “And say”]. “Muḥammad is the Messenger of God” [completion of the *shahada*], “the blessing of God be on him and the angels and His prophets, and peace be on him, and may God have mercy” [blessing].

“In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is One. He has no associate” [beginning of the *shahada*]. “Unto Him belongeth sovereignty and unto Him belongeth praise. He quickeneth and He giveth death; and He is Able to do all things” [conflation of 64:1 and 57:2]. “Muḥammad is the Messenger of God” [completion of the *shahada*], “the blessing

of God be on him. May He accept his intercession on the Day of Judgment on behalf of his people” [blessing and prayer].

“In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate. There is no god but God. He is One. He has no associate. Muḥammad is the Messenger of God” [the *shahada* complete], “the blessing of God be on him” [blessing].

“The servant of God Abd [Allah the *Imam al-Ma’mun*, Commander] of the Faithful, built this dome in the year two and seventy. May God accept from him and be content with him. Amen, Lord of the worlds, praise be to God” [foundation notice].²⁸

This Qur’anic material is the earliest direct attestation to the existence of the book—sixty years after the Arab armies that had presumably been inspired by it began conquering neighboring lands. And yet the mixture of Qur’anic and non-Qur’anic material is odd. Would pious Muslims really have composed an inscription that combined Qur’anic material—which they would have understood as the perfect and unalterable, eternal word of Allah—with merely human words, however eloquent? Would Muslims who believed that the Qur’an was the perfect and unalterable word of Allah have dared to change the Qur’an’s words, “And peace is on me the day I was born and the day I will die and the day I am raised alive” (19:33), to the Dome of the Rock’s “Peace be on him the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he shall be raised alive!”? The change is not substantial, but it would still involve liberties with the perfect word of Allah that presumably would give the pious pause.

Likewise, the presentation of material from all over the book, although it is thematically related, is curious. If the authors of the inscription intended to include all the Qur’an’s statements that rebuke Trinitarian Christianity, there are some notable omissions—especially the claim that “they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him” (4:157). Or if the main thrust of the inscription is to deny the divinity of Christ and to assert the prophethood of Muhammad, the omission of the Qur’anic passage (61:6) in which Jesus prophesies the coming of Muhammad is odd.

Given the seamlessly mixed Qur'anic/non-Qur'anic nature of the inscription and the way the Qur'an passages are pulled together from all over the book, some scholars, including philologist Christoph Luxenberg, have posited that whoever wrote this inscription was not quoting from a Qur'an that already existed. Rather, they suggest, most of this material was added to the Qur'an only later, as the book was compiled.

Not everyone agrees, of course. Estelle Whelan, writing in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* in 1998, argues that if the Dome of the Rock inscriptions that can now be found in the Qur'an actually predated the Qur'an, they would have gone into the Qur'an the way they appear on the famous mosque: "It seems particularly unlikely that the combination of phrases from 64:1 and 57:2, repeated twice, could originally have been a unitary statement that was then 'deconstructed' and incorporated into different parts of the Qur'an." She thus argues that the Qur'an must have predated the inscription and served as its source.²⁹

Although the two verses do go together very well in the Dome of the Rock inscriptions, they are not notably out of place in their contexts in the Qur'an as it stands—unlike other verses that appear to be fairly obvious interpolations (as we will see in Chapter 8). It may be that both the Dome of the Rock and the Qur'an incorporated material from earlier sources that contained similar material in different forms. After all, if anything is a characteristic of early Islamic literature, it is repetition: even the Qur'an itself, as brief as it is (shorter than the New Testament), tells numerous stories more than once and frequently repeats phrases. Yet all its repetitions of the same story, whether that of Moses and Pharaoh, or of Satan's refusal to bow down to Adam, contain minor variations. This is what one might expect if this material was held in the minds of poets, prophets, and orators rather than committed to writing.

It is thus possible that the Dome of the Rock inscriptions predated the Qur'an but did not serve as its source, or at least its sole source. The separation of Qur'an 64:1 and 57:2 may simply have come from a different source, not from someone deciding to divide what appears in the Dome of the Rock inscriptions as a unified passage.

What is most unusual about the Dome of the Rock inscriptions, however, is that they may not refer to Islamic theology at all. This may seem to be an outrageous statement at first glance: after all, when the inscription warns the “People of the Book”—primarily Jews and Christians, and in this context, Christians only—not to “exaggerate in your religion” by claiming that Jesus is the Son of God, it is articulating a staple of Islamic theology and an oft-repeated assertion of the Qur’an.

But there is a grammatical difficulty with the traditional explanation of the first inscription above. *Muhammad*, remember, means “praised one” in Arabic—and, accordingly, could be a title as well as a proper name. *Al-muhammad* would be precisely “the praised one,” but the word *muhammad* here without the definite article *al-* could be a gerundive meaning “praising” or “being praised,” and hence also “the one who is being praised.” Christoph Luxenberg explains that in the context of the Dome of the Rock inscription, the phrase commonly translated as “Muhammad is the servant of God and His messenger” is more correctly understood as reading “praised be the servant of God and His messenger.” Luxenberg elaborates with reference to Arabic grammar: “Therefore, by using this gerundive, the text here is not speaking of a person named *Muhammad*, which was made only later metaphorically into a personal name attributed analogically to the prophet of Islam.”³⁰

A compelling case can be made that this inscription refers not to the prophet of Arabia at all but to Jesus himself, whom the inscription clearly calls “a messenger of God,” “a servant unto God,” and finally “Your messenger and Your servant.”³¹

In fact, the entire inscription makes much more sense as a literary and theological statement if one understands “muhammad” as referring to Jesus. Then the whole passage is about Jesus being but a messenger of God rather than his son. By the standard Islamic interpretation, the inscription mentions Muhammad essentially in passing, identifying him as a messenger from God and his servant; then, without explanation, it turns away from Muhammad to Jesus, calling him also a messenger from and servant of God, and spends the bulk of its time correcting Christian Christology.

If the inscription does not speak of Muhammad or reflect Islamic theology, why would it challenge the divinity of Christ? It may well offer a version of Christian theology differing from that of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire and the great church in Constantinople.

At the time the Dome of the Rock was constructed, the Church of Constantinople was still in the throes of a centuries-long battle to determine the exact nature of Jesus Christ. Five ecumenical councils had been held to discuss aspects of this; those who believed that Jesus was a created being, albeit a demigod, were anathematized at the first of these, held across the Bosphorus from Constantinople in Nicaea in 325. Because of the institutionalized discrimination that these heretical groups then faced, many of them left the Byzantine Empire and headed for points east. It is therefore possible that the Dome of the Rock inscription is a surviving expression of the theology of a heretical Christian group that viewed Jesus solely as a divine messenger, not as the Son of God or Savior of the world.³²

The specific theology of such a group has not come down to us in the many denunciations of heresies that orthodox theologians produced in these centuries. But that may be due to other factors: it could have been a politically driven attempt at theological compromise, much like Monothelism in Christianity, and hence corresponded exactly to the theology of no particular group. Or this silence could be due simply to the remoteness of this group from the imperial centers by the time such works were being produced, or to its gradual coalescing with non-Christian monotheistic groups to the extent that most of what was distinctively Christian about the group was effaced.

Not Islamic, and Not Even a Mosque

The Dome of the Rock inscription, then, could be an expression of a theologically uncomplicated Arab monotheism that is deeply concerned with Christ and Christianity—to the point of polemicizing against claims of Christ's divinity. This preoccupation with Christ leaves us far short of Islam in any clearly recognizable form as the religion of Muhammad and the Qur'an. By that point in history the specifics of that religion still had been nowhere elaborated.

Supporting the idea that the Dome of the Rock was constructed during the time in which Islam as a distinct creed was in its infancy at best is the stunning fact that despite being one of the world's most famous and celebrated mosques, the Dome of the Rock is not actually a mosque at all—at least not as originally constructed. “It is constructed,” Donner observes, on the octagonal plan of a late antique Christian (and earlier pagan) martyrium—a design that was well known in the Byzantine architecture of the Near East.”³³ Donner adds, however, that “the building was clearly not intended to be a Christian monument,” precisely because of the inscriptions inside that so clearly depart from Christian orthodoxy.³⁴

Abd al-Malik and Hajjaj ibn Yusuf Introduce Islam

Seen in this light, an official inscription from 693 (or possibly 702), found on a road near Tiberias, could but does not necessarily refer to a fully-formed Islam, with its prophet Muhammad:

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate[.]

There is no God but Allah alone, He has no *sharik* [partner in receiving worship]

Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.

The Servant of God Abd al-Malik, Commander of the Faithful, ordered

The straightening of this mountain road.

It was made by Yahya bn al-...

In Muharram of the year three [and 70 *or* and 80].³⁵

While it seems as if here we finally breathe in the full atmosphere of Islam, with the denunciation of *shirk*, the association of partners with Allah, and the proclamation of Muhammad as his prophet, this inscription actually goes no farther than those of the Dome of the Rock, and is just as compatible with Muawiya's vague Abrahamic monotheism as with traditional Islam.

It was not until 696, five years after the Dome of the Rock was dedicated, that the caliph Abd al-Malik began to have coins minted

without images of a sovereign (in line with Islam's prohibition of images) and bearing the *shahada*, the Islamic confession of faith.³⁶

Thus it was Abd al-Malik who proclaimed Islam as the state religion of the empire of the Umayyads—an oddly late proclamation for an empire that was supposed to have been inspired by and founded upon Islam six decades earlier.³⁷ The historian Robert G. Hoyland concludes that “it was pressure from rebel factions” that induced Abd al-Malik and his successors “to proclaim Islam publicly as the ideological basis of the Arab state.”³⁸

Indeed, Abd al-Malik's rival Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr, who had revolted against the Umayyad caliphate and controlled Arabia, Iraq, and Iran, had started minting coins that proclaimed Muhammad as the prophet of Allah as early as 685—the first such official proclamation.³⁹ The coins carried the inscription, “In the name of God, Muhammad is the messenger of God (*bismillah Muhammad rasul Allah*).”⁴⁰ Hoyland remarks that this “would mean that the earliest attested Islamic profession comes from an opposition party. This is not implausible. That the revolt of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr had religious implications is confirmed by a contemporary Christian source, which says of him that ‘he had come out of zeal for the house of God and he was full of threats against the Westerners, claiming that they were transgressors of the law.’”⁴¹

Abd al-Malik emulated his rival Ibn al-Zubayr in minting coins bearing the inscription *Muhammad rasul Allah*—Muhammad is the messenger of God. An Umayyad coin bearing the inscription *Muhammad rasul Allah*—“Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”—bears a date of 66 AH, or 686, the year after Abd al-Malik became caliph. However, this was a time of immense turmoil because of Ibn al-Zubayr's challenge to Umayyad rule; consequently it is unlikely that the Umayyads had either the luxury or the resources to mint coins at that time, and some historians believe that this coin was actually produced at a later date.⁴²

In any case, the religious atmosphere at this point is quite different from that of just twenty or so years before this, when the leaders of the Arabic empire that is assumed by most to have been Islamic were still minting coins with crosses on them. Nor was the new

religion the property of just one party or faction among the Arabs. Heidemann notes that “the acknowledgment and invocation of the messengership of Muhammad was obviously the fundamental characteristic of the new religion. Even ideologically opposed groups referred to him in the same way and with the same phrase.”⁴³

Abd al-Malik’s associate Hajjaj ibn Yusuf (d. 714), who was governor of Iraq after he defeated Ibn al-Zubayr, had coins minted in the year 696 that contained the full text of the Islamic confession of faith: *Bism Allah la ilah ila Allah wahdahu Muhammad rasul Allah* (“In the name of God, there is no deity but God on His own; Muhammad is the messenger of God”).⁴⁴ (This text is a bit different from the common phrasing of the *shahada*, in placing the *bismallah* at the start, and in other ways.)

Around 692, or the year 72 AH, a member of al-Zubayr’s faction, Abd al-Aziz ibn Abdallah ibn Amir, had coins minted in his capacity as governor of Sijistan, a region that today is in eastern Iran and southern Afghanistan. These coins replaced images of the Zoroastrian fire altar that had been featured on earlier coins with the inscription:

Seventy-two [the year the coin was minted]
No God but he
another God does not exist
Muhammad (is) the Messenger of God
SK [the mint abbreviation for Sijistan].⁴⁵

The question recurs once again: If Islam arose in Arabia in the early seventh century, including its holy scripture, which proclaims the superiority of Islam over Zoroastrianism, why was this change made only seven decades after the new religion began? Some have argued that early Islamic coinage retained Christian and Zoroastrian symbols as a gesture of tolerance toward the conquered people, but such gestures would have run counter to the abhorrence Islamic leaders and theologians have uniformly maintained throughout Islamic history for non-Muslim religious expression. Islamic law forbids the subject people to make any public display of their religious rites; even when Islamic rulers have been quite tolerant and

welcoming to non-Muslim communities, this openness has seldom, if ever, extended to allowing them free public expression of non-Muslim devotion.

Even as these proclamations appeared on coins, the situation remained in considerable flux: some coins minted in this era bore the confession of faith but still pictured rulers; one depicted rulers with crosses on their crowns.⁴⁶

Also noteworthy is the fact that the earliest Islamic coins were not minted in Arabia, as one would expect if that were where Islam originated and the place from which the Islamic empire emanated. The earliest Islamic coins were minted in Damascus, Spain, and Egypt, with coins minted in the Hijaz only dating from one hundred years after the hijra.⁴⁷

Yet it was the reign of Abd al-Malik, as well as that of his rival Ibn al-Zubayr, that marked an all-important turning point. His reign also witnessed the first references by non-Muslims to “Muslims,” as opposed to “Hagarenes,” “Ishmaelites,” “Muhajirun,” and “Saracens,” and to the Qur’an itself. Yet we do not see this kind of thing until sixty or seventy years after the Arab conquests began, during the reign of Abd al-Malik.

Did Abd al-Malik, Ibn al-Zubayr and Hajjaj ibn Yusuf essentially invent Islam, or begin investing it with details about Muhammad and his teaching, to unify and strengthen their empire? The first Muhammad coin that Ibn al-Zubayr minted make it possible that he originated the idea of the Islamic prophet, but it is also entirely possible that he appropriated and greatly expanded on the nascent Muhammad myth for his own political purposes.

As he battled and ultimately defeated Ibn al-Zubayr, Abd al-Malik must have seen the potential this myth had to serve his own purposes: after defeating his rivals (who included not only Ibn al-Zubayr but the Kharijite caliph Qatari ibn al-Fuja’a), he attempted to unite the factions by taking over some of the elements of their own beliefs and worship. Heidemann notes that “this reform was not organized at a district or provincial level, but centrally, by the caliph in Damascus, in close cooperation with Hajjaj b. Yusuf.”⁴⁸

There are hints of this. Much of what we know of the first appearances of what is specifically Islamic may be traced to Abd al-Malik's reign. Donner posits that Abd al-Malik was the linchpin of the theological development of what had previously been a simple monotheism without a developed theology: the caliph "seems to have encouraged the Arabian Believers to redefine themselves, and the Believers' movement, in a manner that was less ecumenical or confessional and open than it had been originally. The category of 'Believer,' which hitherto had included righteous monotheists of several confessions, came to be increasingly limited to those who followed Qur'anic law. A boundary began to be drawn between Qur'anic Believers, and those righteous Christians and Jews who had formerly belonged to the Believers' movement."⁴⁹

Abd al-Malik may have done much more, however, than simply limit his community to those who followed Qur'anic law. He may have played a large role in the formulation of that law, and of the Qur'an itself. According to a hadith reported by the respected Islamic scholar as-Suyuti (d. 1505) and others, the caliph himself is said to have claimed, "I have collected the Qur'an (*jama'tul-Qur'ana*)."⁵⁰ This report is very late, but it is hard to explain why it would have been invented at such a late date, since it contradicted well-established traditions. It is easy to see why Abd al-Malik might have collected the Qur'an and then claimed that Uthman did it: in order to give his new scripture a patina of age and authenticity. But what could possibly be the reason for anyone inventing a story in which Abd al-Malik claimed he collected the Qur'an, if everyone took it for granted as true that Uthman had done it forty years earlier?

Other hadiths record that Hajjaj ibn Yusuf collected and edited the Qur'an during the reign of Abd al-Malik. And according to several hadiths, Hajjaj was the first to add the bulk of the diacritical marks to the core text of the Qur'an, making it possible for the first time to read it without confusion—and, not incidentally, fixing the Islamic character of the text.⁵¹ The jurist Malik ibn Anas (d. 796) backs these claims; another hadith notes that he recalled that "reading from the *mushaf*"—that is, a copy of the Qur'an—"at the Mosque was not

done by people in the past. It was Hajjaj b. Yusuf who first instituted it.”⁵²

Intriguingly, the fifteenth-century Hadith scholar Ibn Hajar (1372–1448) notes that Hajjaj “had a pure Arabic language, he was eloquent and well-versed in the law,” and said that “obedience to the Caliph in his every demand was compulsory for the population, and he even debated that very point” with those who disputed it.⁵³ It is striking that, six centuries after Hajjaj’s life, his “pure Arabic language” would persist in the memory of the Islamic community. A pure Arabic language would be useful for writing or editing Arabic scripture out of concern for obedience to the caliph and the political unity of his empire. And, for reasons we will explore later in this book, it may well be the case that the Qur’an *needed* to be Arabicized.

The Umayyad court of Abd al-Malik and those of his successors began to expand on the Muhammad accounts of the Hadith and edit and augment the Qur’anic text to buttress their own practices and political position—a practice that the enemies of the Umayyads, the Abbasids, skillfully employed when they supplanted the Umayyads in 750.

If Abd al-Malik built up the Islamic religion for political purposes, then the earlier silence from all quarters about Muhammad, Islam, and the Qur’an can be explained very simply: there was no reference to these things because Muhammad, Islam, and the Qur’an did not exist yet, or existed only in an inchoate state.

Further evidence that Islam was newly developing during the reign of Abd al-Malik can be seen in the fact that the ideas did not take root immediately. Even after Abd al-Malik and Hajjaj ibn Yusuf did their work, the official statements that the Umayyads left behind are not unanimously or unambiguously Islamic. Qasr Kharana is a desert castle that Abd al-Malik’s successor, Walid I (705–715), built in eastern Jordan. It bears this inscription:

Allahumma have mercy on Abd al-Malik ibn Umar [not the Abd al-Malik the caliph, who was the son of Marwan, not the son of Umar, to whom this inscription refers] and forgive him his

transgressions, the earlier and the later ones, the hidden and the disclosed;

No one of himself draws nigh unto Thee but that Thou forgivest him and hast mercy upon him

if he believes. I believe in my Lord. Therefore bestow on me Thy benefits,

for Thou art the Benefactor, and have mercy

upon me, for Thou art the Merciful. Oh God, I beg of Thee to accept from him his prayer and his donation. Amen Lord of Creation,

Lord of

Moses and Aaron. May God have mercy on him who reads it and says

Amen, Amen, Lord of Creation,

the Mighty, the Wise! Abd al-Malik bn [sic] Umar wrote [it] on Monday, three [nights] remaining from Muharram of the year two and

ninety. [A.D. 710]

[Witnessed by] Lam bn Harun.

And lead us so we meet with my prophet and his prophet in this world and the next.⁵⁴

The Lord is the Lord of Moses and Aaron. No mention is made of Muhammad. It is an odd omission, unless this newly created prophet Muhammad was not yet established enough in the popular mind to figure in such an invocation alongside the likes of Moses and Aaron.

But fame would soon come to the warrior prophet of Arabia. In the year 735 another inscription betrayed a very different popular religious sensibility:

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful
Allah! forgive! Hasan bn Maysarah
and his two parents and their offspring

Amen Lord of Muhammad and Ibrahim
Allah! consider my deeds great exertion (*jihad*)
and accept my compassion as martyrdom in Your cause
and Hasan wrote (it) on Tuesday
the 22th [*sic*] of the month of Rabiyy' al-Awwal, in which passed
away
Banu Ha[t]im may God have mercy on all of them
And this in the year 117 [735]⁵⁵

By this time, accounts of the heroic life and exemplary deeds of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, had begun to circulate widely. He had become a figure with whom the faithful could identify—someone they felt as if they knew.

This familiarity was the product of a remarkable court industry, first among the Umayyads and then among the Abbasids, of unabashedly manufacturing material about what Muhammad said and did.

CHAPTER 4

Inventing Muhammad

If Muhammad Did Not Exist, It Was Necessary to Invent Him

From the foregoing it is clear that when it comes to the history of early Islam, the records, both of the Arab conquerors and of the conquered people, are sketchy in the extreme. Instead of what we might expect—depictions of Muslim warriors shouting “Allahu akbar,” invoking Muhammad, and quoting the Qur’an—we see hardly any presence of the Qur’an, Muhammad, or Islam at all. The early Arab rulers, while styling themselves as “servant of God” or “agent of God” (*khalifat allah*) and “commander of the faithful,” are vague at best about the content of their creed, and make no mention whatsoever of the putative founder of their religion or his holy book for decades after beginning to conquer and transform huge expanses of territory across the Middle East and North Africa.

If the Qur’an was complete at the time of Muhammad’s death in 632, and had been codified and distributed to the Islamic provinces by the caliph Uthman in 653, as Islamic tradition would have us believe, this silence is extremely strange. Islam, in its canonical texts, is an unapologetically supremacist religion, calling upon believers to make those of other religions “feel themselves subdued” (Qur’an 9:29) and declaring that whoever “desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted from him” (Qur’an 3:85). The “unbelievers among the People of the Book,” that is, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians who do not accept Islam, are “the most vile of created beings” (Qur’an 98:6).

Would the early Arab rulers depart from prayers with passages such as these (and there are many, many others like them) ringing in

their ears and then decide to remain reticent about their new religion, and refrain even from informing the conquered people that they had a new prophet whose message confirmed their scriptures in some ways and corrected them in others?

Compounding this curiosity are the shaky historical foundations of the Hadith, the voluminous accounts of Muhammad's words and deeds. The importance of the Hadith in Islam cannot be overstated. They are, when Islamic scholars deem the accounts authentic, second in authority only to the Qur'an itself. Along with the Qur'an that they elucidate, the Hadith form the basis for Islamic law and practice regarding both individual religious observance and the governance of the Islamic state. And in fact, so much of the Qur'an is obscure and opaque, and explained only in the Hadith, that functionally, if not officially, the Hadith are the primary authority in Islam.

Much of the Muslim holy book—not just its Arabic neologisms and turns of phrase—would be incomprehensible without the Hadith. The Qur'an is prohibitively uninviting to those unschooled in its particularities; reading much of it is like walking into a conversation between two people one doesn't know who are talking about incidents in which one was not involved—and they aren't bothering to explain matters.

Thus the Hadith become a necessity. They are the prism through which the vast majority of Muslims understand the Qur'an. According to Islamic tradition, these accounts clarify the import of cryptic Qur'an verses by providing the *asbab an-nuzul*, or occasions of revelation. These are stories about when, where, and why Muhammad was given a certain verse—usually in order to settle a question in dispute among Muslims, or to answer a query that one of the believers posed to the Islamic prophet.

Some of the hadiths are fairly straightforward. In one, Ibn Abbas, forefather of the Abbasids and a companion of Muhammad, recalls that the Qur'anic command to "obey Allah and obey the messenger and those in authority among you" (4:59) was revealed to Muhammad "in connection with Abdullah bin Hudhafa bin Qais bin Adi when the Prophet appointed him as the commander of a *Sariya*

[army unit].”¹ That is as plausible an explanation for the verse as any, but the context and setting are entirely imposed from without: nothing in the Qur’anic verse itself refers to this particular appointment by Muhammad; it could just as easily refer to any number of similar incidents.

The same can be said of an explanation of a Qur’an verse excoriating hypocrites: “Will you bid others to piety, and forget yourselves while you recite the Book? Do you not understand?” (2:44). According to one hadith, Ibn Abbas explains, “This was revealed about the Jews of Medina,” who would “enjoin people to follow Islam while abstaining themselves from doing so.”² This verse certainly *could* refer to the Jews of Medina who pretended allegiance to Muhammad while plotting against him, but there is no internal indication of that.

A more elaborate explanation can be found for Qur’an 5:67: “O Messenger, announce that which has been revealed to you from your Lord, and if you do not, then you have not conveyed his message. And Allah will protect you from the people. Indeed, Allah does not guide the disbelieving people.”

The eleventh-century Qur’anic scholar al-Wahidi (d. 1075), who collected the occasions of revelation and published them together in a book, *Asbab an-Nuzul*, quotes a hadith asserting that this verse was revealed because of apprehensions that Muhammad felt: “Said al-Hasan [one of Muhammad’s Companions and the putative source of this report]: ‘The Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, said: “When Allah, exalted is He, sent me His message, I felt oppressed by it, for I knew that some people will give me the lie.”’ The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, was apprehensive of the Quraysh, Jews and Christians, and so Allah, exalted is He, revealed this verse.” The Companions (*sahaba*) of Muhammad were his closest early followers.

Al-Wahidi also reports, however, that another Muslim, Abu Said al-Khudri, recounted a different story, saying that the verse “was revealed on the day of ‘Ghadir Khumm’ about Ali ibn Abi Talib, may Allah be well pleased with him.” The Shi’ites contend that in the last year of his life, Muhammad, while on his way to Medina, stopped at

“Ghadir Khumm,” the pond of Khumm, near the town of al-Juhfah in Arabia, and delivered a sermon in which he appointed his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib his successor—or indicated, by taking his hand, that he wanted Ali to succeed him.

According to hadiths, Muhammad’s favorite wife Aisha and Ali were at odds with each other ever since Ali treated her dismissively while she was accused of adultery; decades later, their forces actually clashed during the Battle of the Camel. And so after relating the Shi’ite explanation of the verse, al-Wahidi quotes Aisha offering an explanation of this verse that has nothing to do with Ali: “The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, stayed up one night and so I said: ‘What’s the matter, O Messenger of Allah?’ He said: ‘Is there not any righteous man who would stand to watch over us tonight?’ Then we heard commotion caused by arms and the Messenger of Allah asked: ‘Who’s there?’ ‘It is Sa’d and Hudhayfa, we have come to keep watch over you,’ came the response. The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, went to sleep, and he slept so deeply that I heard his snoring; this verse was then revealed. The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, then popped his head out of the collar of his garment and said: ‘O people, you can leave, for Allah has protected me.’”

Finally, al-Wahidi quotes Ibn Abbas, who gives a similar explanation: “The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, used to be guarded. Abu Talib used to send every day men from the Banu Hashim to guard him until this verse was revealed (O Messenger! Make known that which hath been revealed unto thee from thy Lord) up to His words (Allah will protect thee from mankind). And so when his uncle wanted to send with him people to protect him, he said: ‘O uncle! Indeed Allah has protected me from the jinn and humans.’”³

The multiplicity of explanations suggests the authenticity of none of them. If one of these four explanations of the verse was the true one, and was therefore as old as the verse itself, it is hard to see how the others would have arisen or, if they were formulated for political reasons, how they would have gained widespread credence. It is

evident that no one really knew the circumstances of the verse, and so stories were constructed to explain it.

The accounts of the circumstances of the Qur'anic revelations generally emerged late, with the Hadith dating from the ninth century. There is no evidence contemporary with the Qur'an explaining its origins. In light of that, it could be that these accounts were invented in order to explain Qur'an verses, rather than actually presenting the historical circumstances of revelations to Muhammad.

The Centrality of the Hadith

However questionable many hadiths may be, they form the basis for the standard Islamic understanding of Qur'anic verses that are less than clear on their surface (and the number of those is considerable). The Hadith are also pivotal because of the tremendous importance that Islamic theology and tradition attaches to Muhammad, whom the Qur'an terms "an excellent example for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the last day and remembers Allah often" (33:21).

It may seem curious that Muhammad is made so important when the Qur'an itself says so little specific about him, but that is precisely why the biographical material elaborated in the Hadith was so urgently needed. The Qur'an tells believers that Muhammad is "of a great moral character" (68:4), and, "He who obeys the messenger has obeyed Allah, but those who turn away—We have not sent you over them as a guardian" (4:80). Exhortations to obey Allah's messenger, who is assumed to be Muhammad, occur frequently in the Qur'an (3:32; 3:132; 4:13; 4:59; 4:69; 5:92; 8:1; 8:20; 8:46; 9:71; 24:47; 24:51; 24:52; 24:54; 24:56; 33:33; 47:33; 49:14; 58:13; 64:12). What does it mean to obey Muhammad? To answer that, one must know what he said and did.

Muhammad himself, according to one hadith, asserted the centrality of his words and deeds: "I have given orders, exhortations and interdictions which count as much as the Koran if not more."⁴ They became in Islamic tradition the guideposts for even the most minute aspects of individual behavior. The modern-day Islamic apologist Muqtedar Khan of the Center for the Study of Islam and

Democracy explains that “the words, deeds and silences (that which he saw and did not forbid) of Muhammad became an independent source of Islamic law. Muslims, as a part of religious observance, not only obey, but also seek to emulate and imitate their Prophet in every aspect of life. Thus Muhammad is the medium as well as a source of the divine law.”⁵

The centrality of Muhammad allows no room whatsoever for innovation (*bida*): what the prophet approved is approved, and what he rejected is rejected, for all time. Thus the fifteenth-century Islamic scholar al-Qastallani rejected “anything that is practiced without a relevant example from olden times and, more especially in religion, anything that was not practiced in the time of the Prophet.”⁶

The prophet of Islam himself sums up these Islamic beliefs when he says in a hadith: “Verily, the most truthful communication is the Book of Allah, the best guidance is that of Muhammad, and the worst of all things is innovation; every innovation is heresy, every heresy is error, and every error leads to hell.”⁷ In another hadith, however, Muhammad seems to retreat from this hard-line stance. He promises a reward to “anyone who establishes in Islam a good sunna”—that is, an accepted practice—and warns against “anyone who establishes in Islam an evil sunna.”⁸ This presupposes that Islamic leaders will establish new practices, and that some of these practices may be good and some evil—a clear departure from the idea that “every innovation is heresy.”

Did Muhammad equivocate? Did he forbid innovation and then change his mind, or vice versa? Possibly. However, these two traditions can be harmonized by coming down against innovation while interpreting the second hadith as meaning that as new issues arise, they must be judged in light of Muhammad’s words and deeds. In any case, in this as in all matters pertaining to Islamic law, Muhammad’s example (along with the word of the Qur’an) is paramount, and hadiths recording that example decisive.

The Contentless Sunna

One of the most curious aspects of Muhammad’s paramount importance in Muslim law and practice is that there is absolutely no

evidence that the Muslims who actually knew the prophet of Islam kept records of what he said and did. If the canonical account of the origins of Islam is true, then the material in the Hadith about Muhammad's words and deeds existed, and presumably circulated in Muslim communities, for nearly two centuries before it was finally sifted, judged for authenticity, collected, and published. Yet there is no indication of this material's presence.

The early caliphs do not appear ever to have invoked Muhammad's example. The word *caliph* means "successor" or "representative," and in the traditional understanding the caliphs were successors to the prophet. But the first four caliphs who ruled after Muhammad's death—known as the "rightly guided caliphs"—issued coins that proclaimed them to be the "caliphs of Allah," rather than the expected "caliphs of the prophet of Allah." Apparently the early caliphs saw themselves as vice-regents or vicars of Allah on earth, not as the successors of Allah's prophet.

One scholar of Islam, Nadia Abbott, contends that there is no record of the early caliphs invoking the hadiths of Muhammad because the caliph Umar (634–644) ordered hadiths destroyed. He did so, she says, because he feared that a collection of Hadith would rival and compete with the Qur'an: he believed that the Qur'an should have a singular status as the only religious knowledge (*ilm*) that could or should rightly be written down.⁹ This anti-intellectualism accords with the character of Umar as encapsulated in the legend about his ordering the destruction of the celebrated library of Alexandria: "If those books are in agreement with the Quran, we have no need of them; and if these are opposed to the Quran, destroy them."¹⁰

One tradition ascribes the duty *not* to preserve the hadith literature to, paradoxically enough, Muhammad himself: "Do not write down anything from me except the Qur'an. If anyone has written down from me anything other than the Qur'an, let him erase it."¹¹ Except that directive itself, apparently.

But if Umar really did order not just pagan literature but also the records of his prophet's words and deeds destroyed, or if Muhammad himself ordered that his words and actions not be

recorded despite the difficulty this would pose for the Qur'an's numerous exhortations to obey and imitate him, how could later Muslims have preserved these traditions in such quantity? Or why would they have done so? Did Muslims really preserve wheelbarrows full of hadiths against the express orders of the Leader of the Believers, or hold it all in their memories with absolute fidelity? If such material had been written down and then discovered by those who opposed the preservation of hadith, would it not have been destroyed?

We begin to hear about Muhammad's example from the same caliph who built the Dome of the Rock, claimed to have collected the Qur'an (after the caliph Uthman was supposed to have done it decades earlier), and created the first coins and inscriptions mentioning Muhammad as the prophet of Allah: the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik. Reigning from 685 to 705, Abd al-Malik called rebels to obey Allah and the sunna of his prophet.¹² (By contrast, an earlier caliph, Muawiya, had referred to the "sunna of Umar," his predecessor.¹³) The Umayyad governor of Iraq, Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, who was said in some hadiths to have edited the Qur'an and destroyed variant texts, scolded a Kharijite rebel: "You have opposed the book of God and deviated from the sunna of his prophet."¹⁴

One would think, given such references, that the sunna of the prophet was by that period a recognized corpus of laws. But just as Umayyad rulers charged their opponents with departing from the prophet's example, those same opponents invoked the sunna of the prophet to justify their own, competing perspectives and rulings.¹⁵ The historians Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds conclude that in the early decades of the Arab empire, the sunna of the prophet did not refer to a specific set of rulings at all: "To say that someone had followed the sunna of the Prophet was to say that he was a good man, not to specify what he had done in concrete terms....In concrete terms, the 'sunna of the Prophet' meant nothing."¹⁶

But Abd al-Malik and his successors emphasized Muhammad's example: they presented, the words and deeds of the prophet as normative for Islamic faith and practice. The necessity for every Muslim to obey Muhammad became a central and oft-repeated

doctrine of the Qur'an. Consequently, the hunger for them became so intense that some Muslims traversed the entire Islamic world searching for the prophet's solution to a disputed question. An eighth-century Egyptian Muslim named Makhul, a freed slave, recounted how he searched for what Muhammad might have decreed about the particulars of distributing the spoils of war: "I did not leave Egypt until I had acquired all the knowledge that seemed to me to exist there. I then came to al-Hijaz and I did not leave it until I had acquired all the knowledge that seemed to be available. Then I came to al-Iraq, and I did not leave it until I had acquired all the knowledge that seemed to be available. I then came to Syria, and besieged it. I asked everyone about giving rewards from the booty. I did not find anyone who could tell me anything about it." Finally, he found what he was looking for: "I then met an old man called Ziyad ibn Jariyah at-Tamimi. I asked him: Have you heard anything about giving rewards from the booty? He replied: Yes. I heard Maslama al-Fihri say: I was present with the Prophet (peace be upon him). He gave a quarter of the spoils on the outward journey and a third on the return journey."¹⁷

That settled that—for Makhul, anyway. Not every Muslim could travel the world in search of answers. In the face of commands to obey Allah's messenger, there was an immense need for a collection of the prophetic word on various disputed issues. Finally, Islamic tradition generally identifies the second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur, who reigned from 754 to 775, as the first to commission a legal manual: the *Muwatta*. Because Islamic law is based to such a tremendous degree on the words and example of Muhammad, this manual of Islamic law records a great many hadiths of the prophet of Islam. The imam who wrote the *Muwatta*, Malik ibn Anas (715–801), died a mere seventeen decades after Muhammad, making him the nearest in time of all the collectors of hadiths to the life of the man whose every action and every utterance is the focus of the Hadith.

Various editions of Malik's *Muwatta* differ from one another so widely as to raise the question of whether they are the same book at all. Different versions (*riwayat*) of Malik's teachings were written down and transmitted by different students of his. On one occasion a

man approached the imam and showed him a manuscript. “This is your Muwatta, O Abu Abd Allah,” the man said to Malik, “which I have copied and collated; please grant me your permission to hand it down.” Without looking at the manuscript, Malik responded, “This permission is granted, and when handing down the text you may use the formula: Malik has told me, Malik has reported to me.”¹⁸ Some of the variant manuscripts were probably compiled after Malik died. In any case, the variations hardly inspire confidence regarding the authenticity of the *Muwatta*’s material about Muhammad.

But with Muhammad held up as an exemplar, the Hadith became political weapons in the hands of warring factions within the Islamic world. And as is always the case with weapons in wartime, they began to be manufactured wholesale. The early Islamic scholar Muhammad ibn Shihab al-Zuhri, who died in 741, sixty years before the death of Malik ibn Anas, complained even in his day that the “emirs forced people to write hadiths.”¹⁹ Even the caliph al-Mahdi (775–785) was known as someone who fabricated hadiths.²⁰

Some of these were useful in justifying the rapid expansion of the Arab empire, by placing its manifest destiny in the mouth of Muhammad. One such hadith describes an incident during the siege of Medina by the pagan Quraysh of Mecca. After ordering a trench to be dug around the city, Muhammad jumps in with a pickaxe to help out with a particularly large rock. Three times when he strikes the rock, lightning shoots out from it.²¹ Muhammad then explains: “The first means that God has opened up to me the Yaman [Yemen]; the second Syria and the west; and the third the east.”²² In another version of the tale, he says the lightning indicates that the Muslims will conquer “the palaces of al-Hirah” in southern Iraq “and al-Mada’in of Kisra,” the winter capital of the Sassanian empire, as well as “the palaces of the pale men in the lands of the Byzantines” and “the palaces of San’a.”²³ In another, Muhammad predicts that “the Greeks will stand before the brown men [the Arabs] in troops in white garments and with shorn heads, being forced to do all that they are ordered, whereas that country is now inhabited by people in whose eyes you rank lower than a monkey on the haunches of a camel.”²⁴

Muslims also fabricated hadiths in the heat of political and religious controversies that they hoped to settle with a decisive, albeit hitherto unknown, word from the prophet. Abd al-Malik at one point wanted to restrict Muslims from making pilgrimages to Mecca, since he was afraid that one of his rivals would take advantage of the pilgrimage to recruit followers. Accordingly, he prevailed upon the hapless al-Zuhri to fabricate a hadith to the effect that a pilgrimage to the mosque in Jerusalem (*Bayt al-Maqdis*) was just as praiseworthy in the sight of Allah as one to Mecca. Al-Zuhri went even further, having Muhammad say that “a prayer in the Bayt al-Maqdis of Jerusalem is better than a thousand prayers in other holy places”—in other words, even better than going to Mecca. This hadith duly appears in one of the six canonical Hadith collections that Muslim scholars consider most reliable: the *Sunan* of Muhammad ibn Maja (824–887).²⁵

Factionalism and the Hadith

Sometimes hadiths were manufactured in order to support one party or another among early Muslim factions. The caliph Muawiya had supplanted the last “rightly guided caliph,” Muhammad’s son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib, and Ali’s son and chosen successor Husayn, and he continued to struggle against the nascent party of Ali (*shiat Ali*), which ultimately became the Shi’ites. Muawiya is presented in a hadith as having told his lieutenant al-Mughira: “Do not tire of abusing and insulting Ali and calling for God’s mercifulness for Uthman [Ali’s predecessor and Muawiya’s cousin], defaming the companions of Ali, removing them and omitting to listen to them; praising, in contrast, the clan of Uthman, drawing them near to you and listening to them.”²⁶

Accordingly, a hadith appeared in which Muhammad declared that Ali’s father and Muhammad’s guardian, Abu Talib, was burning in hell: “Perhaps my intercession will be of use to him at the day of resurrection, so that he may be transferred into a pool of fire which reaches only up to the ankles but which is still hot enough to burn his brain.”²⁷

For its part, the party of Ali had Muhammad designate Ali as the guarantor of the proper understanding of the Muslim holy book: “I go

to war for the recognition of the Koran and Ali will fight for the interpretation of the Koran.”²⁸ In another hadith that came to be beloved of the Shi‘ites, Muhammad declares, “So know then that whose master I am, their master is Ali’s also.” Then he takes Ali’s hand and prays, “O God, protect him who recognizes Ali and be an enemy to all who oppose Ali.” Hearing this, Umar (who later became caliph, after the death of Abu Bakr in 634), says to Ali: “I wish you luck, son of Abu Talib, from this hour you are appointed the master of all Muslim men and women.”²⁹ In another pro-Ali hadith, Muhammad exclaims to one of his Companions: “O Anas! Is there anyone amongst the Ansar who is better than or preferable to Ali?”³⁰ The Ansar, or “helpers,” were the people of Medina who had converted to Islam after Muhammad moved there from Mecca in the Hijra, twelve years into his career as a prophet.

The Umayyads fought back with new hadiths of their own. In one, Muhammad’s favorite wife, Aisha, who hated Ali for his ungallant advice to Muhammad to discard her and get a new wife when she was accused of adultery, is told after the death of the prophet of Islam that Muhammad appointed Ali as his successor in his will. Aisha responds fiercely: “When did he appoint him by will? Verily, when he died he was resting against my chest (or said: in my lap) and he asked for a washbasin and then collapsed while in that state, and I could not even perceive that he had died, so when did he appoint him by will?”³¹

In another, Muhammad showers praise on the three men who immediately succeeded him: Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman, each of whom was chosen as caliph instead of Ali. After Muhammad climbs the mountain of Uhud with the three successors, the mountain starts shaking, and he speaks to it: “Be firm, O Uhud! For on you there are no more than a Prophet, a *Siddiq* and two martyrs.”³² *Siddiq*, or “truthful,” is an honorary title bestowed on one who is entirely trustworthy.

The Umayyads even put words in the mouth of Ali, having him praise his two foremost rivals as Muhammad’s closest Companions, Umar and Uthman. In a hadith, Ibn Abbas recalls: “While I was standing amongst the people who were invoking Allah for Umar bin

Al-Khattab who was lying [dead] on his bed, a man behind me rested his elbows on my shoulder and said, '[O Umar!] May Allah bestow His Mercy on you. I always hoped that Allah will keep you with your two companions, for I often heard Allah's Apostle saying, "I, Abu Bakr and Umar were [somewhere]. I, Abu Bakr and Umar did [something]. I, Abu Bakr and Umar set out." So I hoped that Allah will keep you with both of them.' I turned back to see that the speaker was Ali bin Abi Talib."³³

The partisans of Ali made fun of Uthman for having run away during some of the early battles of the Muslims. One follower of Ali mocked Uthman in verse: "You can accuse me of no other sin than that I have mentioned him who ran away from Khaybar. I mention the man who fled from Marhab, like a donkey runs from the lion."³⁴

Uthman exonerated himself by referring to the words of Muhammad. One hadith tells the story of an Egyptian who has come to Mecca for the hajj and asks an elderly Muslim, Abdullah bin Umar, son of the second caliph: "Do you know that Uthman fled away on the day [of the battle] of Uhud?"³⁵

When Ibn Umar says that yes, he did know that, the Egyptian has more: "Do you know that Uthman was absent on the day [of the battle] of Badr and did not join it?"³⁶

When Ibn Umar again says yes, the Egyptian comes back with a third question: "Do you know that he failed to attend the Ar-Ridwan pledge and did not witness it?"³⁷ This pledge was a declaration of loyalty to Muhammad that his closest Companions made after the Islamic prophet concluded with the pagan Arabs of Mecca the treaty of Hudaibiya, which was disadvantageous to the Muslims in numerous particulars.

For the third time, Ibn Umar says, "Yes."³⁸ The Egyptian responds, "Allahu akbar!"—in this case, an expression of indignation and dismay.³⁹

Then Ibn Umar explains, saying that Allah "excused" Uthman and forgave him for being absent from Uhud, although he does not explain the absence.⁴⁰ As for Badr, Ibn Umar says that Uthman was not there because he was obeying Muhammad: "The daughter of Allah's Apostle was his wife and she was sick then. Allah's Apostle

said to him, 'You will receive the same reward and share [of the booty] as any one of those who participated in the battle of Badr [if you stay with her].'"⁴¹ Finally, Ibn Umar explains Uthman's nonappearance at the Ar-Ridwan pledge of allegiance by saying that Muhammad sent Uthman elsewhere, and "had there been any person in Mecca more respectable than Uthman [to be sent as a representative], Allah's Apostle would have sent him instead of him."⁴² In fact, while Uthman was absent, Muhammad "held out his right hand saying, 'This is Uthman's hand.' He stroked his [other] hand with it saying, 'This [pledge of allegiance] is on the behalf of Uthman.'"⁴³ Ibn Umar tells the Egyptian: "Bear [these] excuses in mind with you."⁴⁴

Not only did this tale exonerate Uthman by invoking Muhammad himself; it also exalted him beyond all rivals as being "more respectable," and even showed Muhammad acting as his proxy. How, then, could anyone favor Ali's claim to the caliphate over Uthman's? That is, at least until the party of Ali invented another hadith in favor of its champion. This hadith describes the siege of the oasis of Khaybar, home of the last Jewish settlement in Arabia after Muhammad (according to still other hadiths) exiled two of the three Jewish tribes of Medina and massacred the third. Muhammad sends Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman—here again, the first three caliphs and Ali's rivals—in turn against one of the Khaybar forts, but they cannot capture it. When he sends out Uthman, Muhammad refers to his reputation for cowardice and sticks up for him: "Tomorrow I will give the flag to a man who loves Allah and his apostle. Allah will conquer it by his means; he is no runaway." But even Uthman fails, so Muhammad summons Ali, heals him miraculously from an eye ailment, and sends him against the fort. Ali, of course, succeeds.⁴⁵

The various Muslim factions produced a steady stream of hadiths defending their leaders or attacking those of their opponents. The Umayyad side invented a hadith defending the Umayyad governor of Iraq, Khalid al-Qasri (d. 743), whom pious Muslims hated for his brutality in governing. Khalid is redeemed in a hadith in which Muhammad is made to say, "O God, let thy victory and the victory of thy religion take place through the offspring of Asad b. Kurz,"

Khalid's ancestor.⁴⁶ But opponents of the Umayyads had Muhammad disparage the caliph al-Walid (705–715). In the hadith, Muhammad confronts a man who has just named his newborn son al-Walid: “You name your children by the names of our Pharaohs. Verily, a man with the name al-Walid will come who will inflict greater injury upon my community than ever did Pharaoh upon his people.”⁴⁷ A later transmitter of this hadith notes that while it was initially believed to refer to al-Walid I, once al-Walid II (743–744) began committing his own atrocities, it became clear that Muhammad had actually been referring to *him*.⁴⁸

Riddled with Contradictions

The consequence of all this was inevitable: utter confusion. Since warring parties were all fabricating hadiths that supported their positions, the Hadith is riddled with contradictions. Many of these, but by no means all of them, revolve around differences in Islamic ritual practice, probably reflecting regional variations. For example, among the hadiths compiled by the renowned ninth-century imam Muhammad Ibn Ismail al-Bukhari is one recording that, according to Ibn Abbas, “The Prophet performed ablution by washing the body parts only once.”⁴⁹ But Bukhari reports that another companion of Muhammad, Abdullah bin Zaid, said that “the Prophet performed ablution by washing the body parts twice.”⁵⁰ And yet another hadith collected by Bukhari has Muhammad praising Uthman for performing the ablutions not once or twice but thrice, saying that if he does it that way while avoiding distractions, “his past sins will be forgiven.”⁵¹ Bukhari puts these three hadiths together without comment or attempt at harmonization.

In a hadith recorded by another ninth-century imam, Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri, we are told that Muhammad “disapproved the drinking of water while standing.”⁵² Yet Muslim also reports that when Ibn Abbas gave Muhammad some sacred water from the well of Zamzam in Mecca, Muhammad—whose conduct is always exemplary for Muslims—“drank it while standing.”⁵³

Contemporary Islamic apologists point to a hadith in which Muhammad “forbade the killing of women and children” as evidence

of the humaneness, unusual for its time, of Islam's rules of warfare.⁵⁴ Immediately following that prohibition, however, Muslim includes another hadith in which Muhammad, "when asked about the women and children of the polytheists being killed during the night raid, said: They are from them."⁵⁵ In other words, the children of the polytheists are from the polytheists and deserve to share their fate.

Other contradictions involve details of Muhammad's own life, the Islamic eschatological scheme, and more. Consequently, the ninth-century scholar Asim an-Nabil (d. 827) threw up his hands in despair: "I have come to the conclusion that a pious man is never so ready to lie as in matters of the hadith."⁵⁶

Collecting and Codifying the Hadith

Islamic authorities realized that some effort had to be made to bring order out of all this chaos. In the latter part of the eighth century, the Abbasids initiated the collection and codification of the Hadith. By doing so, they exponentially expanded specific knowledge about what the prophet of Islam had commanded and condemned, approved and disapproved. The poet Marwan ibn Abi Hafsah accordingly exulted about the Abbasid caliph Muhammad ibn Mansur al-Mahdi (775–785): "The *amir al-mu'minin* [commander of the believers] Muhammad has revived the sunna of the Prophet with regard to what is permitted, what forbidden."⁵⁷

Revived, or originated? Either way, this great effort came to full fruition in the next century, with the appearance of the six most important Hadith collections, none of which date from earlier than two centuries after Muhammad's death. Together these are known as *al-Sahih al-Sittah*: the authentic and trustworthy ones (*sahih* means "sound" or "reliable"). These include, in order of their importance and general reputation for reliability, *Sahih Bukhari*, the most respected and authoritative Hadith collection, compiled by Bukhari (810–870); *Sahih Muslim*, by Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (821–875); the *Sunan* of Abu Dawud al-Sijistani (818–889); *As-Sunan as-Sughra*, by Ahmad ibn Shuayb al-Nasai (829–915); the *Jami* of Abi Isa Muhammad Al-Tirmidhi (824–892); and the *Sunan* of Muhammad ibn Maja (824–887). Although Muslims consider Bukhari's and

Muslim's collections to be the most trustworthy, the others are held in high regard as well. Abu Dawud as-Sijistani, for example, reportedly traveled to Arabia, Iraq, Khurasan, Egypt, Syria, Iran, and elsewhere collecting hadiths. One respected imam, Zakariya bin Yahya al-Saji, declared: "The Qur'an is the foundation of Islam and *Sunan Abu Dawud* is its pillar." Another, Ibn al-Arabi, added: "There is no need of acquaintance of anything after acquiring the knowledge of the Qur'an and of *Sunan Abu Dawud*."⁵⁸

It is important to note that Bukhari and Muslim were both Persians. Bukhari was born in Bukhara (hence the name by which he is known), in modern-day Uzbekistan; Muslim was also Persian. Abu Dawud hailed from Basra in Iraq. Al-Nasai was another Persian, born in what is now Turkmenistan. Tirmidhi and Ibn Maja were also Persians. None of these men were from Arabia, where the incidents there were putatively collecting and sifting for authenticity all took place, and only one of them, Abu Dawud, was even an Arab. They are said to have traversed the Islamic world to find accounts of what Muhammad said and did; there is no doubt that in every case, they had to travel a considerable distance to get even close to where the events recounted are supposed to have taken place. That in itself doesn't mean that they didn't collect authentic traditions, but it is striking that there were mostly non-Arabs collecting accounts of the Arab prophet, and that the process of collecting the hadith largely took place outside Arabia.

The most respected Hadith collection, Bukhari's, began in a dream, according to Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, a Saudi Islamic scholar and Qur'an translator. Dr. Khan writes that Bukhari dreamed that he was "standing in front of Prophet Muhammad having a fan in his hand and driving away the flies from the Prophet." The imam interpreted this dream as a divine sign that he would "drive away the falsehood asserted against the Prophet." Accordingly, he spent his life attempting to distinguish authentic hadiths from forgeries.

According to Islamic tradition, Bukhari collected stories about Muhammad's words and deeds—fully 600,000 of them.⁵⁹ Ultimately, he rejected nearly 593,000 of them as fabricated, or at least impossible to evaluate as to their reliability. He chose and published

7,563 hadiths, though these included repetitions; in all, he included 2,602 separate hadiths that he deemed authentic. Even these run to nine volumes in a modern-day English/Arabic edition published in Saudi Arabia.

The imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj was Bukhari's disciple. Born in Nishapur in what is now Iran, he is said to have traveled to Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq to collect hadiths. According to Islamic tradition, he collected 300,000 hadiths, of which he preserved 4,000 as authentic in his *Sahih*. Most Muslim scholars consider his collection, as well as that of Bukhari, to be almost entirely reliable; Muslims raise virtually no question about the authenticity of traditions that appear in both *Sahih Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*—of which there are many. One internet-based introduction to Islamic faith and practice, which assures readers that “nothing on this site violates the fixed principles of Islamic law,” sums up the prevailing opinion among Muslims: “Sahih Bukhari is distinguished with it's [sic] strong reliability.” It adds that the imam Muslim chose the hadiths that he included in *Sahih Muslim* “based on stringent acceptance criteria.”⁶⁰

The Proliferation of Forgeries

Yet if the imams Bukhari and Muslim had to go to such extraordinary lengths to find a relatively small number of authentic hadiths, this means that hundreds of thousands of stories about Muhammad were either completely unreliable or of doubtful authenticity. The problem was beyond their, or anyone's, ability to control. Ignaz Goldziher, the pioneering critical historian of the Hadith, notes that “the simplest means by which honest men sought to combat the rapid increase of faked hadiths is at the same time a most remarkable phenomenon in the history of literature. With pious intention fabrications were combated with new fabrications, with new hadiths which were smuggled in and in which the invention of illegitimate hadiths were condemned by strong words uttered by the Prophet.”⁶¹

Muhammad was accordingly made to acknowledge: “After my departure, the number of sayings ascribed to me will increase in the same way as sayings have been ascribed to previous prophets.”⁶² In another hadith he prophesies, “In the later days of my community,

there will be people who will hand you communications which neither you nor your forefathers have ever heard. Beware of them.” And even more strongly: “At the end of time there will be forgers, liars who will bring you hadiths which neither you nor your forefathers have heard. Beware of them so that they may not lead you astray and into temptation.”⁶³

But how was a pious Muslim to know the true hadiths from the false? A hadith cites Muhammad proposing a solution: “What therefore is told you as a saying of mine you will have to compare with the Book of God [the Qur’an], and what is in accordance with it is by men, whether I have in fact said it myself or not.”⁶⁴ Ibn Abbas adds another criterion, community acceptance: “If you hear from me a communication in the name of the Prophet and you find that it does not agree with the book of God or is not liked by the people, know that I have reported a lie about the Prophet.”⁶⁵

Note that in these hadiths neither Muhammad nor Ibn Abbas is made to say that Muslims should make a careful effort to winnow out the Islamic prophet’s authentic sayings from those that are inauthentic. Rather, they are simply to measure his purported sayings against the Qur’an, and follow those that aren’t contradicted by the Muslim holy book. To this day, one of the criteria by which Muslims evaluate hadiths is by how well they accord with the Qur’an. Those that contradict the words of Allah are rejected. That is a reasonable criterion, but it doesn’t get us any closer to what Muhammad actually said and did.

Nonetheless, Bukhari and the other hadith collectors made a valiant attempt. They claimed to be able to distinguish genuine material about Muhammad from forged hadiths largely by examining the chain of transmitters (*isnad*), the list of those who had passed on the story from the time of Muhammad to the present. Islamic scholars grade individual traditions according to their chains of transmitters as “sound,” “good,” “weak,” “forged,” and so on.

A hadith is considered sound if its chain of transmitters includes reliable people and goes back to a recognized authority. A typical strong chain is recorded by the Shi’ite scholar Sheikh al-Mufid (Ibn Muallim, 948–1022) as going all the way back to Ali himself. Al-Mufid

said: “Abul Hasan Ali b. Muhammad b. Khalid al-Maythami reported to me from Abu Bakr Muhammad b. al-Husain b. al-Mustanir, who reported from al-Husain b. Muhammad b. al-Husain b. Masab, who reported from Abbad b. Yaqoob, who reported from Abu Abdil Rahman al-Masoodi, from Katheer al-Nawa, from Abu Maryam al-Khawlani, from Malik b. Dhamrah, that *Amir ul-Mu’mineen* [leader of the believers] Ali b. Abi Talib (A.S.) said....”⁶⁶

If the chain of transmission includes unreliable people or a broken link, Muslim scholars consider the authenticity of the hadith doubtful. Ibn Maja notes that one hadith is considered weak “because of Khalid b. Ubaid,” one of its transmitters. He quotes Bukhari saying of Khalid: “His hadith is debatable,” and points out that two other Islamic authorities, Ibn Hibban and Hakim, “have stated that he narrates *maudu* [spurious] *ahadith* [traditions] on Anas’s authority.”⁶⁷

The apparent reliability of the *isnad* chain was what determined authenticity. It didn’t matter if a hadith was self-contradictory or absurd on its face; so long as its *isnad* chain was clear of anomalies, and it did not contradict the Qur’an, the tradition had no obstacles to being accepted as reliable.⁶⁸ Bukhari and Muslim, as well as their counterparts and the biographers of Muhammad such as Ibn Hisham, Ibn Sa’d, and others also tended to favor traditions that they received from multiple sources, but this indicates only that a hadith had circulated widely, not that it was authentic.

If a hadith could be forged, however, so could its chain of transmission. There are numerous indications that *isnads* were forged with the same alacrity with which *matns*—that is, the content of the hadiths—were invented. The scholar of Islamic law Joseph Schacht notes one anomalous hadith that indicates the liberties taken with the *isnads*. He points out that ash-Shafii, a renowned Islamic jurist of the early ninth century, described a particular hadith as “*mursal*,” meaning hurried, and “generally not acted upon.” Shafii’s description implies that the hadith “is not confirmed by any version with a complete *isnad*,” Schacht explains. But, he continues, the same hadith “appears with a different, full *isnad* in Ibn Hanbal... and Ibn Maja.”⁶⁹

Schacht notes many instances of hadiths with obviously forged or altered *isnads*. He recounts one passed on by Malik in his *Muwatta*. Malik heard from Muhammad ibn Abdalrahman ibn Sad ibn Zurara, who heard from one of Muhammad's wives, Hafsa, that once Hafsa killed one of her slaves who practiced witchcraft and had cast a spell on her. In another place we learn that Malik heard from Abul-Rijal Muhammad ibn Abdalrahman ibn Jariya, who heard from his mother, Amra, that another one of Muhammad's wives, Aisha, sold one of her slaves who practiced witchcraft and had cast a spell on her. "One of these versions is modeled on the other," Schacht observes, "and neither can be regarded as historical."⁷⁰

But Are They All Unreliable?

That hadiths were forged is admitted by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike. For the Muslim scholar Muhammad Mustafa Azami, the existence of obviously faulty *isnads* is in itself enough to establish the reliability of the hadiths that have been deemed authentic.⁷¹ After all, he argues, if the *isnads* were forged, why would the forger buttress his work with an unsatisfactory chain of transmission? If the whole thing is fictional in the first place, and fabricated for political reasons, why not attribute the tradition to none but respected members of the Islamic community, passing on Muhammad's words in an unbroken and clearly reliable chain? But Azami's argument falters on the fact that hadiths were manufactured by competing factions, and the old adage that the victors write the history books applies: if a well-known hadith did not promote a perspective favorable to the ruling faction, altering the *isnad* was an easy way to cast doubts on its authenticity. Moreover, a transmitter whom one faction saw as a reliable and pious could be considered a villainous fabricator by another faction.

The contemporary scholar Harald Motzki has also challenged on several fronts the idea that the Hadith as a whole is unreliable. He points to the hadiths collected by scholar Abd al-Razzaq (744–826) as evidence that hadiths were circulating by at least the early eighth century. But in truth, Abd al-Razzaq did the bulk of his work toward the end of the eighth century.⁷² Like Azami, Motzki cites the very

existence of suspect *isnads* to argue that the other hadiths must be authentic. He notes that Abd al-Razzaq sometimes attributes hadiths to sources that he considers of doubtful reliability, and even presents hadiths with no known source. If hadiths were being manufactured wholesale and fitted out with impressive *isnads*, why would hadiths with weak attribution, or no attribution at all, even exist?⁷³

Despite such claims, there is strong reason to question the reliance on *isnads* as a guide to the authenticity of hadiths. Even Schoeler, who defends the overall reliability of the Islamic sources regarding the life of Muhammad, warns that “we must always keep in mind that the requirements for an *isnad* were not nearly as strict in Ibn Hisham’s time as they would later become for the traditionists.”⁷⁴ The *isnads* themselves didn’t start appearing until after hadiths had begun circulating. Islamic tradition attributes a telling statement about the *isnads* to Muhammad ibn Sirin, an eighth-century Qur’anic scholar who was also renowned as an interpreter of dreams in Iraq. the collectors of hadiths, he said, “were not used to inquiring after the *isnad*, but when the *fitna* [civil war] occurred they said: Name us your informants.”⁷⁵ The *fitna* is usually understood as a reference to the unrest that followed the assassination of the caliph Uthman in 656—more than thirty years after the death of Muhammad, the subject of the hadiths. Thus even according to Islamic tradition, hadiths circulated for a considerable period without *isnads*. It strains credulity to imagine that thirty years after Muhammad’s death, Muslims could remember exactly who among the Islamic prophet’s Companions was responsible for transmitting each of thousands of stories about him.

Significantly, the use of *isnads* apparently became mandatory in the early 700s—around the time of Abd al-Malik and Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, or shortly thereafter.⁷⁶

Even the idea that the *isnad* is an indication of authenticity rests on shaky foundations. Anyone who has played the child’s game of telephone, involving a story passed on by whispers through multiple transmitters and then compared with the original at the end of the chain, knows how unreliable oral tradition can be.⁷⁷ If Muhammad could be made to warn the Muslims that they “must keep on reciting

the Qur'an because it escapes from the hearts of men faster than camels do when they are released from their tying ropes," would not the same tendency to evanesce apply even more to the Hadith?⁷⁸

To be sure, Arabia had an established practice of memorizing poetry, and the memorization of Islamic texts would accord with that practice. It is equally true that in ancient Greece, trained bards recited the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from memory. But the original transmitters of the Hadith were not poets or trained bards; they were simply Companions of Muhammad who saw him do or say something at a given moment. What's more, the Hadith is far more voluminous than the ancient epics that the ancient bards committed to memory. And yet the canonical account of Islam's origins assumes that Muhammad's Companions had essentially total recall of the prophet's words and deeds, and that they passed on with scrupulous care what they saw and heard in literally thousands of incidents. It further assumes that subsequent transmitters applied equal care over the course of many decades, passing on these traditions without embellishment, clarification, or alteration of any kind until the hadiths were finally collected and written down in the ninth century.

Seldom, if ever, has such a feat of memory been documented.

What Did Muhammad Really Say and Do?

And so ultimately it is impossible to tell whether or not Muhammad himself actually said or did any of what the traditional Islamic sources depict him as saying or doing, or even if there was a Muhammad at all. We have already seen that the Abbasids to a great degree sponsored the proliferation, and ultimately the collection, of the prophetic hadiths. This was in keeping with their opposition to the Umayyads on religious grounds. Ignaz Goldziher observes that the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads because of the latter's "godlessness and opposition to religion." The Abbasids, led by the general Abu Muslim—who, Goldziher writes, was "the man with the 'cudgel for the unbelievers'"—rose up against the Umayyads primarily to establish "the pillar of *din* [religion]."⁷⁹

On the other hand, it may be that the charges of impiety leveled at the Umayyads were simply Abbasid polemic, intended to discredit

their great rivals. After all, it is exceedingly strange that the Umayyads, who took over the caliphate in 661, following the murder of Ali, would have been so notorious for their irreligion. They ostensibly took power less than three decades after the death of the prophet of Islam, and among them were supposedly many who knew Muhammad personally and loved him above all creatures. Muawiya, the first Umayyad caliph, was a cousin of the caliph Uthman, who is credited with standardizing the text of the Qur'an. Is it really plausible that the Umayyads would have essentially discarded Muhammad's religion so soon after he gave it to them? Why did the Islamic community so quickly fall into the hands of rulers who cared little for its central organizing principle and reason for being?

This could have been simply due to the vicissitudes of a violent age and of a religion that sanctioned that violence. Muawiya, after all, was the son of Abu Sufyan, the Quraysh chieftain who (according to Islamic tradition) fought several battles against Muhammad and converted to Islam only reluctantly once defeated. In a meeting with the vanquished general, Muhammad asked, "Woe to you, Abu Sufyan, isn't it time that you recognize that I am God's apostle?" Abu Sufyan answered, "As to that I still have some doubt." Muhammad's companion Ibn Abbas, forefather of the Abbasids, would have none of that. He said to Abu Sufyan: "Submit and testify that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the apostle of God before you lose your head." Abu Sufyan duly obeyed.⁸⁰

In light of all this, it is not outrageous to wonder about Muawiya's commitment to Islam. Then again, there are hadiths saying that he actually became very devout, and even served as a scribe to Muhammad. The hadith about Abu Sufyan could be the product of Abbasid polemic.

Even if Muawiya was not devout, it is difficult to imagine that he would have passed on his irreligion to his successors, ruling as they did for a hundred years over Muslims who, according to the standard account, were inspired by the words of the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad. Perhaps what Islamic tradition characterizes as Umayyad irreligion could simply reflect a time (the early Umayyad

period) when the words and deeds of Muhammad, and the text of the Qur'an, had not yet been fixed.

The unreliability of the Hadith makes it impossible to know for certain anything about Muhammad. Further doubts arise because, as we shall soon see, there is scant evidence establishing Mecca as the center for trade and pilgrimage that it was reputed to be in Muhammad's time. But in the eighth century the first biography of the prophet of Islam appeared. And that book, combined with the beginning of the collection of the scattered and chaotic hadiths, heralded a momentous event: the mysterious and shadowy figure of the prophet of Islam began to move ever more confidently into "the full light of history."

CHAPTER 5

Switching on the Full Light of History

Urwa ibn al-Zubayr: Muhammad's First Biographer?

Islamic sources mention several historians who recorded information about Muhammad's words and deeds, but their works have not survived, and what has come down to us about them is uncertain. For example, Islamic tradition records that the man generally acknowledged as the founding father of Islamic history, Urwa ibn al-Zubayr ibn al-Awwam, was a cousin of Muhammad and nephew of Aisha who died in 712. Over the next two centuries, several Muslim historians attribute many traditions to him, but if he wrote anything at all, it has not come down to us.¹

That has not prevented contemporary historians from considering Urwa to be one of the most important early witnesses to Muhammad's life. Gregor Schoeler notes that Islamic tradition touts Urwa's access to the inner circle of the prophet of Islam: "Of Urwa's collection activities we are told that he once sent a messenger to three companions of the Prophet, one of which was Gabir ibn Abdallah (d. 73/692–693 or a few years later), to inquire about an event relating to the *hijrah*. It goes without saying that he would have consulted his aunt Aisha; he is said to have recorded reports he received from her in writing."²

Urwa lived in Medina, says Schoeler, and "is said to have transmitted reports from all his relatives—especially Aisha—and many other companions of the Prophet and members of the successor generation (e.g. Abdullah ibn Umar, Abdallah ibn Abbas,

Abu Hurayrah, Abdallah ibn Amr ibn al-As). Muslim tradition therefore regards him as a pre-eminent authority on early Islamic history, particularly the life of the Prophet.”³

Urwa lectured regularly in the mosque in Medina about Muhammad’s life and legal rulings. He is said also to have taught them to his sons, so that they could recite his teachings from memory. Urwa is even reported to have written down some of his material on Islamic law, and would “write letters in answer to written questions by the caliph Abd al-Malik.”⁴

However, in the year 683, the inhabitants of Medina revolted against Umayyad rule, and Urwa, apparently afraid that they would fall into hostile hands, burned the texts he had committed to writing. He is also depicted as coming to believe that the only book that should exist at all is the Qur’an, and therefore he “erased” all of his “books.”⁵ Urwa is said to have believed that everything besides the Qur’an, including records of Muhammad’s words and deeds, should be committed to memory, and then the written record destroyed. To preserve written documents would be to elevate them to an “eternal” status that only the Qur’an actually enjoys.⁶

Schoeler says: “As we can see from the material transmitted on his authority, Urwah gave accounts of all of the important events in Muhammad’s life.”⁷

Maybe he did. But virtually all we know about Urwa ibn al-Zubayr is what later historians recorded. There is no possible guarantee that material attributed to Urwa has not undergone legendary elaboration in the intervening period. It is possible, given the tradition that he wrote letters to Abd al-Malik, that Urwa was at least in part responsible for the beginning of mentions of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, as a distinct figure during Abd al-Malik’s caliphate.

However, here again the idea that the voluminous biographical material that appeared in the eighth and ninth centuries about Muhammad actually existed in the seventh century in the form of oral tradition founders on the fact that there is simply no mention of any of it. The seventh century gives us only the name, or title, Muhammad, and toward the end of the century, the assertion that he is the messenger of Allah.

Why the Muslims would remain quiet about the massive amount of oral traditions they are supposed to have possessed at that time has never been adequately explained. Marwan, who was caliph from June 684 to April 685, had previously served as governor of Medina from 661 to 668 and again from 674 to 677; while he was governor of Medina, he is supposed to have asked a scribe to write down some of the sayings of Muhammad that were circulating.⁸ This doesn't seem to have been done, but even if it had been, the available accounts from the 660s and 670s don't show any sign of these traditions about the prophet of Islam ever being mentioned.

Once these accounts were finally committed to writing, whether they were actual traditions of Muhammad, adaptations of stories about other people, or invented outright, it is possible that Urwa ibn al-Zubayr was actually the source of some of the material that was eventually incorporated into the Muhammad legend. But the historicity of that material cannot be determined with any more certainty than can be accorded the claim that various traditions about Muhammad actually originated with Aisha's nephew.

Yet Schoeler maintains that the biography of Muhammad as recorded in the canonical Islamic sources is accurate, and that one of the indications of the reliability of this information is that Urwa's material, although lost today, was used by later writers. Since Urwa died in 712 and collected the bulk of his stories about Muhammad from the 660s to the 690s, he had ample occasion to gather reliable information. Urwa, says Schoeler, "still had the opportunity to consult eye witnesses and contemporaries of many of the events in question—irrespective of whether he mentions his informant in the *isnad* or not. For this reason, it is much more likely that he asked his aunt Aisha about many events she had witnessed....In addition, he was able to collect first-hand reports on numerous incidents occurring (slightly) before, during and after the *hijra*, e.g. the *hijra* itself (including the 'first *hijra*' to Abyssinia and the circumstances and events leading to the *hijra* proper), the Battle of the Trench and al-Hudaibiya."⁹

These are all important events in Muhammad's life: The *hijra* is the Muslims' move from Mecca to Medina in 622, when Muhammad

became for the first time a military and political leader as well as a spiritual one. Before that, some Muslims had fled to Abyssinia to escape persecution from the Quraysh of Mecca. The Battle of the Trench in 627 was the siege of Medina by the pagan Arabs of Mecca—a siege the Muslims eventually broke, with momentous consequences for all concerned. The Treaty of Hudaibiya was the truce Muhammad reached with the Quraysh around the year 628; it permitted Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. This treaty set the standard in Islamic law for all treaties between Muslims and non-Muslims. If Urwa was really able to gather and transmit reliable information about all this from his aunt Aisha and other eyewitnesses of the events in question, then the biography of Muhammad in the standard Islamic accounts is essentially trustworthy.

Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri: A Principal Source?

Another early source of reports about Muhammad's words and deeds is Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 741), who like Urwa ibn al-Zubayr was a Medinan whose work is now lost. Salih ibn Kaysan, a Muslim who died around 757, is recorded as having said: "Ibn Shihab (az-Zuhri) and I met while collecting traditions (*natlubu al-ilm*). We agreed to write down the practices (of the Prophet) (*as-sunan*). We then wrote down whatever we heard on the Prophet's authority. Later, we also wrote down whatever came from his companions."¹⁰

As this activity was likely going on at the end of the seventh century at the earliest, it is still a considerable distance removed from the time Muhammad is said to have lived. The traditions about al-Zuhri are also conflicting. He is also said to have denied writing down any material about Muhammad. On one occasion he wrote down a lengthy hadith and then, having recited it, erased his notes. Yet other traditions say that al-Zuhri carried written material with him wherever he went and was ridiculed for doing so.¹¹

Al-Zuhri may have begun by memorizing the information he had gathered about Muhammad and then transmitting it to his students through lectures, and then started writing it down upon request. One of his students has been depicted as asking him, "If you would only write and compile these books for the benefit of the people...you

would be rid of all this labor!”¹² Al-Zuhri responds defensively: “Nobody has spread this knowledge farther and been more generous with it than me.”¹³

Al-Zuhri may have been reluctant to commit the traditions he had collected to writing in light of his complaint about forged hadiths, as well as a reluctance to transgress against the prohibition of writing anything down that wasn’t the Qur’an. However, he is said to have started writing down notes for the benefit of these students. This material may have formed the basis of some of the existing hadith literature, but does not survive in any document that actually dates from al-Zuhri’s time or close to it. Al-Zuhri is said to have spent some time in the employ of the Umayyad caliphs, two of whom—Umar II (717–720) and Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (724–743)—are recorded as having asked him to provide written collections of hadiths. Al-Zuhri supposedly had a prodigious memory, and dictated from memory (with perfect recall, no doubt) extensive hadith collections; the recitation of one of these took him no less than a year to complete.¹⁴

That year’s work went for naught, however, for when the Abbasids supplanted the Umayyads in 750, all of al-Zuhri’s work was said to have been destroyed or lost. “The Abbasids,” Schoeler says with perhaps more portent than he intended, “had to start again from scratch.”¹⁵ Whether or not the superabundance of material we now possess about the life of Muhammad actually had strong sources and historical antecedents that are not available to us, there is no doubt that they began to appear around the same time. If the Abbasids actually started from scratch by providing the impetus for an extensive legendary elaboration of the Muhammad myth, or painstakingly began to commit to writing the historical material about Muhammad that had circulated for so long, mostly orally, this certainly started to appear around this time.

But a closer examination of the canonical account of how these stories were preserved and passed down reveals a great many problems.

Urwa, al-Zuhri, and Muhammad’s Prophetic Revelation

The standard Islamic account of Muhammad's first revelation illustrates some of the difficulties involved in accepting the biographical material about the prophet of Islam in Islamic tradition as historically reliable. The traditional account of the first visitation to Muhammad of the unnamed angel later identified as Gabriel is a case in point. It appears in the hadith collections of Bukhari, Muslim, and others, and is attributed to Aisha, with an *isnad* chain that in most versions goes through both Urwa ibn al-Zubayr and Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri. The characters in the story include Muhammad, the as-yet-unnamed angel, Muhammad's first wife Khadija, and her uncle, Waraqa ibn Naufal.

Taking this at face value, it still must be acknowledged that Aisha was not present at these events, or even yet born, and so must have heard the story from Muhammad himself, who would have had to recount to her not just his own experiences, but the words of Khadija and Waraqa. There is nothing implausible about that, since if there were indeed a historical figure named Muhammad who claimed to be a prophet, he would have had every reason to repeat the story of his becoming a messenger of Allah in immense detail. But the difficulties come immediately after that. Aisha is supposed to have passed all this on to Urwa, who transmitted it to al-Zuhri, who passed it on to various other sources, who ultimately transmitted it to the great hadith collectors; Schoeler traces three transmitters between al-Zuhri and Bukhari and the same number, albeit different people, between al-Zuhri and Muslim.¹⁶

The assumption in Islamic tradition, at least regarding hadiths that are declared to be *sahih*, is that all this transmission went on with absolute accuracy and no legendary elaboration. But hadiths are not ruled *sahih* by some criteria for measuring their historical reliability; rather, the principal requirements for *sahih* status are compatibility with the Qur'anic message and a sound *isnad* chain. All the hadith transmitters who are deemed trustworthy are imagined to have prodigious, one-hundred-percent accurate memories.

Yet the accounts of the first revelation to Muhammad call this into question. Bukhari repeats the story several times, indicating that he received it from more than one source. In all these accounts, it

follows the same general outline: Muhammad goes out to the cave of Hira to worship Allah and has a “good dream” in which the unnamed angel comes and asks him to read (or recite), and he answers that he cannot read. The angel presses him hard three times, demanding that he read, until, terrified, Muhammad finally agrees. Then he goes back to Khadija in a state of agitation and terror, asking her to cover him. She speaks to him reassuringly and then takes him to see Waraqa, who is identified as a convert to Christianity. Waraqa tells him that Muhammad has had a vision of the same angel that appeared to Moses. Muhammad asks if his people will now drive him out, presumably in response to his prophetic preaching, and Waraqa says that they will, and that he will help him if he lives long enough to do so, but Waraqa dies shortly afterward.¹⁷

All the versions of this story in Bukhari and Muslim follow this same order, and are remarkably similar. In one, when Muhammad is fearfully telling Khadija what happened, he says: “I fear that something may happen to me.” She responds: “Never! By Allah, Allah will never disgrace you. You keep good relations with your kith and kin, help the poor and the destitute, serve your guests generously and assist the deserving calamity-afflicted ones.”¹⁸ In another version, Muhammad says: “O Khadija! what has happened to me? I fear for myself.” She answers: “It can’t be. Be happy. I swear by Allah that He shall never humiliate you. By Allah, you join ties of relationship, you speak the truth, you bear people’s burden, you help the destitute, you entertain guests, and you help against the vicissitudes which affect people.”¹⁹

These minor variations of language indicate that these traditions were passed on orally, not in written form, but their unanimity is striking. However, other sources begin to diverge. In his collection of biographical material about Muhammad, Ibn Sa’d has the angel call out to Muhammad: “O Muhammad! I am Gabriel, O Muhammad! I am Gabriel.”²⁰ Ibn Hisham goes even farther: in his version, the angel twice calls out, “O Muhammad! Thou art the apostle of God and I am Gabriel.”²¹ What’s more, even before Gabriel appears to Muhammad, according to Ibn Hisham, the future prophet would “journey far afield until he reached the glens of Mecca and the beds

of its valleys where no house was in sight; and not a stone or tree that he passed by but would say, 'Peace unto thee, O apostle of Allah.' And the apostle would turn to his right and left and look behind him and he would see naught but trees and stones."²²

Ibn Ishaq died in 773; Ibn Hisham in 833; Ibn Sa'd in 845; Bukhari in 870; and Muslim in 875. Bukhari completed his work in 846, and Muslim later, although they may have been recording traditions that were developed earlier than those Ibn Sa'd is passing along. However, Ibn Sa'd's version, taken at face value, has just as good a claim of authenticity as that of Bukhari and Muslim, as his *isnad* chain traces his version of the story back not to Aisha, but to Muhammad's cousin Ibn Abbas. In any case, neither one has the angel identifying himself to Muhammad during their first meeting in the fullest accounts of how Muhammad became a prophet; the identification is left to Waraqa, and even he doesn't mention the name Gabriel.

Who or what exactly appeared to Muhammad is important to the story, and to Islam as a whole. The fact that some versions of the story have an unnamed angel appearing to Muhammad, and others Gabriel, and others still identifying the first angel appearing to Muhammad as Saraphel, and Gabriel only later, is evidence more of legendary elaboration than of straight history. Did Muhammad tell the story in these three different ways? The identification of the angel as Gabriel may have been removed because it conflicted with Muhammad's terror and uncertainty about what had happened to him; the story makes more sense overall if the angel does not identify himself to Muhammad. This may make sense, but this inconsistency is an indication that we are not reading historical accounts.

One element of the story upon which all the sources seem to agree is that what Gabriel told Muhammad ("Recite in the name of your Lord who created") constitutes the first part of sura 96, which Islamic scholars today consider to have been the first portion of the Qur'an to have been revealed. However, while the precedence of sura 96 is accepted as axiomatic today, earlier Islamic authorities were not so sure. One stated: "Ibn Abbas and Mujahid think it is the first."²³

Another: “It belongs to the first ones, that had been sent from the Qur’an, in the opinion of most people.”²⁴ A third: “It is said to be the first.”²⁵ The thirteenth-century scholar Al-Nawawi concluded: “This is the right opinion, that is shared by the greatest number of the former and later ones.”²⁶

However, the philosopher Jabir ibn Hayyan, who died in 813, stated that the first sura to have been revealed was actually sura 74: “O you who covers himself, arise and warn, and your Lord glorify, and your clothing purify, and uncleanness avoid, and do not confer favor to acquire more, but for your Lord be patient” (74:1–7). The eleventh-century philosopher al-Kirmani was dismissive of this idea: “Jabir himself has invented that, it does not belong to his account. Aisha’s account is true because it has been passed on by her since tradition has to be preferred to fiction.”²⁷

Very well. But here again, why would Jabir have invented such a tradition? It is at very least possible that he was recording an alternative theory that had survived to his day from the time when the Qur’an’s contents, as well as those of the life of Muhammad, were much more in flux than they were later. This is also true of still another tradition. The twelfth-century Persian Islamic scholar and jurist Zamakhshari notes that most Qur’an commentators at the time he was writing believed that the first sura to have been revealed was actually the *Fatiha*, the first sura of the Qur’an as it stands today.²⁸ One version of this tradition concludes with the claim: “And that is the opinion of Ali bin Abi Talib.”²⁹

Maybe it was; after all, Ali ibn Abi Talib and Aisha were so famously at odds that their enmity is the root of the Sunni-Shi‘ite split. Other early Islamic authorities claim that suras 68, 73, and 95 were the first. Whatever is the right answer, the uncertainty on this point is striking. If it were clear and obvious to everyone that the first part of the Qur’an to have been revealed was contained in sura 96, why did anyone invent any other story? But if the Qur’an, and the traditions about Muhammad as well, were the product of many authors, some working independently of one another, the disagreement is readily understandable.

Ibn Ishaq and His Sira

The “full light of history” supposedly shining on Muhammad’s life is largely attributed not to the work of Urwa ibn al-Zubayr or Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri, but to the pious Muslim who had Gabriel address Muhammad as “apostle of God” at their first meeting: Muhammad Ibn Ishaq Ibn Yasar, generally known as Ibn Ishaq, who wrote the first biography (sira) of Muhammad. But like Urwa and al-Zuhri, Ibn Ishaq was not remotely a contemporary of his prophet. As Ibn Ishaq died in 773, his work dates from well over a hundred years after the death of his subject, and even it, like the works of Urwa and al-Zuhri, has been lost in its original form.

Ibn Ishaq was said to be a voracious collector of traditions about Muhammad. The tenth-century Islamic scholar Ibn Hibban recounts of Ibn Ishaq that “because of his desire craving for knowledge (i.e. traditions), he used to record (material) from those who were higher than him, equal to him, and lower than him.”³⁰ The ninth-century Islamic jurist and hadith specialist Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) notes somewhat derisively that Ibn Ishaq “took peoples’ ‘books’ and ‘inserted’ them into his own.”³¹

The result of this all-inclusive approach was his voluminous *Sirat Rasul Allah* (Biography of the Messenger of Allah), which has not survived in its original form. It comes down to us today only in a later, abbreviated (although still quite lengthy) version compiled by another Islamic scholar, Ibn Hisham, who died in 833, sixty years after Ibn Ishaq, as well as in fragments quoted by other early Muslim writers, including the historian Tabari (839–923).

The lateness of this material doesn’t in itself mean that it is unreliable. Historians generally tend to favor earlier sources over later ones, but an early source is not always more trustworthy than a later one. A hurriedly written biography of a politician rushed into print within weeks of his death, for example, would not be likely to have greater value than a more considered account published several years later, after exhaustive research. But in light of the rampant forging of material concerning Muhammad’s words and deeds, and the way various factions in the eighth and ninth centuries

used Muhammad's supposed statements and actions to support their positions, Muhammad's first biographers would have faced an extraordinary challenge in winnowing out authentic material from forgeries and fabrications.

Ibn Hisham, moreover, warns that his version is sanitized: he left out, he says, "things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people; and such reports as al-Bakka'i [Ibn Ishaq's student, who edited his work] told me he could not accept as trustworthy."³² Abdallah ibn *Numayr*, a collector of hadiths who died in 814, complained that although Ibn Ishaq's work contained much that was authentic, the authentic material was mixed with "worthless sayings" that Ishaq had obtained from "unknown people."³³

Ahmad ibn Hanbal did not regard Ibn Ishaq as a trustworthy source for Islamic law.³⁴ Since much of that corpus of law is derived from the example of what Muhammad said and did, embraced and avoided, that is extremely significant: ibn Hanbal's delicacy in this matter implies that he considered the great bulk of what Ibn Ishaq reported about Muhammad to be unreliable. On another occasion, however, ibn Hanbal clarified his view, explaining that while he did not believe Ibn Ishaq was trustworthy on matters of law, he saw his work as reliable regarding material about Muhammad that was more purely biographical, such as accounts of battles. A less favorable view comes from another early Islamic jurist, Malik ibn Anas (d. 795), who called Ibn Ishaq "one of the antichrists."³⁵ Others simply called him a liar.³⁶

Defending Ibn Ishaq

Ibn Ishaq had his defenders as well. The early Muslim writer who collected all these unfavorable statements about Ibn Ishaq, and many more as well, ultimately dismissed the criticisms and affirmed the trustworthiness of the biographer's work. And indeed, many of those who objected to Ibn Ishaq's work did so because he had Shi'ite tendencies or affirmed the free will of mankind, which many Muslims considered to be a heresy. Some believed that he wrote too favorably of the Jewish tribes of Arabia. The caliph al-Mansur (d. 775), however, seems to have had a high opinion of Ibn Ishaq, as he

is said to have asked him to write an all-inclusive history of the world beginning with the creation of Adam.

None of this actually bears upon the veracity of what he reports, and many early Muslims affirmed that veracity. One eighth-century Muslim, Shuba, dubbed Ibn Ishaq the “amir of traditionalists” (that is, hadith specialists) because of his prodigious memory.³⁷ One of his students, Yunus ibn Bukayr (d. 815), insisted that “all of Ibn Ishaq’s narrative (*hadit*) is ‘supported’ (*musnad*) because he dictated it to me (*amla-hu alayya*) or read it out to me (*qara’a-hu alayya*) or reported it (from memory?) to me (*haddata-ni bi-hi*), but what was not ‘supported’ was recited [by a student] before Ibn Ishaq.”³⁸

The ninth-century collector of traditions about Muhammad’s life and teachings Ibn Sa’d, noted that Ibn Ishaq “was the first to collect (*gama’a*) and compose (*allafa*) the *magazi* ([the book of] the Campaigns) of the Messenger of God.”³⁹ Ibn Sa’d seems to have taken for granted that Ibn Ishaq’s work was reliable.

A late ninth-century writer, Abu Zura, said that Ibn Ishaq’s work had been scrutinized for accuracy and had passed the test. The early ninth-century jurist ash-Shafii said that Ibn Ishaq was an indispensable source for the battles of the prophet, and even exclaimed that “knowledge will remain among men as long as Ibn Ishaq lives.”⁴⁰

Ibn Ishaq’s star rose even higher in the tenth century, when the hadith scholar Ibn Adi declared: “Even if Ibn Ishaq’s only merit had been to turn the rulers away from devoting themselves to useless books and direct their attention to the study of the campaigns of the Messenger of God (*magazi rasul Allah*), his mission in Mecca (*mab’at*) and the beginnings of creation (*mubtada*), this (alone) would qualify him for the renown which he was the first to merit. Others after him also wrote systematically arranged books (*sannafaha*) (about this subject), but they did not reach Ibn Ishaq’s standard in this field.”⁴¹

The widely divergent views among Muslims regarding Ibn Ishaq, in the recension of Ibn Hisham that has come down to us, may be attributable at least in part to the fact that the picture of Muhammad that emerges from Ibn Ishaq’s biography is not what one might

expect from the founder of one of the world's great religions. The Muhammad of Ibn Ishaq/Ibn Hisham is not a peaceful teacher of the love of God and the brotherhood of man but rather a warlord who fought numerous battles and ordered the assassination of his enemies. "The character attributed to Muhammad in the biography of Ibn Ishaq," observes the twentieth-century historian David Margoliouth, "is exceedingly unfavorable. In order to gain his ends he recoils from no expedient, and he approves of similar unscrupulousness on the part of his adherents, when exercised in his interest."⁴²

It isn't so much Muhammad's wars that embarrass modern-day Muslims in the West—those they can attribute to their prophet's particular time and place, glossing over his status as an "excellent example" (Qur'an 33:21) for Muslims in all times and places. Harder to explain away are incidents such as the notorious "satanic verses" episode: Muhammad received a revelation naming three goddesses of the pagan Quraysh as daughters of Allah, worthy of veneration. But when the prophet of Islam realized that he had compromised his message of monotheism, he claimed that Satan had inspired those verses, and indeed that Satan interfered with the messages of all the prophets (cf. Qur'an 22:52). Muhammad quickly canceled the offending passages. Ibn Ishaq tells the story of this incident, which most other early chroniclers of Muhammad's life omit from their accounts. Ibn Ishaq also recounts the horrific story of Kinana bin al-Rabi, a Jewish leader at the oasis of Khaybar, which Muhammad raided and conquered. Thinking that Kinana knew where the Jews of Khaybar had hidden their treasury, the prophet gave this order to his men: "Torture him until you extract what he has." The Muslims then built a fire on Kinana's chest, and when Kinana still wouldn't tell them where the treasure was, they beheaded him.⁴³

Ehteshaam Gulam, a modern-day Islamic apologist and writer at the website "Answering Christian Claims," offers a typical Islamic objection to this story when he rejects it for its lack of a proper chain of transmitters (*isnad*): Ibn Ishaq doesn't name his source at all. Gulam also says that the story simply can't be true, because Muhammad would not have acted this way: "That a man should be

tortured with burns on his chest by the sparks of a flint is too heinous a deed for a Prophet (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) who had earned for himself the title of *Rahma'il Alamin* (Mercy for all the worlds).⁴⁴ He suggests that Jews may have concocted the story and passed it along to a credulous Ibn Ishaq.

Ibn Ishaq's Reliability

So are these all “worthless sayings” that Ibn Ishaq received from “unknown people” and that Ibn Hisham passed on to the world at large? Possibly. Yet left unexplained in these criticisms is Ibn Ishaq's motive. If there were indeed Jews who were enemies of Islam (as they are for all generations, as designated by Qur'an 5:82) and were feeding Ibn Ishaq false information about Muhammad in order to discredit Islam, their motive is relatively clear, but Ibn Ishaq's isn't. Ibn Ishaq, says Margoliouth, paints “a disagreeable picture for the founder of a religion,” but it “cannot be pleaded that it is a picture drawn by an enemy.”⁴⁵

Even if the Muhammad of Ibn Ishaq's portrait is more of a cutthroat than a holy man, his biographer's reverence for his protagonist is obvious and unstinting. Clearly Ibn Ishaq has no interest in portraying his prophet in an unfavorable light; Muhammad, after all, is Ibn Ishaq's moral compass, just as he is for so many Muslims today. Ibn Ishaq seems not to be troubled by the moral implications of the stories he tells or to believe that the incidents place Muhammad in a negative light. Such stories cannot be rejected as unhistorical simply because modern-day Muslims wish they weren't there.

There is no way to evaluate the veracity of Ibn Ishaq's various accounts of Muhammad. Material that circulated orally for as many as 125 years, amid an environment in which forgery of such material was rampant, is extremely unlikely to have maintained any significant degree of historical reliability. The decades between the work of Ibn Ishaq and that of Ibn Hisham make it even more difficult to have any certainty about its veracity. What's more, as the Dutch scholar of Islam Johannes J. G. Jansen observes, “Nothing from the contents of Ibn Ishaq is confirmed by inscriptions or other

archeological material. Testimonies from non-Muslim contemporaries do not exist. Greek, Armenian, Syriac and other sources about the beginnings of Islam are very difficult to date, but none of them is convincingly contemporary with the Prophet of Islam. Under such circumstances, no biography can be a scholarly work in the modern sense of that word, not even with the help of an omniscient Ibn Ishaq.”⁴⁶

Historical Embroidery

Later biographers were even more knowing, often embroidering on Ibn Ishaq’s accounts. Patricia Crone adduces one particularly egregious example. According to Ibn Ishaq’s account as it was passed on by Ibn Hisham, the raid of Kharrar appears to have been a nonevent in Muhammad’s life: “Meanwhile the Messenger of God had sent Sa’d b. Abi Waqqas on campaign with eight men from among the Muhajirun. He went as far as Kharrar in the Hijaz, then he returned without having had a clash with the enemy.”⁴⁷

Two generations later, al-Waqidi, in his *Book of History and Campaigns*, a chronicle of the battles of Muhammad, embellishes this spare account:

Then the Messenger of God (may God bless him and give him peace) appointed Sa’d b. Abi Waqqas to the command against Kharrar—Kharrar being part of Juhfa near Khumm—in Dhu’l-Qa’da, eighteen months after the *hijra* of the Messenger (may God bless him and give him peace). Abu Bakr b. Ismail b. Muhammad said on the authority of his father on the authority of Amir b. Sa’d on the authority of his father [sc. Sa’d b. Abi Waqqas]: the Messenger of God (may God bless him and give him peace) said, “O Sa’d, go to Kharrar, for a caravan belonging to Quraysh will pass through it.” So I went out with twenty or twenty-one men, on foot. We would hide during the day and travel at night until we arrived there on the morning of the fifth day. We found that the caravan had passed through the day before. The Messenger had enjoined upon us not to go beyond

Kharrar. Had we not done so, I would have tried to catch up with it.⁴⁸

Al-Waqidi knows so much more about this expedition than did Ibn Ishaq—and, as Crone notes, “He knows all this on the impeccable authority of the leader of the expedition himself.” But how is it that these details eluded Ibn Ishaq and yet made their way to al-Waqidi some fifty years later? While it is possible that al-Waqidi had access to oral traditions that had been passed on from people close to Muhammad but had escaped Ibn Ishaq’s notice, it is more likely that these details were legendary elaborations developed for the purposes of dramatic storytelling.⁴⁹

Legendary Elaboration

Schoeler contends that the traditional Islamic material about Muhammad’s life and work is substantially reliable, pointing out that although the work of Urwa ibn al-Zubayr is lost, Ibn Hisham and other early Muslim writers quote it extensively.

Schoeler’s claim, however, falters in light of the comparison above between Ibn Ishaq’s and al-Waqidi’s accounts of the nonevent at Kharrar. If that material could be subject to so much legendary elaboration within a few decades, what was to prevent those who passed on Urwa’s material from altering it substantially, whether they did so in light of other material they had received from different sources, or in the service of some political calculation, or out of a pious interest in exaggerating Muhammad’s virtues, or a combination of such motives? In fact, this process of legendary elaboration was already taking place when Ibn Ishaq first compiled his account.

The clearest evidence of this comes from the Qur’an’s repeated assumption that the messenger who received its revelations was not a miracle worker. The unbelievers demand a miracle: “Those who do not know say, ‘Why does Allah not speak to us or there come to us a sign?’ Thus spoke those before them like their words. Their hearts resemble each other. We have shown clearly the signs to a people who are certain” (2:118; cf. 6:37; 10:20; 13:7; 13:27).

Allah tells his messenger that even if the prophet did come to the unbelievers with a miracle, they would reject him anyway: "And We have certainly presented to the people in this Qur'an from every example. But if you should bring them a sign, the disbelievers will surely say, 'You are but falsifiers'" (30:58). Elsewhere in the Qur'an, Allah delivers a similar message: "And if you brought to those who were given the scripture every sign, they would not follow your qibla [direction to face during prayers]. Nor will you be a follower of their qibla. Nor would they be followers of one another's qibla. So if you were to follow their desires after what has come to you of knowledge, indeed, you would then be among the wrongdoers" (2:145). The repetition of this theme suggests that one of the primary criticisms the unbelievers brought against the prophet was that he had no miracles to perform; the Qur'an was intended to be sufficient sign in itself: "And is it not sufficient for them that We revealed to you the Book which is recited to them? Indeed in that is a mercy and reminder for a people who believe" (29:51).

Yet the Muhammad of Ibn Hisham's biography is an accomplished miracle worker. Ibn Hisham relates that during the digging of the trench that ultimately thwarted the Meccans' siege of the Muslims in Medina, one of Muhammad's Companions prepared "a little ewe not fully fattened" and invited the prophet to dinner. Muhammad, however, surprised his host by inviting all of those who were working on the trench to dine at the man's home. The prophet of Islam solved the problem just as Jesus in the Gospels multiplied bread and fish: "When we had sat down we produced the food and he blessed it and invoked the name of God over it. Then he ate as did all the others. As soon as one lot had finished another lot came until the diggers turned from it."⁵⁰ On another occasion, Ibn Hisham writes, one of the Companions seriously injured his eye, so that it actually hung from its socket; Muhammad "restored it to its place with his hand and it became his best and keenest eye afterwards."⁵¹ In other stories, Muhammad drew water from a dry waterhole and called down the rain with a prayer.⁵²

There are many, many such stories in Ibn Hisham's biography. If any of them had been known at the time the Qur'an was written, it is

inexplicable that Muhammad would have been portrayed in his own holy book as a prophet with a book alone and no supporting miracles. It is remarkable that a man who could heal the sick, multiply food, draw water from dry ground, and shoot out lightning from the strike of a pickaxe would nonetheless be portrayed as a prophet whose message was unsupported by miraculous signs.

Ibn Hisham also includes stories of how Muhammad was repeatedly identified as a future prophet when he was a mere child. In one, Muhammad was taken as a child to Syria, where a Christian monk named Bahira studied him, “looking at his body and finding traces of his description [in the Christian books].” Ibn Hisham affirms that Bahira found the boy to be a stout monotheist, although his people were polytheists; young Muhammad told the monk that “by Allah nothing is more hateful to me” than al-Lat and al-Uzza, two goddesses of the Quraysh. Bahira also “looked at his back and saw the seal of prophethood between his shoulders in the very place described in his book.” Accordingly, the monk gave Muhammad’s uncle a warning that foreshadowed, or echoed, the later demonization of the Jews in Islamic tradition: “Take your nephew back to his country and guard him carefully against the Jews, for by Allah! If they see him and know about him what I know, they will do him evil; a great future lies before this nephew of yours, so take him home quickly.”⁵³

Johannes Jansen explains the motivation behind such stories:

The storytellers intended to convince their public that Muhammad has indeed been a prophet from God. In order to do so, they assured their public that already Christians, even monks, had recognized him as such. They had no real memory of such an event, but they wanted to convince their public that to recognize Muhammad as the prophet of God was a good thing. If a neutral, Christian authority had already recognized Muhammad, they must have argued, how much more should others do so!

In this case, the storytellers could only get their message across if they could create a setting in which Muhammad might have actually met a monk. Hence, they tell several stories of how

Muhammad as a child went to Syria, together with one of his uncles. There he met his monk, and the monk recognized him. The many stories about Muhammad's travels to Syria are not the product of real historical memory, however vague, but a creation that was made necessary by the theological need to have Muhammad recognized as a prophet by Christians, preferably a monk.

The story about the meeting of Muhammad and the monk is improbable, it appears in many contradictory versions, but it served its purpose.⁵⁴

Such stories are also strange in light of the opposition that Muhammad faced among his own people, the Quraysh, once he did proclaim himself as a prophet: if he really fulfilled the prophecies of a prophet who was to come, why were the Quraysh so slow and obstinate about recognizing that fact? In this the life of Muhammad resembles that of Jesus, whom the Gospel of Matthew in particular depicts as fulfilling the prophecies of the coming Messiah and yet being rejected by the religious leaders most familiar with those prophecies. This close resemblance indicates that the stories of Muhammad's being identified as a prophet as a youth have a typological, legendary cast.

The legendary character of these accounts is especially obvious in light of their absolute incompatibility with other Islamic traditions about how surprised and terrified Muhammad was by the first visitation of the angel Gabriel. Ibn Hisham himself reports that this encounter left Muhammad in such extreme agitation that he said to his wife: "Woe is me poet or possessed."⁵⁵ In this context (and others), a poet is someone who receives ecstatic visions and may be insane. If he had been repeatedly identified as a prophet when he was a child and a young man, one might be forgiven for thinking that he should have seen it coming.

On this basis alone, the historical reliability of Ibn Hisham is severely compromised. The material he includes in his biography must have arisen long after the collection of the Qur'an. Even in that case, it is odd that he would have included so much material that

clearly contradicts the testimony of the Qur'an, a book with which Ibn Hisham was familiar at least in some form, as he frequently quoted passages that appear in it.

If Ibn Hisham's biography of Muhammad is largely or even wholly pious fiction, all the information about Muhammad that is generally regarded as historical evaporates. Ibn Hisham's overarching intention is to demonstrate to his readers that Muhammad is indeed a prophet. But in doing so he recounts so many legends that fact cannot be separated from fiction. There is no reliable way to distinguish the miraculous material in Ibn Hisham's account from that which appears to be more straightforwardly historical.

Leaping Over the Leap Months

Jansen administers the *coup de grâce* to any claims that Ibn Hisham's biography is historical. He points out that "for every event which took place in the life of Muhammad, Ibn Ishaq meticulously recorded in his *Sira* in which month it took place," and "this meticulous and systematic dating by month which is Ibn Ishaq's wont, is, of course, one of the main reasons why Western historians classified his book as historiography in the normal sense of that word."⁵⁶ Yet this supposedly painstaking record keeping simply does not line up with the Arabic calendar.

The pre-Islamic Arabic calendar, like the Islamic calendar, was lunar, consisting of 354 days rather than the 365 days of the solar calendar. To make up this difference, Arabians added leap months—one every three solar years. They discontinued that practice in the year 629; the Qur'an actually forbids adding leap months (9:36–37). But by that point, Muhammad had acted as a prophet for almost twenty years, according to the standard Islamic account. "How then," asks Jansen, "is it possible that not a single one of the numerous events Ibn Ishaq describes and attaches a date to, took place during a leap month? If his narrative of the life of Muhammad would be based on historical memories and on real events, however distorted, but remembered by real people, how can half a solar year (or more) remain unmentioned and have disappeared from the record?"⁵⁷

Ibn Ishaq/Ibn Hisham's biography, Jansen observes, "can only date from a period in which people had forgotten that leap months had once existed."⁵⁸ That period would have to have been a considerably long time after Muhammad is supposed to have lived. "These stories by Ibn Ishaq," concludes Jansen, "do not attempt to describe memories of events that took place in the past, but they want to convince the reader that the protagonist of these stories, Muhammad, is the Messenger of God."⁵⁹

Muhammad's Big Day

Yet another sign that the early biographical material about Muhammad is not history, but legend crafted to solve various problems and solve various needs is the fact that, as Donner notes, "the chronology of this traditional material about Muhammad, moreover, is not only vague and confused, but also bears telltale signs of having been shaped by a concern for numerological symbolism. For example, all the major events of Muhammad's life are said to have occurred on the same date and day of the week (Monday, 12 Rabi' al-awwal) in different years."⁶⁰ While there are some notable divergences, the early biographers of Muhammad do place a great many important events on this day, the twelfth day of the third Islamic month. Ibn Hisham states that "the apostle was born on Monday, 12th Rabi'u'l-awwal."⁶¹ And "the apostle came to Medina on Monday at high noon on the 12th of Rabi'u'l-awwal."⁶² According to Ibn Sa'd, invoking Aisha as his authority, "the Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, died on Monday, the 12th of Rabi' al-Awwal."⁶³ Other traditions place all three of these events on the second day of Rabi' al-awwal.⁶⁴

Ibn Hisham and Ibn Sa'd also both date the occasion of Muhammad's first revelation, the Battle of Badr, and the conquest of Mecca to the month of Ramadan.⁶⁵ Of course, it is not outside the realm of possibility that these events all really did take place at roughly the same time, but the congruence is an indication that considerations other than historical accuracy were in play in the development of these traditions.

Amid all these signs that the sira literature is more pious fiction than fact, the overarching difficulty that Ibn Hisham's biography of Muhammad presents, along with other early accounts of the life of the prophet of Islam, is that if there is any kernel of historical accuracy within the accounts, it is so thoroughly mixed in with legendary material as to make it ultimately impossible to distinguish one from the other.

History That Is Not History

Even when early Islamic tradition appears to be offering straight historical accounts, what is actually going on can be quite different. The scholar of Greek and Arabic geography Hans von Mzik offers one telling example, noting that the different accounts of the Battle of Badr give different numbers for the Muslim forces: Ibn Sa'd says that 324 Muslims faced the Meccans in battle; another sources says there were "310 and several more," and other sources offer different numbers, all in the low 300s.⁶⁶ Mzik states that "the details at first create the impression that we are dealing with a genuine historical account." However, there are numerous small but telling indications that the account is more stylized than first appears; this becomes clear in the Islamic accounts' resonances with the Biblical story of Gideon.

Ibn Hisham introduces his account of the Battle of Badr with a curious story about a Muslim woman named Atika, who "saw a vision which frightened her."⁶⁷ She told her brother al-Abbas: "Brother, last night I saw a vision which frightened me and I am afraid that evil and misfortune will come upon your people."⁶⁸ She explained: "I saw a rider coming upon a camel who halted in the valley. Then he cried at the top of his voice, 'Come forth, O people, do not leave your men to face a disaster that will come in three days time.' I saw the people flock to him, and then he went into the mosque with the people following him. While they were round him his camel mounted to the top of the Ka'ba. Then he called out again, using the same words. Then his camel mounted to the top of Abu Qubays, and he cried out again. Then he seized a rock and loosened it, and it began to fail, until at the bottom of the mountain it split into pieces. There was not

a house or a dwelling in Mecca but received a bit of it.”⁶⁹ Ibn Hisham also records another dream relating to Badr: “Juhaym b. al-Salt b. Makhrama b. al-Muttalib saw a vision. He said, ‘Between waking and sleeping I saw a man advancing on a horse with a camel, and then he halted and said: “Slain are Utba and Shayba and Abu’l-Hakam and Umayya” (and he went on to enumerate the men who were killed at Badr, all nobles of Quraysh). Then I saw him stab his camel in the chest and send it loose into the camp, and every single tent was bespattered with its blood.”⁷⁰

Mzik explains: “It is not hard for us to recognize the model in both dreams: the ominous dream of the Midianite before the great battle with Gideon.”⁷¹ The Book of Judges states: “When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade; and he said, ‘Behold, I dreamed a dream; and lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat’” (Judges 7:13).

In all three of these, something tumbles into the enemy camp and destroys it, heralding the imminent victory in battle. Mzik points out that “all three dreams have the rather unusual motif of movement in common: the ‘rolling’ of the boulder, the ‘running around’ of the camel, and the ‘rolling’ of the barley bread, but the Muslim versions have been expanded and become more sensory.”⁷²

Maybe there was the extraordinary coincidence that the Battle of Badr was preceded by dreams heralding victory that were remarkably similar to the dream in the Book of Judges heralding Gideon’s victory. But it is much more likely that what historians have frequently taken as historical records in Islamic tradition actually contain not only a good amount of legendary material, to the extent that what is historical, if anything, can no longer be ascertained, but also material that is typological, fashioned to make theological points rather than reporting on historical events.

Having It Both Ways with Ibn Hisham

Nonetheless, the twentieth-century scholar of Islam W. Montgomery Watt (1909–2006) purported to separate the historical from the

legendary in Ibn Hisham in his two-volume biography of the prophet of Islam, *Muhammad at Mecca* and *Muhammad at Medina*. He did so, however, not on the basis of some stated criteria whereby he evaluated the reliability of various traditions, but simply by ignoring the miraculous elements of Ibn Hisham's work and presenting the rest as historically accurate. Watt's procedure is, in the final analysis, completely arbitrary: there is no reason to give any more credence to the nonmiraculous elements of Ibn Hisham's biography than to the miraculous ones. Neither the miraculous nor the nonmiraculous accounts are attested by any other contemporary source, or any source closer to the actual lifetime of Muhammad.

Patricia Crone explains some of what is wrong with Watt's methodology: "He accepts as historically correct the claim that Muhammad traded in Syria as Khadija's agent, even though the only story in which we are told as much is fictitious. It is similarly, to him, a historical fact that Abd al-Muttalib dug the well of Zamzam in Mecca, though the information is likewise derived from a miracle story."⁷³ Watt informs his readers with impressive precision that "the siege of Medina, known to Muslims as the expedition of the Khandaq or Trench, began on 31 March 627 (8/xi/5) and lasted about a fortnight."⁷⁴ He does not say anything about the lightning that shot from Muhammad's pickax during the digging of the trench, or note that his source for the precise start of the siege was al-Waqidi, whose ahistorical elaborations on Ibn Hisham's already legendary narrative we have seen. Why Watt believes the precise dating for the start of the siege to be historically reliable, but not Muhammad's portentous pickax, he does not explain.

Watt is not alone. Nowadays many Islamic apologists, confronted with embarrassing material from Muhammad's life as Ibn Hisham depicts it, quote the ancient Muslim writers who impugn Ibn Ishaq's reliability, and on that basis dismiss anything that is sourced from Ibn Ishaq/Ibn Hisham as legendary. They do not explain why pious believers such as Ibn Ishaq or Ibn Hisham would record material so unflattering to their own prophet.

What's more, there is simply no alternative to Ibn Ishaq/Ibn Hisham if one wishes to record the earliest available Islamic sources say

about Muhammad. Consequently, every modern-day biography of Muhammad written by noted apologists for Islam who are intent upon portraying the prophet of Islam in the most favorable possible light (including Karen Armstrong, Tariq Ramadan, Juan Cole, and Omid Safi) depend to a great degree upon Ibn Ishaq/Ibn Hisham. Johannes Jansen observes: "Later books about Muhammad essentially limit themselves to retelling Ibn Ishaq's story. Sometimes they are a little more detailed than Ibn Ishaq, but the extra details they supply do not inspire much confidence in modern skeptics. The modern western biographies of Muhammad, too, all completely depend upon Ibn Ishaq. Equally, all encyclopedia articles about Mohammed, whether popular or academic, are nothing but summaries of Ibn Ishaq's narrative."⁷⁵

But historians who depend on Ibn Hisham for their knowledge of Muhammad can't have it both ways. If the material in his biography of Muhammad that depicts Muhammad favorably is historically reliable, then so is the material they ignore that depicts Muhammad unfavorably.

So if Ibn Hisham is not a historically trustworthy source, what is left of the life of Muhammad? If nothing certain can be known about him, Islam stands as a momentous effect in search of a cause. If there was no warrior prophet teaching jihad warfare against unbelievers and presenting this teaching as the perfect and eternal word of the only true God, then how and why did the great Arab conquests of the seventh century and thereafter really come about? What was the energizing force behind them, if they were not inspired by a fiery prophet's promise of reward in this world and the next for his warriors?

If Islam did not develop as Muslims believe it did and as the earliest Islamic sources explain, then how and why did it develop at all?

A clue to this comes from the anomalies surrounding Islam's Arabian setting.

CHAPTER 6

The Absence of Arabia

Muhammad: Arabian Prophet?

Muhammad was an Arab messenger, born in Mecca, speaking Arabic, and bringing the message of Allah to the Arabs (cf. Qur'an 41:44) and thence to the world at large.

Every element of that sentence is a commonplace that both Muslims and non-Muslims take for granted; yet every element, upon closer scrutiny, begins to dissolve. From the extant historical records it is not at all clear that there was an Arab prophet named Muhammad anywhere near Mecca who brought any kind of message to the world. Or at the very least, the records indicate that if there was a Muhammad, he was not in Mecca and didn't preach anything that closely resembles Islam. Only long after his death, when his biography and holy book as we know them began to be constructed, did Islam as we know it come to be.

The centrality of Arabia and the Arabic language to the message of Islam cannot be overstated. Although Islam presents itself as a universal religion for all people on the earth, it has a decidedly Arabic character. Converts to Islam, whatever their nationality, usually take Arabic names. Wherever they are in the world, and whatever their native language, Muslims must pray in Arabic and recite the Qur'an in Arabic.

Many converts in non-Muslim countries adopt traditional Arabic dress. Arabic culture has a pride of place in the Islamic world that has frequently given rise to tensions between Arab and non-Arab Muslims. Arabic supremacists have in our own time made war

against non-Arab Muslims in the Darfur region of the Sudan; such conflicts are a recurring feature of Islamic history.¹

Central to Islam, therefore, is the traditional account of how Muhammad, an Arabian merchant, received the Qur'an through the angel Gabriel from Allah, first in Mecca and then in Medina. According to the canonical Islamic account, armed with its message, Muhammad had united the entire Arabian Peninsula under the banner of Islam by the time of his death in 632.

It was not an easy task, according to the standard Islamic sources. The prophet and his new religion faced stiff resistance from his own tribe, the Quraysh, who were pagans and polytheists. The Quraysh, according to the Islamic story of the religion's origins, lived in Mecca, which was a center for both trade and pilgrimage, such that people went there from all over Arabia and from outside Arabia as well. The Quraysh, say the Muslim sources, profited from those who made pilgrimages to the Ka'ba to worship its many idols. Mecca, according to Islamic tradition, was central to both the religion and the commerce of the area.

The canonical account of the origins of Islam holds that the Quraysh initially rejected Muhammad's prophetic claim for reasons that were economic more than spiritual. Watt notes that "by the end of the sixth century a.d.," the Quraysh "had gained control of most of the trade from Yemen to Syria—an important route by which the West got Indian luxury goods as well as South Arabian frankincense."² Much of this trade depended on the Arabs who came to Mecca as pilgrims. With pagan Arabs traveling from all over the Arabian Peninsula to worship their gods at the Ka'ba, a proclamation that all these gods did not exist or were demons—exactly what Muhammad preached with his uncompromising monotheism—would not only cost the Quraysh their pilgrimage business but also cut into their trade interests.

And so for the twelve years he remained in Mecca, Muhammad attracted few followers, but aroused the antagonism of the Quraysh. That antagonism flared up regarding both the idols in the Ka'ba and the Quraysh trading caravans. Ibn Hisham tells us that when Muhammad migrated to Medina twelve years into his prophetic

career, he ordered the Muslims to raid the Quraysh caravans that were returning from Syria laden with goods. The prophet himself led many of these raids, which kept the Muslim movement solvent.

Though driven by economic need, the raids became the occasion for certain elements of Islamic theology to take hold, according to Islamic tradition. In one notorious incident, a band of Muslims raided a Quraysh caravan during one of the four sacred months of the pre-Islamic Arabic calendar. These were the months during which fighting was forbidden, meaning that the Muslim raiders had violated a sacred principle. But the Qur'an says that Allah permitted the Muslims to violate the sacred month if they were persecuted—in other words, to set aside the moral principle for the good of Islam: "They ask you about the sacred month, about fighting therein. Say, 'Fighting therein is great sin, but averting people from the way of Allah and disbelief in him and preventing access to the Holy Mosque and the expulsion of its people therefrom are greater in the sight of Allah. And persecution is worse than slaughter'" (2:217). The "Holy Mosque" is, according to Islamic tradition, a reference to the Ka'ba.

This was a key incident for the development of Islamic ethics, establishing that good was what benefited Islam, and evil anything that harmed it. It also set the relations between the Muslims and the Quraysh on war mode. Their battles, according to the standard Islamic account of the origins of Islam, became the occasion for Allah to reveal to Muhammad many of the Qur'an's key passages regarding warfare against unbelievers.

Therefore, the Arabian setting of the Qur'an and the antagonism of the Quraysh to Muhammad's message are crucial for both Islamic history and theology. This was the context in which some of the most important Islamic doctrines unfolded. Islamic tradition establishes that, at root, the Quraysh opposed Muhammad's prophetic message because it could end pilgrimages to Mecca and disrupt trade.

The Absence of Mecca

Just as Arab identity is central to Islam, Mecca, the holiest city in Islam, is central to its Arab identity. Yet for all its centrality to Islam, Mecca is mentioned by name only once in the Qur'an: "And it is he

who withheld their hands from you and your hands from them within Mecca after he caused you to overcome them. And ever is Allah of what you do, seeing” (48:24).

What incident this refers to is—as is so often the case in the Qur’an—completely unclear. The medieval Qur’an commentator Ibn Kathir explains the verse this way: “Imam Ahmad recorded that Anas bin Malik said, ‘On the day of Hudaibiya, eighty armed men from Makkah went down the valley coming from Mount At-Tan‘im to ambush the Messenger of Allah. The Messenger invoked Allah against them, and they were taken prisoners.’ Affan added, ‘The Messenger pardoned them, and this Ayah [“sign,” or Qur’anic verse] was later on revealed.’”³ But the Qur’an itself says nothing about Hudaibiya in the verse in question. What’s more, as foundational as the Treaty of Hudaibiya became for the Islamic doctrine regarding treaties and truces with non-Muslim forces, no record outside of the Islamic sources verifies that the treaty was ever concluded at all.

As is true of so much about early Islamic history, the closer one looks at the relevant sources about Mecca’s importance in the Arabia of Muhammad’s time, the less there is to see. If Watt was correct that the Meccans controlled a pivotal trading empire that included the route from Europe to India, one would reasonably expect some indication of it in the contemporary literature. As Crone puts it, “It is obvious that if the Meccans had been middlemen in a long-distance trade of the kind described in the secondary literature”—that is, works by Watt and other historians who take for granted the canonical Islamic account—“there ought to have been some mention of them in the writings of their customers. Greek and Latin authors had, after all, written extensively about the south Arabians who supplied them with aromatics in the past, offering information about their cities, tribes, political organization, and caravan trade.”⁴

But in all such sources, there is silence. Scant mention of Mecca. Nothing about its appearance, the nature of the business conducted there, the demeanor of the Quraysh—the usual kind of details one finds in chronicles of travelers and tradesmen from classical times into the Middle Ages. Instead, there is a yawning gap. “It is not

clear,” writes Crone, “why some scholars believe the overland route”—that is, a trade route that included Mecca—“to have continued into the fourth century CE, or even later [e.g., the seventh century], or why Islamicists generally assume it to have retained its importance until the time of Mecca’s rise to commercial prominence, or to have recovered it by then.”⁵

There have been numerous attempts to solve this problem. Muslim writers make much of the mathematician and astrologer Ptolemy’s mention of a place in Arabia called Macoraba, but even if this does refer to Mecca, Ptolemy died in ad 168. No one would take the account of a traveler in Constantinople in 1400 as evidence that the city was a thriving center of Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century. Similarly, one would be ill-advised to take Ptolemy’s writing about Mecca as witness to its being a thriving center for trade nearly five centuries after his death.⁶ What’s more, Crone states that “if Ptolemy mentions Mecca at all, he calls it Moka, a town in Arabia Petraea,” that is, in northwest Arabia or southern Jordan, near, astonishingly, the city of Petra.⁷

Meanwhile, Procopius of Caesarea (d. 565), the leading historian of the sixth century, does not mention Mecca—which is strange indeed if it were really the center of trade in Arabia and between the West and India during the time of Muhammad, who allegedly was born only five years after Procopius’s death.⁸ Centers of trade do not spring up instantaneously.

No non-Muslim historian mentions Mecca in any accounts of trade in the sixth and seventh centuries. (Nor, for that matter, do Muslim historians: there are no surviving Islamic records regarding this trade earlier than the eighth century.) Crone notes, “The political and ecclesiastical importance of Arabia in the sixth century was such that considerable attention was paid to Arabian affairs, too; but of Quraysh and their trading center there is no mention at all, be it in the Greek, Latin, Syriac, Aramaic, Coptic, or other literature composed outside Arabia before the conquests. This silence is striking and significant.”⁹ Specifically, she says, “Nowhere is it stated that Quraysh, or the ‘Arab kings,’ were the people who used to supply such-and-such regions with such-and-such goods: it was only

Muhammad himself who was known to have been a trader.”¹⁰ And that is known only from sources written long after his death.

The first explicit mention of Mecca comes over a hundred years after the city was supposed to have been a thriving center for trade during Muhammad’s lifetime. Even that mention is strange, as it places the city far north of where it actually is. The *Byzantine-Arab Chronicle*, a brief history of the origins of Islam (generally following the canonical account) and the Byzantine Empire, cannot date from before AD 741, as it mentions that the Byzantine Emperor Leo III “assumed the sceptre for 24 years,” and Leo became emperor in 717, dying twenty-four years later, in 741.¹¹ In discussing the Saracens, the *Chronicle* refers to “Mecca, the home of Abraham as they think, which lies between Ur of the Chaldees and the city of Harran (Carras) in the desert.”¹² That would place Mecca in Mesopotamia, modern Iraq, northeast of its location in Arabia.

What’s more, the location of Mecca is wrong if it was to have served as a center for trade. It is located in western Arabia, such that, in the words of historian Richard Bulliet, “Only by the most tortured map reading can it be described as a natural crossroads between a north-south route and an east-west one.”¹³ Travelers along the route Watt envisions, between Yemen and Syria, might have had reason to stop at Mecca, but his contention that Mecca was central to an “important route by which the West got Indian luxury goods as well as South Arabian frankincense” is both unsupported by the contemporary evidence and unlikely, geographically. Mecca was so insignificant that, according to historian Dan Gibson, “not one map before 900 AD even mentions Mecca.”¹⁴ This is an extremely odd omission if Mecca was as bustling and important in the seventh century as it is described as being in the hadith and sira literature.

Attempting to refute Crone’s findings, historian Mikhail D. Bukharin collects evidence which he says establishes that “Mecca lay on the Incense Road,” and that “the Incense Road survived until the sixth and seventh centuries CE, and the inhabitants of the southern Hijaz participated in the trade flowing through it, mostly as caravaneers.”¹⁵ Conspicuously absent, however, is direct evidence that this trade still

survived at the time of the advent of Islam, even at the dates given in the canonical Islamic sources for the beginning of the religion.

The same thing goes for the idea of Mecca as a major pilgrimage site in the early seventh century. Contemporary evidence indicates that pilgrimages were conducted to at least three other sites in Arabia—Ukaz, Dhul-Majaz, and Majanna—but not to Mecca.¹⁶ Crone also notes that Mecca differed from these other sites in being a populated city, whereas the established places for Arabian pilgrimage were uninhabited except during the times of the pilgrimage. She adds, “The pilgrimage was a ritual performed at times and places in which everybody downed arms and nobody was in control: a sanctuary owned by a specific tribe”—that is, the Quraysh—“does not belong in this complex.”¹⁷

The significance of this is enormous. If Mecca was a center only for local, small-scale trade and pilgrimage in the early seventh century, then the entire canonical story of the origins of Islam is cast into doubt. If the Quraysh did not object to Muhammad’s message on the grounds that it would harm their trade and pilgrimage business, on what grounds did they object to it? If Muhammad did not encounter stiff resistance from the Quraysh during the first twelve years of his prophetic career, as he preached his message of monotheism to an unreceptive Meccan audience, then what *did* happen?

Without Mecca as a trading and pilgrimage center, there is no foundation for the accounts of antagonism between Muhammad and the Quraysh in Mecca. Nor is there any foundation for accounts of Muhammad’s subsequent migration to Medina and warfare against the Quraysh. Likewise unsupported are stories of how he defeated the Quraysh, returned to Mecca toward the end of his life, and converted the Ka’ba into a Muslim shrine, the centerpiece of what would forever after be a site of Islamic, rather than pagan, pilgrimage.

Today, Muslim pilgrims flock to Mecca for the Hajj, as they have done for many centuries. But the entire account of the Meccan origins of Islam stands on shaky foundations. Although there is evidence that a shrine of some kind existed at Mecca, it does not appear to have been a major one.¹⁸ Either Muhammad or later

Muslims transformed the shrine into the center for Islamic pilgrimage that it is today. In doing so, they elevated Mecca to an importance that there is no clear record of its having had even at the time Muhammad is supposed to have lived.

Islam thus grows less Arabic and Arabian by the minute. The Arabic holy book, as we have seen, contains significant non-Arabic elements. Now it turns out that one of the key pieces anchoring Islam's origins in Arabia—Muhammad's increasingly antagonistic interaction with a Quraysh tribe jealous of its economic and religious prerogatives—turns out to be historically unsupported.

If that is the case, how did the stories of Muhammad arise at all, and for what reason? Why were they apparently cast back into an Arabia that had not known his pagan tribe and their thriving trade and pilgrimage business, so meticulously recounted in the Islamic texts?

The Qibla Switches

Dan Gibson, the pioneering researcher of the history of the qibla, notes that Islamic traditions dating from the tenth century record that the Muslims were originally told to pray facing Jerusalem. The switch to facing the Forbidden Mosque, which is identified in Islamic tradition as the Great Mosque in Mecca, came during prayers. If the Qur'an is a reliable source for events that occurred during the traditional time span of Muhammad's prophetic career (AD 610–632), and if the Hadith, even though they were written down two to three centuries after the traditional dates of Muhammad's prophetic career, contain reliable narrations about events during that same period, then the question of which direction Muslims should face while praying was settled during Muhammad's lifetime, and there was no reason for any mosque constructed after 632 to face anyplace other than Mecca.

According to the Qur'an, Allah changed the direction toward which Muslims were to pray during the lifetime of the prophet, and indeed, at least in part in order to please him: "We have certainly seen the turning of your face toward the heaven, and We will surely turn you to a qibla with which you will be pleased. So turn your face toward al-

Masjid al-Haram [the Forbidden Mosque]. And wherever you are, turn your faces toward it. Indeed, those who have been given the Scripture well know that it is the truth from their Lord. And Allah is not unaware of what they do” (2:144).¹⁹ Neither Jerusalem nor Mecca are specifically mentioned.

Before the change, Tabari tells the story of a group of Muslims that declared it was going to pray facing the Ka’ba; another group responded: “By God, we have not heard that our Prophet prays in any other direction than toward Syria, and we do not wish to differ from him.”²⁰ He also writes of another Muslim who asked Muhammad for his qibla and then “prayed with us toward Syria.”²¹ Syria, not Jerusalem, although to be sure, Palestine was considered to be southern Syria. In other traditions Tabari quotes, however, Jerusalem is specifically mentioned. He says that according to some of the Companions of Muhammad, “People used to pray towards Jerusalem when the Prophet came to Medina [around AD 622], and for eighteen months after his Emigration.”²² Muhammad himself “prayed towards Jerusalem for sixteen months and after that was turned towards the Ka’bah.”²³ Tabari recorded these traditions around the year 920, fully three centuries after these events are supposed to have taken place.²⁴

Bukhari records a hadith that tells what happened at the Quba Mosque right outside Medina, which is one of the oldest mosques in the world (legend has it that Muhammad himself put its first stones in place to begin its construction), when the change in the qibla came: “While some people were at Quba (offering) morning prayer, a man came to them and said, ‘Last night Qur’anic Verses have been revealed whereby the Prophet has been ordered to face the Ka’bah [at Mecca], so you, too, should face it.’ So they, keeping their postures, turned towards the Ka’bah. Formerly the people were facing Sham (Jerusalem).”²⁵

The word “Jerusalem” was added by the translator; “Sham” is the Arabic word for the Levant, which certainly includes Jerusalem but is far less specific. It is often translated simply as “Syria.”

The frequent reference to the direction of prayer as facing simply Syria, and not Jerusalem specifically, is not the only anomaly. In this,

as in other cases, the available Islamic sources are full of oddities.

Meanwhile, before this curious instruction was issued, the Syriac Orthodox theologian and chronicler Jacob of Edessa, who died in 708, noted in passing that the Muslims in Egypt did not pray facing the south, as they would if they were facing Mecca: “The Jews who live in Egypt, as likewise the Mahgraye [that is, the Muslims] there, as I saw with my own eyes and will now set out for you, prayed to the east, and still do, both peoples—the Jews towards Jerusalem, and the Mahgraye towards the Ka’ba (*k’b’t*).”²⁶

The Ka’ba in Mecca is south, not east, of Egypt; was there another Ka’ba far north of Mecca toward which Muslims were still praying in the early eighth century?

While there is only one Ka’ba today, at the time of Islam’s emergence there may have been many. Crone and Cook observe that the Islamic sanctuary in Medina “even possesses an originally Ka’ba-like structure” that the caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (Umar II) modified between 717 and 720, once Islam as we know it today had begun to take shape, “to prevent its being taken for a *qibla*.”²⁷ There are other indications that the Ka’ba in Mecca is not unique: the archaeologist Barbara Finster notes that it has “the same orientation, rectangular ground plan,” and “possibly apsidal closure in the northwest” that are found in “similar temples in southern Arabia, such as the sanctuary of Sirwah” in Yemen.²⁸ Finster also states that the Ka’ba “seems, at least among other things, to have served the Christian cult. The god of the Ka’ba was the god of Christians and thus his cult was also a Christian cult.”²⁹ If that is accurate, it would further open the possibility that there were other, similar structures among Christians in other areas who may have belonged to the same sect or one that held something close to the same mindset.

In any case, there are telling indications that the earliest Muslims did not pray facing the structure in Mecca.

The Holy City of Petra

The fifteenth-century historian Ahmad ibn Ali al-Maqrizi noted that Amr ibn al-As, the seventh-century conqueror of Egypt, prayed facing slightly to the southeast.³⁰ From Fustat, the new capital of

Islamic Egypt, Jerusalem was to the northeast. Farther to the south was the city of Petra, in Jordan. Though removed from the time of Amr by many centuries, al-Maqrizi was in a good position to have heard this tradition circulating, as he served as a preacher at the Mosque of Amr ibn al-As, which was built in 641.³¹

Still, the idea that Amr prayed facing the east rather than the south toward Mecca might have remained an oddity in al-Maqrizi's account were it not for the extraordinary research of Dan Gibson, who discovered that the Mosque of Amr ibn al-As was one of the many early mosques in which the qibla originally faced not toward Jerusalem or Mecca, but toward Petra. Gibson notes that "today the mosque does not exist in its original form, having undergone numerous restorations so that the original foundation is no longer evident. However, a description of the original ground-plan of the mosque shows that the qibla pointed east and had to be corrected towards Mecca later under the governorship of Qurra ibn Sharik," who served as Egypt's governor from 709 until his death in 715.³²

Petra, in modern-day southern Jordan, was a great city of the Nabateans that enjoyed its heyday in the first century AD. The Nabateans knew the city as *Raqemo*, which may be mentioned in the Qur'an "Or have you thought that the companions of the cave and the inscription [al-Raqim] were, among Our signs, a wonder?" (18:9). Gibson, surveying the available data on the qiblas of the earliest mosques, most of which he visited in person, found numerous mosques constructed before 742 facing Petra, including *all* the earliest mosques in which the original qibla could be ascertained. Mosques only begin to be built facing Mecca in 727, although some mosques constructed between the years 707 and 772 actually faced a spot between Petra and Mecca.³³

In his book *Early Islamic Qiblas*, Gibson includes compass readings for each mosque, showing how close it comes to facing Petra, Mecca, or Jerusalem. For the great preponderance of the mosques facing Petra, there is no uncertainty: the qibla points far away from Mecca and Jerusalem, but aligns well with Petra. For example, the qibla of the Jami al-Kabir, or Great Mosque in Hama, Syria, constructed in 637, is off from facing Petra by only 0.61

degrees, whereas it misses Jerusalem by 7.17 degrees and Mecca by 25.81 degrees.³⁴

Gibson surveys twenty-one mosques built between 622 and 708 and finds that eight faced Petra, two faced Petra and Jerusalem, one faced between Petra and Mecca, and that the original qibla of the other ten cannot be ascertained.³⁵

The Geography of the Qur'an and Hadith

Could this simply be a coincidence, an accident of the imprecision of early measuring techniques? Maybe, but it would be an extraordinary coincidence indeed that the inability of these ancient people to plot out the locations of distant places precisely would result in so many mosques facing in the same direction, toward Petra. If they were trying to face Mecca but missed, one would expect them to face in all sorts of directions. Yet Gibson lists seventeen mosques built between 626 and 743 that all originally faced Petra (and most still do) from places as far-flung as Guangzhou in China, Methala in India, Samarkand in Uzbekistan, and Damghan in Iran, as well as mosques in Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, and elsewhere in the Middle East.³⁶

Also, other geographical anomalies point in the same direction. Certain geographical features of Mecca as described in the Qur'an and Hadith don't actually correspond to what can be ascertained about the landscape of Mecca in the time Muhammad is supposed to have lived.

One telling example of this comes in a Bukhari hadith that he attributes to Muhammad's child bride Aisha:

One night the Prophet was unable to sleep and said, "Would that a righteous man from my companions guarded me tonight." Suddenly we heard the clatter of arms, whereupon the Prophet said, "Who is it?" It was said, "I am Sa'd, O Allah's Messenger! I have come to guard you." The Prophet then slept so soundly that we heard him snoring. Abu Abdullah said: Aisha said: Bilal said, "Would that I but stayed overnight in a valley with Idhkhir and Jalil

(two kinds of grass) around me (i.e., in Mecca).” Then I told that to the Prophet.³⁷

Mecca is, of course, in the middle of the desert. There are not two kinds of grass there; there is no grass, except where it is artificially sustained. Nor, says Gibson, is there any indication that grass ever grew there.³⁸

Likewise Ibn Hisham describes Mecca as “a town blessed with water and trees.”³⁹ A hadith depicts these trees of Mecca speaking to Muhammad. Ali ibn Abi Talib is made to say: “I was with the Prophet in Makkah. We departed to one of its suburbs, and no mountain or tree was before him, except that it said: ‘Peace be upon you O Messenger of Allah.’”⁴⁰

The talking trees are evidence enough that this is not a sober historical account, but also, just as there was no grass in Mecca, there were also no trees. “To date,” Gibson writes, “there is no record of trees having ever existed in ancient Mecca.”⁴¹

Still, maybe there were grass and trees in Mecca in the seventh century and their existence was too trivial for anyone to mention, or no record of them remains in the available literature. Mountains, however, are harder to conceal, or to escape notice. And while it is possible that Mecca was once notable for its grass and trees but is no longer, mountains cannot be moved, even by Muhammad. Yet another hadith in Bukhari’s collection states that Muhammad “used to enter Mecca from the high Thaniya and used to leave Mecca from the low Thaniya.”⁴² A thaniya, Gibson notes, is a “narrow mountain pass.”⁴³ But there is no sign of such passes. Aisha states in a similar hadith: “When the Prophet came to Mecca he entered from its higher side and left from its lower side.”⁴⁴

Yet there are no mountain passes leading in or out of Mecca, and no higher or lower side. “Today,” observes Gibson, “Mecca is located in a large open area, with low rocky mountains rising from the sand.”⁴⁵ Consequently, he writes: “It is my belief that the early descriptions of Mecca and its mountains do not fit the Mecca of today.”⁴⁶

However, while the Islamic sources contain these and other geographical details about Mecca that don't fit that region, they do fit another area: Petra. There were in Petra a higher and lower side to the city, and it was a bountiful land with grass and trees in abundance.

There is much more. Tabari notes that during the civil war between Ibn al-Zubayr and the Umayyads, "The Syrians had strenuously besieged Ibn al-Zubayr and his men and blockaded them."⁴⁷ When the Umayyad caliph Yazid, the predecessor of Abd al-Malik, died, Ibn al-Zubayr shouted at the Syrian forces, "Your tyrant is dead," and invited the soldiers of the Umayyad army to switch their allegiance to him or return back to Syria.⁴⁸ Gibson observes that "this passage leads us to believe that the Syrians managed to blockade all of Mecca. This would have been a huge task, as Mecca lies open to the outside desert on so many fronts. It is unclear how this blockade would have worked, especially if the two armies were within shouting distance from each other. Petra, on the other hand was a walled city within a canyon, with the walls stretching from one side of the canyon to the other. The two *thaniyas*, or *mountain ways*, were the only other two ways in or out of the city."⁴⁹ A blockade would have been much easier to manage in Petra.

Thus the qiblas of the earliest mosques point toward a city that matches the description of the Islamic holy city more accurately than does the city to which qiblas are all supposed to have pointed since the time of Muhammad.

Abdullah Ibn al-Zubayr's Rebellion

A clue to what may have happened comes in that rebellion of Abdullah Ibn al-Zubayr. His rebellion against the Umayyad caliphate began in 684 and led to a civil war that resulted in the destruction of the structure toward which the believers prayed. Ibn al-Zubayr and his supporters were in the Holy City when Umayyad armies, led by none other than Hajjaj ibn-Yusuf, surrounded the city and began firing stones into it with a trebuchet. According to Tabari, the Ka'ba's "walls had buckled as a result of the catapult stones which had been fired at it."⁵⁰ Surveying the extensive damage to the structure, Ibn al-

Zubayr then “demolished the sanctuary until he had leveled it to the ground.”⁵¹

Would Hajjaj have fired stones at the Ka‘ba if the Black Stone, the sacred meteorite that was venerated at the Ka‘ba as having been cast down from Paradise by the deity, had been present within it? That seems unlikely, since the veneration of the Black Stone at the Ka‘ba predates Islam and was without any doubt a feature of the worship of these Abrahamic monotheists. And there are indications that Hajjaj felt free to bombard the Ka‘ba because the Black Stone was no longer within it. Tabari says that Ibn al-Zubayr placed the Black Stone of the Ka‘ba “by it in an ark [*tabut*] in a strip of silk, and he put the sanctuary ornaments, and the clothes and perfumes which he found inside it, in the treasury of the sanctuary in the care of the doorkeepers, replacing them when he rebuilt it.”⁵² Perhaps he did this because the Ka‘ba had been severely damaged or destroyed, or because he had every reason to believe that it could be.

In any case, without the Ka‘ba, “the people used to make the ritual circumambulation outside the foundations and make the prayer while facing its site.”⁵³ Ibn Al-Zubayr’s destruction of the Ka‘ba becomes so notorious that his enemies call his followers “destroyers of the sacred sanctuary.”⁵⁴

Later, however, Ibn al-Zubayr rebuilt the Ka‘ba. He “dug out its foundation and made the Hijr a part of it.”⁵⁵ The Hijr was an area enclosed by the *hatim*, a low wall near the Ka‘ba; Ibn al-Zubayr may have thought it important to include the *hatim* within the structure because the *hatim* was considered to be a remnant of the original Ka‘ba that Abraham and his son Ishmael had built. According to Tabari, Ibn Al-Zubayr claimed the authority of Muhammad himself for this alteration in the structure of the Ka‘ba. Tabari quotes Ibn al-Zubayr attributing to Muhammad the desire to enclose the Hijr within the Ka‘ba. In Tabari’s account, the rebel caliph says: “My mother Asma bint Abi Bakr told me that the Messenger of God said to Aishah: ‘If it were not that your people had only recently been in a state of unbelief, I would restore the Ka‘bah on the foundations of Abraham and I would add to the Ka‘bah part of the Hijr.’”⁵⁶

Tabari adds that Ibn al-Zubayr then fulfilled Muhammad's wishes: he "gave the order for it and it was excavated, and they found rocks as big as a camel. They moved a boulder of them and a bright light flashed out. They re-established it on its foundation and Ibn al-Zubayr rebuilt it, giving it two doors, from one of which it was entered and from the other vacated."⁵⁷

It has been universally assumed that Ibn al-Zubayr demolished the Ka'ba in Mecca and rebuilt it there as well. However, Tabari compiled his account over two hundred years after the events he describes took place. If the original Holy City, and the original Ka'ba, of the Muslims had been in Petra, the early qiblas would be explicable. Ibn al-Zubayr may then have chosen Mecca as the place to rebuild it so as to be far more difficult for the Umayyad caliph to reach, and he invoked Abraham as the builder of the original Ka'ba on that spot to give legitimacy to his endeavor.

This is speculative, but there are hints of it in the Islamic literature, in addition to the evidence of the qiblas of the early mosques facing Petra and the change, early in the eighth century, to the qibla at Mecca. In the midst of his rebellion, the people of Kufa appeal for the good will of Ibn al-Zubayr by saying: "We are people who turn to the same *qiblah* as you and hold your creed."⁵⁸ While this may be simply an appeal for mercy based on common ground, it could also be an indication that others had a different qibla, and a different creed as well, and that the people of Kufa are assuring Ibn al-Zubayr that they're on his side, and not members of the opposition. In the middle of a civil war, this interpretation becomes much more likely.

Wasit in the Middle

Toward the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth, as the rebellion of Ibn al-Zubayr against the Umayyads was in full swing, Hajjaj ibn Yusuf built a city in Iraq: Wasit. Wasit is midway between Kufa and Basra; this is generally considered to be the reason for its name, which means "between." But Hajjaj also oversaw the construction of a mosque in Wasit in 706. The qibla of this mosque points to neither Jerusalem nor Mecca, nor even to Petra, but to a point exactly between Petra and Mecca.

The philosopher and theologian al-Jahiz, an opponent of the Umayyads, wrote about the alleged evil deeds of the caliph Walid I (who reigned from 705 to 715) over a century after Walid died, and includes among those evils what al-Jahiz considered to be the moving of the qibla of the mosque in Wasit away from Mecca.⁵⁹ However, other mosques constructed around the same time face the same in-between spot, despite there being nothing actually at that point but desert sand. A third group of mosques from the same period point in directions parallel to a line drawn between Petra and Mecca.

One possible explanation for this is that Hajjaj, having led the armies that destroyed the Ka'ba that had been in Petra, did not wish to have his mosque face there for prayer, and likewise didn't want to face the direction for prayer that had been established by a man who stood in defiant opposition to Umayyad rule, and against whom Hajjaj himself was fighting. So he hedged his bets, having his mosque constructed to face an in-between point until the matter was definitively settled. The mosques that had qiblas facing in a line parallel to a line from Petra to Mecca were hedging their bets as well, refusing to commit on a controverted issue.

When Abd al-Malik constructed the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, it had no qibla at all, perhaps for the same reason: when it was built in 691, it was not clear whether Petra would remain the qibla for the believers, or if it would shift to Mecca.⁶⁰ It may also be, however, that the Dome of the Rock had no qibla because, with his rival Ibn al-Zubayr having destroyed and rebuilt the Ka'ba, Abd al-Malik intended the Dome of the Rock to be a Ka'ba of his own. Donner notes that "some have argued that it was built by Abd al-Malik during the Second Civil War, when Mecca was controlled by his rival Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr, in order to provide an alternative destination for pilgrims."⁶¹ In that case, it didn't have a direction that everyone had to face to pray because it was originally intended to be the direction everyone everywhere else faced to pray. That would explain why it features a stone, after the fashion of the Black Stone at the Ka'ba: the Foundation Stone, or Noble Rock, lies at the center of the Dome of the Rock.

For all the grandeur of the Dome of the Rock, however, Abdullah Ibn al-Zubayr had a premier claim to authenticity: the Black Stone that he possessed actually had a history of being venerated by the believers. That may have been why Abd al-Malik's rival holy place did not become the focal point of Islamic prayer. And so, rather than replace Ibn Zubayr's Ka'ba, Abd al-Malik ended up co-opting it, much in the way that Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, is depicted in Islamic tradition as entering the Ka'ba, hitherto filled with pagan idols, and cleansing it for Islamic pilgrimage and prayer. By the time Abd al-Malik's lieutenant Hajjaj ibn Yusuf killed Ibn al-Zubayr and the rebellion ended, Petra and its Ka'ba had been destroyed. That left only one authentic Ka'ba, the one in which the Black Stone was housed—the one that had been established by the rivals of the Umayyads—al-Zubayr's Ka'ba in Mecca. Abd al-Malik embraced Mecca as the new Holy City and the new direction for prayer. Doing so would go a long way toward reconciling al-Zubayr's disgruntled followers.

After the Umayyads put down the rebellion and consolidated their power, qiblas began to shift, albeit not instantaneously. The Umayyad Mosque in Amman, Jordan was built around the year 700, nearly a decade after al-Zubayr's death, with a qibla facing Petra. However, in 712, Allah himself appeared to ratify the change of qibla from Petra to Mecca, as what remained of Petra was destroyed in an earthquake. The qibla of the Umayyad Mosque in Amman was redirected toward Mecca in 740.⁶²

Rebuilding the Mosque of the Prophet

Some mosques did make the change before the earthquake. Tabari records that around 707, the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina was demolished, so that a larger structure could be built:

In [this year] al-Walid b. Abd al-Malik ordered the pulling down of the mosque of the Messenger of God, may God bless and preserve him, and the pulling down of the rooms of the wives of the Messenger of God, may God bless and preserve him, and the incorporation of them into the mosque. Muhammad b. Umar

mentioned that Muhammad b. Ja'far b. Wardan al-Banna (i.e., "the builder") said: I saw the messenger sent by al-Walid b. Abd al-Malik. He arrived in the month of Rabi'i in the year 88 (February–March 707) with a turban wound round his head. He entered into the presence of Umar b. Abd al-Aziz bearing al-Walid's letter ordering him to incorporate the rooms of the wives of the Messenger of God, may God bless and preserve him, into the mosque, and to buy [the land, etc.] behind it and beside it so that it might [measure] two hundred cubits by two hundred cubits. He also said to him [in the letter]: "Move the *qiblah* [wall] forward, if you are able, and you *are* able, because of the standing of your maternal uncles; they will not go against you. If any of them objects, order the people of the *misr* [garrison town] to estimate a fair value for him. Then demolish and pay them the prices. You have good precedents for this in the actions of Umar and Uthman."⁶³

Just after this, in the year 708, the *mihrab*, or niche in the wall indicating the direction for prayer, was introduced into mosques. Was it introduced so that there would be no confusion about what the direction for prayer actually was, after a period in which this was a matter of some controversy? Before the innovation of the *mihrab*, mosques were built facing in the direction of the qibla, with the wall that believers faced to pray being known as the qibla wall. In discussing plans for the new, larger Mosque of the Prophet, Muhammad b. Ja'far b. Wardan al-Banna tells the caliph Umar b. Abd al-Aziz to "move the *qiblah* forward."

This is a curious instruction; if the entire existing building was going to be demolished and a new one built incorporating the rooms Muhammad's wives had lived in, every wall would presumably be built anew, not just moved forward. Nor is there any indication that the original qibla wall was preserved and incorporated into the new structure. Why did the builder find it necessary to single out the qibla wall for mention, and to note ways in which anticipated resistance to the move could be overcome? What would be the point of moving it forward, which would not make it significantly closer to the direction

in which it was pointing? And the direction of the qibla had been settled around eighty years before this, according to the canonical account of the origins of Islam. So why would anyone object to moving the qibla wall forward, to the extent that Umar would have to rely on the clout of his uncles and even resort to paying people?

One possible explanation is that the qibla itself was pointing in a direction other than toward Mecca, and so had to be moved altogether, not just moved forward while facing the same direction. Maybe many people remembered that prayers had always been performed facing Petra, and were unhappy about the change. It would be more in line with the canonical account to assume that the original qibla faced Jerusalem, but if the first Mosque of the Prophet was built by Muhammad himself in 622, as Islamic tradition holds, and the change in the qibla had really taken place during Muhammad's lifetime. If that had been so, why was the mosque's qibla still uncorrected eighty-five years later?

The Significance of the Mosques with Petra Qiblas

Dan Gibson's explosive discovery that numerous mosques, some built during what are traditionally regarded as the earliest days of Islam, face Petra rather than Mecca coincides perfectly with Patricia Crone's findings regarding the absence of evidence that Mecca was actually a significant city during the time Muhammad is supposed to have lived.

Gibson's research has, predictably, elicited furious reactions, none more furious than that of David A. King, who, as we have seen, accuses Gibson of "Islamophobia." More substantively, he says: "Funnily enough, the authoritative *Encyclopaedia of Islam* has no entry for Petra, for nothing of consequence in early Islamic history happened there."⁶⁴ To this, Gibson responds that this is precisely why he published books and produced videos on the topic of the qibla and Petra, "to demonstrate that something did indeed happen there."⁶⁵

But isn't the absence of mention of Petra in the Qur'an (with the arguable exception of 18:9) an indication that King is right, that "nothing of consequence in early Islamic history happened there"?

Not necessarily. Tabari was writing about events that had happened two centuries earlier. The sira and hadith literature date from a century and a quarter after Muhammad's supposed lifetime, at the earliest. This allows plenty of time for revision. Just as the figure of Muhammad may have been constructed out of stories about other people, legends, and typological recastings of accounts from the Bible and elsewhere, so also in that time the origins of Islam could have been placed in Mecca, thereby anchoring the Arabic empire firmly in Arabia and justifying Ibn al-Zubayr's holy city that had become the holy city of all the Muslims. If the hadith literature and canonical accounts of early Islamic history are late, tendentious, and unreliable regarding Muhammad, then they could also be late, tendentious, and unreliable regarding the site of the beginnings of Islam.

King, moreover, completely misrepresents Gibson's central claims, asserting that Gibson "has a strong conviction and an ultimate purpose: to show that Muslims are misguided and naïve enough to have prayed in the wrong direction for over a millennium."⁶⁶ Even the most cursory examination of Gibson's writings, however, reveals this to be an utterly false characterization. Gibson's thesis has nothing whatsoever to do with Muslims being misguided or naïve, or praying in the wrong direction; he is, rather, pointing out that the earliest mosques faced a direction other than Mecca, and examining the available evidence in order to try to account for this. Since he speaks in passing multiple times about the qibla having been changed to Mecca early in the eighth century, clearly he does not believe that Muslims have been praying in the wrong direction at all. Rather, he is noting that they are not praying in the direction that the earliest mosques faced.

In response to that, King asserts that Gibson is using modern techniques to determine the orientation of the mosques, techniques that were not available to the ancient people who constructed those mosques. Those people, King claims, did not have the ability to calibrate directions precisely, as they were using necessarily imprecise methods and employing the logic of ancient people. Gibson, King complains, "completely misunderstands my findings on

the determination of the *qibla* and mosque orientations. Essentially I found that the Muslims for the first two centuries used folk astronomy, particularly astronomical horizon phenomena, the cardinal directions and solar risings and settings at the solstices. Thereafter they also used *qiblas* based on geographical coordinates and mathematical procedures. I claim that all mosques face the *qibla* in ways most of which we can only now understand. I also say that early mosques do not always face the directions we moderns think they should. Now comes Gibson to claim that they face Petra—and accurately at that.”⁶⁷ He also claims that there were several *qiblas* in use among the Muslims; not all simply endeavored to face the Ka‘ba (wherever that Ka‘ba may have been).

Gibson points out, however, that in the available Islamic literature, there is no hint anywhere of any direction for prayer other than facing the Ka‘ba. And ancient people, including the Arabs, were able to calculate directions well enough to set out on journeys and arrive where they intended to go. What’s more, if the *qiblas* of early mosques pointed in different directions simply by chance, because the people calculating them were not able to be more precise, it is a wild coincidence that so many of them end up facing Petra. How did they all end up facing the same place by chance?

There is another remarkable detail as well. The linguist Mark Durie offers evidence from the type of Arabic in which the Qur’an is written that the book did not originate in southern Arabia. “The ‘clear Arabic’ (*‘arabī*; Q26:195) in which the Qur’an was first recited,” Durie states, “was not the native dialect of Mecca.”⁶⁸ Rather, “the Qur’an was composed and first recited in a dialect very close or identical to the variety in which the spelling of the *rasm* [the Qur’an’s consonantal text] became fixed. This was most likely Nabataean Arabic dialect, that is, the dialect of Palaestina Tertia.” Petra was the city of the Nabataeans. “The orthography for Arabic,” Durie observes, “is known to have been developed from Nabataean Aramaic, but what is crucial for our purposes is that three distinctive phonological features of the Qur’anic *rasm*, reflected in the rhyme but corrected in the pointing, are features native to Arabic dialects from the Southern Levant.”⁶⁹

If the Qur'an had been written in Mecca and Medina, as Islamic tradition holds, one would expect it to have been written in a south Arabian dialect of Arabic, not one that was spoken farther north, outside of Arabia altogether. The fact that its language is that of the region around Petra, toward which the early mosques faced, is all the more striking.

Nabataean Arabic, scant record of Mecca, early mosques facing somewhere else—it all casts large shadows over the traditional account of Muhammad's life.

But there is another important reason why people believe that what we know about Muhammad is historically accurate.

CHAPTER 7

The Embarrassment of Muhammad

Muhammad: Resourceful and Opportunistic

Despite all the evidence of Muhammad's absence, one chief objection to the idea that Muhammad is either wholly or in large part a fictional character is the fact that the canonical Islamic texts contain a significant amount of material that portrays him in a negative light.

For if Muhammad was invented, or invested with a legendary biography, this would have been done in order to provide a nascent culture with a hero. Why would anyone invent a hero and then invest him with weaknesses? Why would anyone fashion a portrait of a founding father, the fashioner and unifier of the community, the exemplar in all things, and make him anything less than admirable in every way?

A singular figure appears to come alive on the pages of the Hadith: a resourceful, inventive, supremely intelligent man who seems to have known just what to do or say to inspire in his followers the maximum of awe and respect. How one evaluates the details of the portrait of Muhammad that emerges from the Islamic sources depends on what one thinks of the man and his claims. But could such a figure be wholly legendary?

Islamic tradition recounts that a rabbi of Medina, whose name comes down to us as Abdullah bin Salam, was impressed by what he was hearing about Muhammad and decided to give him a test to see whether he was really a prophet. Abdullah asked Muhammad

three questions that, said Abdullah, “nobody knows unless he be a Prophet.” They were these: “What is the first portent of the Hour? What is the first meal of the people of Paradise? And what makes a baby look like its father or mother?”

It was an odd scenario: How could Abdullah have known whether Muhammad’s answers were correct unless Abdullah were himself a prophet? Muhammad took Abdullah’s questions in stride, informing him coolly that “just now” the angel Gabriel had given him the answers to precisely those questions. He duly passed the responses on to Abdullah, who was so impressed that he immediately converted to Islam.¹

The reader, confronted with such a story, has three options:

1. Accept that Muhammad’s answers were correct and that this was a sign of his special prophetic knowledge.
2. See Muhammad’s willingness to supply answers to Abdullah that Abdullah had no way of verifying as evidence that he was a false prophet engaged in manipulating credulous people like Abdullah.
3. Regard the entire account as a later embellishment designed to show that Muhammad was a prophet.

The problem with the third option is the logical difficulty embedded within the story: anyone who reflects on this account for any time at all will realize that Abdullah had no way of knowing whether Muhammad’s answers were correct. Nor does the reader, which makes the first option problematic. These considerations make the second option more likely: that Muhammad knew Abdullah had presented him with a game that he could not lose, and he exploited the opportunity.

But if Muhammad was an invented character, why fabricate a story that enemies could use to portray him—and the nascent Islamic community—in a less than flattering light?

Of course, the most likely explanation here is that this story was constructed by people who took for granted that Muhammad was a prophet and did not consider that some readers might take the account as evidence of a con artist. Supporting this explanation is

the fact that establishing Muhammad's prophetic status is not the primary point of the story; the account of Abdullah bin Salam and Muhammad ultimately focuses on demonizing the Jews, whom Abdullah helps Muhammad catch in a lie after he converts to Islam.

But other aspects of the canonical Islamic account of Muhammad clearly did embarrass those who regarded him as a prophet. Some of the earliest Islamic material on Muhammad contains attempts to explain away certain actions of the prophet. One of the most notable examples is the episode in which Muhammad married his former daughter-in-law.

The Comely Zaynab and the Historicity of Muhammad

On several occasions Allah seemed anxious to grant his prophet his heart's desires—as in the notorious story of one of Muhammad's wives, Zaynab bint Jahsh. Noted for her striking beauty, Zaynab was originally married to Muhammad's adopted son, Zayd bin Muhammad (formerly known as Zayd bin Haritha), who was so close to the prophet that he was known as the Beloved of the Messenger of Allah. Zayd has the distinction of being the only contemporary of Muhammad, or purported contemporary, to be mentioned by name in the Qur'an.

One day Muhammad chanced to visit Zayd's home while his adopted son was away, and Zaynab answered the door in a state of semi-undress. "He looked at her," says the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, a respected commentary on the Qur'an, "and felt love for her whereas Zayd disliked her."² Zayd offered to divorce her so that Muhammad could marry her; Muhammad's response is recorded in an elliptical passage in the Qur'an: "Keep your wife and fear Allah" (33:37).

One would think that being overcome with desire for one's daughter-in-law would bring a blush to the cheeks of the most ardent proponent of free love, but the part of the story that embarrassed Muhammad, at least according to Islamic tradition, was not that at all. Rather, it was the fact that he told Zayd to keep his wife. Of this, one of his other wives, Aisha, later remarked: "If Allah's Apostle were to conceal anything [of the Qur'an] he would have concealed this verse."³

Why would Muhammad be embarrassed by this point? Because Allah wanted Muhammad to marry Zaynab, and therefore the prophet was rejecting Allah's will. Indeed, Allah rebuked Muhammad for not wanting to receive what the deity wanted to give him, saying that the prophet feared public opinion (as the people might justifiably be upset at Muhammad's new union with his comely former daughter-in-law) more than he feared Allah: "You concealed within yourself that which Allah is to disclose. And you feared the people, while Allah has more right that you fear him" (Qur'an 33:37).

So Muhammad resolved to do Allah's will. He went into the trance-like state that often attended his reception of divine revelations, and when he came to, he asked happily: "Who will go to Zaynab to tell her the good news, saying that God has married her to me?"

Allah explained that he had staged the whole event in order to impress upon Muslims that adopted sons should not be treated as natural sons, and that adoption itself was illegitimate: "Allah has not made for any man two hearts within him. And he has not made your wives, when you divorce them by saying, 'Be as my mother's back,' truly your mothers. And he has not made your adopted sons your true sons. That is your own saying, by your mouths, but Allah speaks the truth, and guides to the way" (33:4). And specifically in Muhammad's case: "So when Zayd had no longer any need for her, We married her to you in order that there not be upon the believers any discomfort concerning the wives of their adopted sons when they no longer have need of them. And ever is the command of Allah accomplished" (Qur'an 33:37). Zayd ibn Muhammad, whom Allah had declared to be not the true son of Muhammad, went back to being known as Zayd ibn Haritha, and to this day adoption is not considered legitimate in Islamic law.

This new divine decree had the added benefit of absolving Muhammad of any guilt for violating the laws of consanguinity by marrying Zaynab. When Muhammad announced that Allah had married him to Zaynab, according to a hadith that found a place in Bukhari's collection, Aisha remarked—with what degree of irony is up to the reader—"I feel that your Lord hastens in fulfilling your wishes and desires."⁴

Could this story possibly have been fabricated as a pious legend? It is hard to imagine why any pious Muslim would have invented it: the Zaynab incident depicts Muhammad as a rogue prophet, enslaved to his lust, and stooping to construct a flimsy excuse (the prohibition of adoption) in order to exonerate himself.

But embarrassment is relative. Though we may see this incident as casting Muhammad in a bad light, what constitutes a negative depiction is not necessarily constant from age to age and culture to culture. Consider the story of Muhammad's marriage to Aisha, the daughter of his close companion and first successor, Abu Bakr. Whereas the Qur'anic text that refers elliptically to Muhammad's marriage to Zaynab provides an elaborate explanation for the whole incident, the earliest records about Muhammad's dalliance with Aisha state events without apology. A hadith collected by Bukhari notes: "The Prophet wrote the [marriage contract] with Aisha while she was six years old and consummated his marriage with her while she was nine years old and she remained with him for nine years [i.e. till his death]."⁵

Aisha herself betrayed nervousness, but no one else seemed particularly concerned:

The Prophet engaged me when I was a girl of six [years]. We went to Medina and stayed at the home of Bani al-Harith bin Khazraj. Then I got ill and my hair fell down. Later on my hair grew [again] and my mother, Umm Ruman, came to me while I was playing in a swing with some of my girl friends. She called me, and I went to her, not knowing what she wanted to do to me. She caught me by the hand and made me stand at the door of the house. I was breathless then, and when my breathing became all right, she took some water and rubbed my face and head with it. Then she took me into the house. There in the house I saw some Ansari women who said, "Best wishes and Allah's blessing and good luck." Then she entrusted me to them and they prepared me [for the marriage]. Unexpectedly Allah's Apostle came to me in the forenoon and my mother handed me over to him, and at that time I was a girl of nine years of age.⁶

The earliest Islamic sources offer no hint that anyone around Muhammad had a problem with this marriage. Bukhari reports matter-of-factly, and more than once, that she was nine when the marriage was consummated. Nothing in the accounts of this marriage can compare to the evident embarrassment attending Muhammad's marriage to Zaynab. In fact, the Qur'an takes child marriage for granted in its directives about divorce. When speaking about the waiting period required to determine if a woman is pregnant, it says: "And those who no longer expect menstruation among your women, if you doubt, then their period is three months, and those who have not menstruated" (65:4). The last part, "and those who have not yet menstruated," has been understood in Islamic tradition not as a non-sequitur or incomplete thought, but as a specification that the waiting period for divorce should be three months for pre-pubescent girls as well. This passage suggests that in the time and place the stories about Muhammad and Aisha began to be told, few people, if any, had any particular problem with a fifty-four-year-old man consummating a marriage with a nine-year-old girl; it was a cultural norm, and that was that.

Other elements of Muhammad's career that jar modern sensibilities seem to have caused no embarrassment for the authors of the earliest Islamic texts. Far from recoiling from their warrior prophet, one hadith has him boast, "I have been made victorious with terror."⁷ Another hadith tells of how Muhammad, enraged by a tribe that murdered a shepherd and drove away his camels, had the culprits captured and ordered their eyes put out with heated pieces of iron and their hands and feet amputated. (The latter punishment accords with the Qur'an's directive that the hands and feet of those who make war against Allah and his messenger be amputated on opposite sides [5:33].) Then he had them left in the desert without water. All this was justified, according to a companion of Muhammad who is quoted in the hadith, because "those people committed theft and murder, became infidels after embracing Islam and fought against Allah and His Apostle."⁸ As brutal as this episode appears to modern eyes, to those who invented it, it demonstrated Muhammad's strength and fearlessness in the face of injustice. It

also supported punishments that are still part of Islamic law, including amputation for theft (cf. Qur'an 5:38) and the death penalty for apostasy (cf. Qur'an 4:89).

Similarly, hadiths portray Muhammad's polygamy as a sign not of libertinism but of his unmatched virility. The prophet is reported as saying: "Gabriel brought a kettle from which I ate and I was given the power of sexual intercourse equal to forty men."⁹ Other hadiths have Aisha saying, "I used to wash the traces of Janaba [semen] from the clothes of the Prophet and he used to go for prayers while traces of water were still on it [water spots were still visible]."¹⁰ This is odd—how and why did the semen get on his clothes in the first place?—but apparently it is meant to indicate his divinely assisted virility.

Other hadiths appear merely curious to modern readers. That is largely because the controversies that gave rise to these traditions have long since faded, and also because a great deal of folk material and superstition appears to have made its way into the Hadith. For example, in one hadith Muhammad is made to say that Muslims should blow their noses three times upon waking, for Satan sleeps in the bridge of one's nose at night.¹¹ He also said that if someone is troubled by a nightmare, "He should spit on his left side and should seek refuge with Allah from its evil, for then it will not harm him."¹² He claimed that "yawning is from Satan and if anyone of you yawns, he should check his yawning as much as possible, for if anyone of you [during the act of yawning] should say: '*Ha*,' Satan will laugh at him."¹³ He advised the Muslims that "when you hear the crowing of a cock, ask for Allah's Blessings for [its crowing indicates that] it has seen an angel. And when you hear the braying of a donkey, seek refuge with Allah from Satan for [its braying indicates] that it has seen a Satan."¹⁴ He counseled: "If a housefly falls in the drink of anyone of you, he should dip it [in the drink], for one of its wings has a disease and the other has the cure for the disease."¹⁵ Muhammad even announced a startling biological discovery: "A non-Muslim eats in seven intestines whereas a Muslim eats in one intestine."¹⁶

The Hadith contain a great deal of this sort of thing. We cannot know with certainty the derivation of such material, but it seems unlikely that it was added in the heat of some sectarian or dynastic

battle. It is much more likely that everything considered wise, or useful, or just good to know was attributed to the prophet of Islam.

These maxims and pearls of folk wisdom did not cause the early Muslims any embarrassment. The story of Zaynab did—or so it seems.

Why the Zaynab Story Was Composed

The story of Muhammad's marriage to his former daughter-in-law appears to betray embarrassment about, and provide a justification for, a negative episode in Muhammad's life. But it may actually be something else altogether.

The Qur'an's allusive and fragmented reference to the incident concludes with the affirmation that "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but the messenger of Allah and seal of the prophets. And ever is Allah, of all things, knowing" (33:40). What does that affirmation have to do with Muhammad's marriage to his daughter-in-law? Possibly nothing—the Qur'an is remarkably decontextualized, veering from topic to topic within many of its suras, often without any discernable logical connection between the subjects treated. Thus the appearance of this affirmation of Muhammad as "the seal of the prophets" may have nothing to do with the Zaynab incident. Then again, when considered in light of a central tenet of Islamic theology, the assertion that Muhammad is "the seal of the prophets" appears to have *everything* to do with the story of his marriage to Zaynab.

In the Qur'an, the prophets are all related to one another, and it appears that the prophetic office is handed down from father to son, like an inheritance or a genetic predisposition. Speaking of Abraham, Allah says:

And We gave to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, all We guided. And Noah, We guided before; and among his descendants, David and Solomon and Job and Joseph and Moses and Aaron. Thus do We reward the doers of good. And Zechariah and John and Jesus and Elias, and all were of the righteous. And Ishmael and

Elisha and Jonah and Lot, and all We preferred over the worlds (6:84–86).

Thus “David and Solomon and Job and Joseph and Moses and Aaron” and the rest were “among his descendants”—that is, Abraham’s. These prophets were all relatives, and presumably they received their prophetic spirit as something of an inheritance. This view is reinforced by the Qur’an’s confusion of Miriam the sister of Moses and Aaron with Mary the mother of Jesus—the name of each is the same in Arabic: *Maryam*. This makes Jesus Moses’s nephew. While Islamic tradition has Muhammad saying that the appellation “sister of Aaron” for Mary in the Qur’an (19:28) was merely an honorific and not an expression of an actual blood relationship, the Qur’an also has Mary being born of the wife of Imran, the father of Moses (3:36).

If, therefore, Muhammad had a son who survived into adulthood—he is said to have had as many as five sons, all of whom died before reaching puberty—the son would have been a prophet as well, and Muhammad would not have been the last prophet, the “seal of the prophets.”¹⁷

Cornell University professor David S. Powers, a scholar of Islamic history and law, has written an extraordinarily well-researched and well-reasoned book-length examination of the Zaynab incident and its historical and theological status. In it, Powers notes that “as the Last Prophet, Muhammad could not have a son who reached puberty; otherwise, as Muqatil states, that son would have been a prophet.”¹⁸ Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767) was an early commentator on the Qur’an.

Suddenly, then, the presence of Muhammad’s adopted son takes on immense importance to Islamic theology. Powers explains:

The logic of this argument applies not only to Muhammad’s natural sons, none of whom reached puberty, but also to his adopted son Zayd, who did. By virtue of his status as Muhammad’s adult son, Zayd b. Muhammad was a member of the Abrahamic family to which the mantle of prophecy had been entrusted as an exclusive possession. Similarly, Muhammad’s

grandson, Usama b. Zayd b. Muhammad, was also a member of this family. In theory, the mantle of prophecy might have passed from Muhammad to Zayd, and from Zayd to Usama.¹⁹

Indeed, something very like this developed among the Shi'ites, who differed from the Sunnis in maintaining that the leader of the Islamic community had to be a member of Muhammad's household. In the absence of a son, the authority fell to Ali ibn Abi Talib, by virtue of his being Muhammad's son-in-law, the husband of his daughter Fatima. By that point, then, Zayd's claim to be Muhammad's son must have already been repudiated. Powers observes:

The Muslim community had no choice but to construct its foundation narrative in such a way as to marginalize both Zayd and Usama. However, Muhammad's repudiation of Zayd did not fully eliminate the threat to the theological doctrine of the finality of prophecy. This is because at the time of Zayd's repudiation in 5 A.H. [A.D. 626], he was already a grown man. The fact that the Prophet had an adult son named Zayd b. Muhammad conflicted with the assertion in v. 40 that "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men." For the sake of theological consistency, it was important to demonstrate that the *man* who had been Muhammad's *son* failed to outlive the Prophet. Like Muhammad's repudiation of Zayd, the death of the Beloved of the Messenger of God some time prior to the year 11/632 was a theological imperative.²⁰

Sure enough, Islamic tradition holds that Zayd died in the Battle of Muta in the year 629—three years before Muhammad himself.

Thus in order to ensure the centrality of Muhammad in Islamic tradition, and to establish a religious orthodoxy that held the empire together, stories had to be invented emphasizing that Muhammad had neither natural nor adopted sons. This was because a son of Muhammad could potentially become a rallying figure for a rival political faction, as Ali became for the Shi'ites. Even Aisha said: "Had Zayd outlived Muhammad, he would have appointed him as his successor."²¹ So Zayd had to die before Muhammad, and Usama had to be seen as having no reasonable claim to leadership. A

delegitimization of adoption had the added benefit of striking at Islam's chief spiritual rival, Christianity, with its doctrine of Gentiles as adopted sons of God.

To our twenty-first-century Western sensibilities, then, the traditional account of Muhammad's marriage to the wife of his adopted son at first appears to construct a cover for that action by delegitimizing adoption, saying (as in Qur'an 33:4) that adopted sons are not to be considered actual sons. But a closer examination of the story, based on what we know of early Islamic history and theology, suggests that the pronouncements on adoption were not a convenient justification for Muhammad's marriage to Zaynab but rather were the very point the story was meant to illustrate. In short, this incident no longer appears to be an embarrassment that Muslims felt compelled to explain away; it seems fundamental to Islam's theological claims.

Zayd and Usama: Historical Figures?

This explanation has the advantage over the canonical Islamic account in that it does what the mainstream version does not and cannot do: it explains how Qur'an 33:40, which affirms that Muhammad is not the father of any of the Muslims but rather is the Seal of the Prophets, relates to the story of Zaynab, even in the fragmentary form in which it is told in the Qur'an.

This exposition raises other questions, however. Although it explains why the Zaynab story may have been invented to serve various theological and political imperatives, it seems to take for granted that Zayd himself was a historical figure, known in the early Muslim community—and that he was known to have been Muhammad's adopted son. It apparently assumes that Zayd and his son, Usama, had been known and were remembered, and that their existence, or at least their nonprophetic status, had to be explained.

In other words, the story of Zaynab may not have been constructed to explain away Muhammad's lechery, but if it was constructed to dismiss Zayd or Usama's claims to succeed the prophet, this suggests that the story deals with real historical figures, not myths. And if Usama and Zayd were real, wouldn't Muhammad also be

real? Is it possible that the mysterious Arab prophet who appears in the earliest documents of the Arab conquest, apparently preaching some form of monotheism and kinship with the Jews and Christians, was indeed Muhammad?

At the very least the figure of Usama must be considered in this context. Zayd may have conveniently died before Muhammad did, but Usama did not. Usama shows up in several hadiths. For example, Islamic tradition indicates that in the last year of his life, Muhammad appointed Usama as commander of an expedition to Syria. This was an unpopular choice among the Muslims, goes the story, but Muhammad defended Usama: "I have been informed that you spoke about Usama. [Let it be known that] he is the most beloved of all people to me."²² Abu Bakr, Muhammad's successor, later sent Usama on a raid, from which he returned with captives and booty.²³

All this, however, depends on the Hadith, which, as we have seen, were subject to rampant forgery for political reasons. There is no contemporary indication that Zayd or Usama existed at all. Given the theological imperative to establish Muhammad as the final prophet, there would have been ample reason to invent them. If Zayd and Usama did exist, most of what we know about them appears to be legend that was attached to shadowy historical personages whose actual deeds had been largely forgotten.

Giving Muhammad a son whom he adopted and then repudiated decades later in obedience to divine revelation reinforced the Qur'an's point that one should obey not human beings but Allah alone (33:37). Having Usama appear in the early Muslim community, but not as a contender for the leadership, reinforced the point that Muhammad had no sons of any kind, and thus the prophetic line ended with his death.

Zayd's Death and the Battle of Muta

Similarly, what we know of Zayd bin Haritha, formerly known as Zayd bin Muhammad, depends entirely on much later accounts. There are no contemporary records of the Battle of Muta that Islamic tradition tells us took the life of Zayd in 629. The first known reference to the

battle in a non-Muslim source is found nearly two centuries later in the writings of a Byzantine chronicler, Theophanes the Confessor (760–818). Theophanes places the battle *after* Muhammad's death: "Mouamed, who had died earlier, had appointed four emirs to fight those members of the Arab nation who were Christian." According to Theophanes, the local Byzantine ruler, "on learning this from a certain Koraishite called Koutabas, who was in his pay, gathered all the soldiers of the desert guard and, after ascertaining from the Saracens the day and hour when they were intending to attack, himself attacked them at a village called Mothous, and killed three emirs and the bulk of their army."²⁴

Muslim historians such as Ibn Hisham and al-Waqidi also write of this battle, but tell a much different story. According to Ibn Hisham, Muhammad was still alive and sent out the expedition personally with specific instructions about who was to be in command: "The apostle sent his expedition to Muta in Jumada'l-Ula in the year 8 [629] and put Zayd b. Haritha in command; if Zayd were slain then Jafar b. Abi Talib was to take command, and if he were killed then Abdullah b. Rawaha."²⁵ Sure enough, the men were slain in exactly that order: "When fighting began Zayd b. Haritha fought holding the apostle's standard, until he died from loss of blood among the spears of the enemy. Then Jafar took it and fought with it until when the battle hemmed him in he jumped off his roan and hamstringed her and fought till he was killed." And finally Abdullah "seized his sword and died fighting."²⁶

Waqidi offers additional detail about the battle. Powers explains just how different his account is from that of Theophanes: "Waqidi and Theophanes disagree about...the casus belli, the *identity* of the Byzantine military commander, the *size* of the opposing armies, the *reason* for the Muslim defeat, and the *number* of Muslims who were killed. The discrepancies are so striking that one is justified in asking if these two historians are talking about the same battle."²⁷

Waqidi's account is also encrusted with legend. He recounts that during the battle, Muhammad, who was back in Medina in the mosque, received visions of what was happening and relayed the news to other Muslims. The accuracy of these visions of course

provided yet more indication that he was indeed a prophet of Allah. Muhammad reported to the assembled Muslims that before the battle, Satan tried to tempt Zayd with worldly pleasures, but that Zayd responded contemptuously: “Now that belief has been firmly established in the hearts of the Believers, you are enticing me with the pleasures of this world!”²⁸ When Zayd was killed, Muhammad told the people in the mosque to ask Allah to forgive him, “for he has entered the garden, running.”

According to al-Waqidi, Muhammad then reported that Satan tried to tempt Jafar as well, and that Jafar gave him the same pious answer as Zayd had. When Jafar was killed, he sprouted wings and entered the garden flying. Abdullah then took up the standard and was killed. Muhammad said that he entered the garden stumbling—which puzzled Muhammad’s audience, until the prophet of Islam explained that Abdullah could not enter the garden as gracefully or enthusiastically because he had had a great desire for life.²⁹ After all, the Qur’an itself takes for granted that those who are the “friends” of Allah will “long for death”: “O you who are Jews, if you claim that you are allies of Allah, excluding the people, then wish for death, if you should be truthful” (62:6).

With Ibn Hisham and al-Waqidi, it does not seem that we are dealing with straightforward historical records. Raising doubts are the serious discrepancies from the non-Muslim historical accounts and the legendary character of al-Waqidi’s story. (And here again, if Muhammad was such a miracle worker and seer, why do the critics of the prophet complain in the Qur’an that he has worked no wonders?) Adding to this is the way the three commanders whom Muhammad designated died in the order in which he designated them; commanding generals can only wish that battles would unfold in such an orderly manner. There may have been a battle at Muta, but what actually happened there is lost in mists of time, and cannot be reconstructed from Theophanes, Ibn Hisham, or al-Waqidi.

Whether or not there was a battle between the Muslims and the Byzantines at Muta at some time in the late 620s or early 630s, the Muslim accounts of it that include the martyrdom of Zayd have no historical value. Like so many other elements of the canonical

account of early Islam, they may have been invented to emphasize a political and theological point—in this case, that “Muhammad is not the father of any of your men,” and hence is “the Seal of the Prophets.”

Muhammad Bewitched

Other tales that appear to show Muhammad in a less than flattering light have even less to recommend their historicity. Apparently difficult to explain is why anyone would have invented the hadiths in which Muhammad fell under the influence of magic spells. One spell made him think he had had sexual relations with his wives when he actually had not.

In one such hadith, Aisha recalls that Muhammad once said to her: “O Aisha! Allah has instructed me regarding a matter about which I had asked Him. There came to me two men, one of them sat near my feet and the other near my head. The one near my feet, asked the one near my head [pointing at me], ‘What is wrong with this man?’ The latter replied, ‘He is under the effect of magic.’ The first one asked, ‘Who had worked magic on him?’ The other replied, ‘Lubaid bin Asam.’ The first one asked, ‘What material [did he use]?’ The other replied, ‘The skin of the pollen of a male date tree with a comb and the hair stuck to it, kept under a stone in the well of Dharwan.’” Muhammad then went to a well and found that it was “the same well which was shown to me in the dream”: “The tops of its date-palm trees look like the heads of the devils, and its water looks like the henna infusion.” He ordered that the date palm trees be cut down and that the brackish water be drained, which presumably ended the magic spell’s power over him.

Aisha then asked him, “O Allah’s Apostle! Won’t you disclose [the magic object]?” Muhammad refused: “Allah has cured me and I hate to circulate the evil among the people.” The hadith ends with Aisha explaining that the magician who cast this spell on Muhammad, Lubaid bin Asam, “was a man from Bani Zuraiq, an ally of the Jews.”³⁰

In another version of the story, one of Muhammad’s Companions explains that this magic that was “worked on Allah’s Apostle so that

he used to think that he had sexual relations with his wives while he actually had not” was in fact “the hardest kind of magic.”³¹ This version explains that Lubaid, or Labid, was not only “an ally of the Jews” but also a hypocrite.³²

So while at first reading it may appear odd that Allah’s prophet could fall under a magic spell, the intentions of the story are clear: once again to demonize the Jews (who are the “most intense of people in animosity toward the believers,” according to Qur’an 5:82) and to show that even the “hardest kind of magic” could not ultimately prevail over Muhammad, for Allah would give him the information he needed to defeat it. The atmosphere here is more redolent of folk tales than of soberly recounted history. Muhammad is cast as the victor over even the unseen forces of darkness that superstitious men of a prescientific era feared and dreaded. In this, as in his warrior’s might and sexual prowess, he is a worthy prophet, a strong man in a wild and untamed time.

Don’t Bother Muhammad at Home

One passage of the Qur’an, however, reads like a plea from a star who is tired of his adoring but persistent followers:

O you who have believed, do not enter the houses of the Prophet except when you are permitted for a meal, without awaiting its readiness. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without seeking to remain for conversation. Indeed, that was troubling the Prophet, and he is shy of you. But Allah is not shy of the truth. And when you ask his wives for something, ask them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. And it is not for you to harm the messenger of Allah or to marry his wives after him, ever. Indeed, that would be in the sight of Allah an enormity (33:53).

Such a passage seems to reflect the experience of a leader whose followers were annoying him by barging into his home at inconvenient times—but that leader was not necessarily Muhammad. It could just as easily have originated with the annoyance of a later ruler; by means of this directive, this leader could have invoked the

example of Muhammad to get petitioners and hangers-on out of his house.

In all these apparent difficulties, we do not see indications of authentic historical material about Muhammad. In every case we encounter material that appears designed to reinforce Muhammad's status as a prophet and an altogether exceptional human being. Moreover, the hadiths that detail Muhammad's personal habits reflect the interest of one party or another in portraying such behavior as exemplary; as we have seen, such stories could easily be—and often were—invented. Nothing in these accounts is inconsistent with the possibility that Muhammad was fashioned as a hero and prophet beginning toward the end of the seventh century and with increasing industry during the eighth and ninth centuries.

We have already reviewed some of the many reasons to question the veracity of the canonical account of Islam's origins and Muhammad's life. But perhaps no evidence is more important to consider than the numerous curious facts about the perfect book, the pure Arabic Scripture, the book that Muslims believe Allah delivered to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel in pristine form and that contains everything a human being needs to understand this world and his place in it: the Qur'an.

CHAPTER 8

The Unchanging Qur'an Changes

The Qur'an: Muhammad's Book?

The Qur'an is Muhammad's foremost legacy, and the primary source for knowledge of Islamic doctrine and (to a lesser degree) history. According to the Qur'an, the sole author of the Muslim holy book is Allah, who delivered the book piecemeal but in perfect form through the angel Gabriel to Muhammad: "Indeed, it is We who have sent down to you the Qur'an in stages" (76:23).¹ Allah taunts the unbelievers with this fact: "Indeed, it is a noble Qur'an in a register well-protected; none touch it except the purified, a revelation from the Lord of the worlds. Then is it to this statement that you are indifferent and make your provision that you deny?" (56:77–82).

For Muslims, the Qur'an is a perfect copy of the perfect, eternal book—the Mother of the Book (*umm al-kitab*)—that has existed forever with Allah in Paradise. The Qur'an testifies this of itself: "By the clear Book, indeed, We have made it an Arabic Qur'an that you might understand. And indeed it is, in the Mother of the Book with Us, exalted and full of wisdom" (43:2–4). It says it is "an honored Qur'an on a Preserved Slate" (85:21–22).

Those who do not accept this claim generally assume that it was Muhammad who wrote the Qur'an. Certainly the book gives an immediate impression of originating from a single author, what with its repetitions, its stylistic tics (such as ending verses with a tagline such as "Allah is Mighty, Wise," which appears with slight variations forty times in the Qur'an), and its overall unity of message (despite numerous contradictions on particulars).

For many, both Muslim and non-Muslim, the Qur'an itself is the principal indication that the canonical story of Islam's origins is essentially true. After all, if Muhammad never existed, or did little or nothing of what he is thought to have done, then where did the Qur'an come from? If Muhammad was not its author or conduit, then someone else must have been, for it speaks with a unified voice and bears the imprint of a singular personality—or so it is generally assumed.

The Imperfect Perfect Book

This perfect and miraculous book is, however, decidedly imperfect, as even some Muslims have begun to note publicly. In a remarkable article published on January 10, 2020, Saudi journalist Ahmad Hashem observed that the Qur'an "in its present form contains errors of spelling, syntax and grammar; it is estimated that there are about 2,500 such mistakes."² According to Hashem, "They were made by the committee tasked with compiling the Quran, and include the addition or omission of letters in some words or the substitution of one letter for another."³

Hashem provides a brief list of examples: "In Surah 68, verse 6, [the word] بِأَيِّكُمْ ["which of you"] appears, instead of بَأَيْكُمْ. In other words, an extra ي was added. In Surah 25, verse 4, [the word] جَاءُوا ["they committed"] appears, instead of جَاءُوا or جاؤوا. In other words, the alif in the plural masculine suffix وا is missing. In Surah 28, verse 9, the word امرات ["wife"] appears, instead of امرأة. In 54 instances, the name إبراهيم [Ibrahim] appears... as إبراهيم, omitting the letter ي, and the word سماوات ["skies"] is written in this way only once, whereas in 189 other instances it appears [incorrectly] as سموت, without the letter ا... The word قرآن ["Quran"] appears 68 times without the letter ا... The word سنة ["year"] appears eight times with the letter ة [at the end] and five times with the letter ت."⁴

Similarly, in July 2020, the Iraqi Kurdish writer Jarjis Gulizada called for "a reexamination of the Quranic script, [namely] the Uthmani script, which is not suitable for the Islamic nation in the modern world, and especially for non-Arab Muslims, due to the difficulty of pronouncing words that are misspelled." The text of the

Qur'an as it stands, he wrote, "contains many inconsistencies and errors [involving] the mispronunciation and misspelling of words in the verses, [yet it] remains unchanged to this day."⁵

The Unchanged and Unchangeable Book

Hashem, Gulizada and others who have noticed errors in the Qur'anic text will find them hard to correct, for this perfect Qur'an cannot be changed. Allah tells his prophet: "And when Our verses are recited to them as clear evidences, those who do not expect the meeting with Us say, 'Bring us a Qur'an other than this or change it.' Say, 'It is not for me to change it on my own accord. I only follow what is revealed to me. Indeed I fear, if I should disobey my Lord, the punishment of a tremendous Day'" (10:15). Indeed, not just the prophet, but no one at all can change the Qur'an: "And recite what has been revealed to you of the Book of your Lord. There is no changer of His words, and never will you find in other than Him a refuge" (18:27). This is because Allah himself protects it: "Indeed, it is We who sent down the Qur'an and indeed, We will be its guardian" (15:9).

Muslims generally believe that the Qur'an's text as it stands today is the same as it was when the caliph Uthman compiled and published the standard canonical text. Nothing has been changed, nothing has been added, nothing has been lost. "The text of the Qur'an is entirely reliable," says the modern-day Turkish Muslim political and educational leader Fethullah Gülen. "It has been as it is, unaltered, unedited, not tampered with in any way, since the time of its revelation."⁶ The book *What Everyone Should Know About Islam and Muslims* declares: "The Holy Qur'an is the only divinely revealed scripture in the history of mankind which has been preserved to the present time in its exact original form."⁷

The twentieth-century Qur'an commentator and politician Syed Abul Ala Maududi said that the Qur'an "exists exactly as it had been revealed to the Prophet; not a word—nay, not a dot of it—has been changed. It is available in its original text and the Word of God has now been preserved for all times to come."⁸ An English translation of the Qur'an produced in Saudi Arabia boasts: "So well has it been

preserved, both in memory and in writing, that the Arabic text we have today is identical to the text as it was revealed to the Prophet. Not even a single letter has yielded to corruption during the passage of the centuries. And so it will remain for ever, by the consent of Allah.”⁹

The Ahmadiyya leader Maulvi Muhammad Ali went even farther, writing in 1921: “From one end of the world to the other, from China in the Far East to Morocco and Algeria in the Far West, from the scattered islands of the Pacific Ocean to the great desert of Africa, the Qur’an is one, and no copy differing in even a diacritical point is met with in the possession of one among the four hundred millions of Muslims. There are, and always have been, contending sects, but the same Qur’an is in the possession of one and all.... A manuscript with the slightest variation in the text is unknown.”¹⁰

This view has been the standard in the Islamic world since at least the tenth century. The Mutazilites, alone among Muslims, believed the Qur’an to be a human creation, not a perfect copy of an eternal divine book. But by the tenth century, a rival sect, the Asharites, had succeeded in getting this idea to be generally regarded as a heresy. The Mutazilites, facing persecution, eventually died out, along with the idea that the text of the Qur’an was ever subject to human vagaries.

The claim that the Qur’anic text has remained unaltered for 1,400 years is not only a commonplace of Muslim apologetic literature; many non-Muslims, including scholars of Islam, accept it as well. The nineteenth-century non-Muslim historian William Muir asserted that the Qur’anic text had been preserved so carefully that “there are no variations of importance—we might almost say no variations at all—to be found in the innumerable copies scattered throughout the vast bounds of the Empire of Islam.”¹¹

Yet the lack of variation to which Gülen, Maududi, and so many other Islamic spokesmen refer reflects the fact that most Qur’ans today depend on the same medieval sources, not on anything close to an original seventh-century manuscript. And even that consistency breaks down on closer inspection. So, too, does the claim that the Qur’anic text has never been changed since the various suras were

delivered to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Even Islamic tradition shows this contention to be highly questionable, with indications that some of the Qur'an was lost and other parts were added to or otherwise changed.

There is little dispute, however, about the Islamic account that the Qur'an originated with Muhammad. For most people who consider the question at all, what is at issue is whether Muhammad was really reciting revelations from Allah or passing off warmed-over biblical stories and other material as the divine voice. But an examination of the records—including early Islamic tradition itself—indicates that the canonical text of the Qur'an cannot be attributed to Muhammad alone. Even Islamic tradition records that the Qur'an was altered after it first appeared among the believers, at times in ways that were far more serious than minor variations of wording or differences in dialect.

Flexible Revelations

The canonical Islamic accounts of how Muhammad received revelations suggest a less-than-heavenly origin to many Qur'anic verses, and frankly admit that some passages did not originate with Muhammad.

The hadiths concerning the circumstances of Qur'anic revelations sometimes betray a certain improvisational quality. Since, as we have seen, these stories are almost certainly not actual historical accounts, the question must be raised as to why they may have been invented. The answer to this lies in the evolving nature of Islamic tradition itself: these stories were developed as the particular characteristics of Islam were coming to the fore. Islam began to take shape as a religion different from—indeed, opposed to—Judaism and Christianity. Central to it was the figure of the prophet Muhammad, and tales of his exploits began to be circulated among the subjects of the Arabian empire.

But if the founding figure of the new religion was to have received a perfect new scripture from the supreme God, why not have the stories of its delivery emphasize its perfection and flawless transmission? To be sure, many hadiths emphasize just those things.

If, however, Islam and the Qur'an were evolving into the eighth and ninth centuries, as it appears from the historical evidence, that ongoing evolution had to be explained somehow. The hadiths would thus need to convince the faithful that although they had never heard of these sayings of Muhammad before, they were authentic and ancient tradition.

The best way to explain and justify this considerable theological flux would have been to make revision, and even forgetfulness, part of the new divine revelations from the beginning. And so it was done.

One hadith, for example, depicts Muhammad in a decidedly improvisational mode, revising a revelation he had just received from Allah because of a question a blind man posed to him. The revelation concerned the value of fighting jihad: "Not equal are those believers remaining home, and the mujahideen in the cause of Allah with their wealth and their lives." According to the hadith, Muhammad called for one of his scribes, Zaid ibn Thabit, so he could dictate the revelation.¹² But when the prophet began to dictate, a blind man, Amr bin Umm Maktum, interrupted him, calling out, "O Allah's apostle! What is your order for me, as I am a blind man?" Would Amr be considered a lesser Muslim for being unable to participate in jihad warfare because of his disability? Hearing the question, Muhammad dictated the new revelation with a caveat: "Not equal are those believers remaining home, other than the disabled, and the mujahideen in the cause of Allah with their wealth and their lives" (Qur'an 4:95).¹³

One tradition has Zaid ibn Thabit giving a hint that the Qur'an was compiled from earlier, specifically Jewish sources: "The Messenger of God ordered me to study for him the script of the Jews [*kitab al-yahud*, which can also be translated "Book of the Jews"], and he said to me, 'I do not trust the Jews with regard to my correspondence' [i.e., correspondence with the Jews, written in their script]. Not even half a month passed until I used to write for him, and they wrote to him, I would read their letter."¹⁴

Another hadith relates how Muhammad was traveling with Umar, who later became caliph, when Umar asked a question of his prophet. Muhammad, however, did not answer; Umar repeated his

question twice but still received no answer. This greatly disquieted Umar: “I feared that a piece of Qur’an was being sent down about me. It was not long before I heard a crier calling for me, and I said that I feared that a piece of Qur’an had been sent down about me.”¹⁵ A portion of the Qur’an—sura 48—did indeed come to Muhammad, so the hadith goes, but Umar was not rebuked or even mentioned in it. Still, Umar clearly had the idea that Qur’anic revelation—the revelation of the perfect and eternal book—could be altered by his questioning, or his behavior. This would indicate either that Umar had a place in Allah’s eternal plan for the Qur’anic revelation, or that it was not perfect and eternal at all, but could be altered as circumstances warranted. And that may have been the purpose this hadith served: to explain the variants that such alterations created.

Yet another trace of the alterations to the Qur’an comes from the thirteenth-century Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir. He stated that one of Muhammad’s secretaries, Abdullah ibn Sa’d ibn Abi Sarh, “used to record the revelation for the Prophet” in Medina but then left Islam and returned to Mecca, where he noted that Muhammad was remarkably cavalier about the revelations he received: “I used to orient Muhammad wherever I willed; he dictated to me ‘All-Powerful All-Wise’ and I suggested ‘All Knowing All-Wise’ so he would say: ‘Yes, it is all the same.’”¹⁶

The ninth-century Muslim historian al-Waqidi (d. 822) records that Abdullah ibn Sa’d said to the Meccans: “It was only a Christian slave who was teaching him [Muhammad]; I used to write to him and change whatever I wanted.”¹⁷ In line with this, another thirteenth-century Islamic scholar, Abdullah al-Baydawi, recorded in a hadith that Abdullah ibn Sa’d used to mock Muhammad’s claim to have received revelations: “‘To me it has been revealed,’ when naught has been revealed to him.”¹⁸ This secretary to the prophet repudiated Islam when he became convinced that divine intervention was not responsible for the Qur’an. Muhammad was once dictating Qur’an 23:12–14 to Abdullah: “And certainly did We create man from an extract of clay. Then We placed him as a sperm-drop in a firm lodging. Then We made the sperm-drop into a clinging clot, and We made the clot into a lump, and We made the lump bones, and We

covered the bones with flesh; then We developed him into another creation.”¹⁹ Hearing this, Abdullah exclaimed, “So blessed is Allah, the best of creators!”²⁰

Muhammad responded: “Write it down; for thus it has been revealed”—that is, Abdullah’s exclamation became part of the Qur’anic revelation.²¹

Abdullah was disillusioned: “If Muhammad is truthful then I receive the revelation as much as he does, and if he is a liar, what I said is as good as what he said.”²²

Muslim scholars, of course, describe Abdullah as a disgruntled former employee, fabricating stories about the former boss he had come to dislike. However, if the entire scenario of Muhammad receiving and dictating revelations was an ahistorical invention of the later Muslim community, such stories may have served to explain why variants existed in the Qur’an and Hadith. Such hadiths may have been composed at a time when some people in the community remembered earlier formulations that had been discarded. If, however, the revered prophet of Islam could be shown as having freely altered the revelations he had received from Allah, then clearly such alteration could not be condemned outright even among those who remembered that the texts and teachings of the religion had not always been what they were now.

Contradictions in the Qur’an

The Qur’an is, like the Hadith, riddled with contradictions, which may be expected if it was really the product of a false prophet who was improvising theology on the fly, as only people as close to Muhammad as Abdullah would have known. But these contradictions may also be an indication that the Qur’an was not written by Muhammad, much less received from Gabriel by Muhammad, but was a book written by committee, the product of the combination of numerous divergent traditions.

One series of contradictions is created by the Qur’anic dogma that the original religion of all the prophets was Islam, until their messages were corrupted by their self-serving, sinful followers. For Moses, when he meets Allah on the mountain, exclaims, “Exalted

are You! I have repented to You, and I am the first of the believers” (7:143). Evidently some of those who hear Moses’s message don’t realize that he is a believer, for Pharaoh’s sorcerers, overawed by Moses’s miracles, say, “Indeed, we aspire that our Lord will forgive us our sins because we were the first of the believers” (26:51).

But neither the sorcerers nor Moses may be able to claim the honors as the first Muslim, for before Moses there was Abraham, who, when he and his son Ishmael were constructing the Ka’aba in Mecca, prayed, “Our Lord, and make us Muslims to you and from our descendants a Muslim nation to you” (2:127–128). But even before Abraham there was Adam, who was not only the first man but the first prophet: “Then Adam received from his Lord words, and he accepted his repentance. Indeed, it is he who is the accepting of repentance, the merciful” (2:37).

The Qur’an’s stance on alcohol is also self-contradictory. “And from the fruits of the palm trees and grapevines you take intoxicant and good provision. Indeed in that is a sign for a people who reason,” says 16:67. There is no hint that it is prohibited to “take intoxicant” from the grapevines. But then (bear in mind that the Qur’an is not arranged chronologically): “They ask you about wine and gambling. Say, ‘In them is great sin and benefit for people. But their sin is greater than their benefit’” (2:219). And finally: “O you who have believed, indeed, intoxicants, gambling, stone altars, and divining arrows are but defilement from the work of Satan, so avoid it that you may be successful” (5:90).

Alcohol started out as permitted, and then containing some benefit but also leading the believer into sin, with the sin outweighing the benefit, and finally alcohol is the work of Satan. If it had been the work of Satan in the mind of the author or authors of these passages from the beginning, it is hard to see how it could ever have been seen as containing some benefit.

The Qur’an teaches that after warring against Moses, Pharaoh repented and worshiped Allah: “And We took the Children of Israel across the sea, and Pharaoh and his soldiers pursued them in tyranny and enmity until, when drowning overtook him, he said, ‘I believe that there is no deity except that in whom the Children of

Israel believe, and I am of the Muslims” (10:90). The Qur’an also teaches that Pharaoh remained unrepentant and was drowned by Allah. Moses is depicted as saying to Pharaoh: “You have already known that none has sent down these signs except the Lord of the heavens and the earth as evidence, and indeed I think, O Pharaoh, that you are destroyed” (17:102). Allah then makes clear that Moses was right: “So he intended to drive them from the land, but We drowned him and those with him all together” (17:103).

Believers should be forgiving: “And We have not created the heavens and earth and that between them except in truth. And indeed, the Hour is coming; so forgive with gracious forgiveness” (15:85). But believers also have “an excellent pattern in Abraham and those with him, when they said to their people, ‘Indeed, we are disassociated from you and from whatever you worship other than Allah. We have denied you, and there has appeared between us and you animosity and hatred forever until you believe in Allah alone” (60:4). The passage even goes on to say that Abraham is not an “excellent pattern for the believers,” and thus should not be imitated, when he tells his pagan father, “I will surely ask forgiveness for you” (60:4).

The Qur’an contains divergent accounts of the creation of the world. One says that Allah created the universe in eight days: “Say, ‘Do you indeed disbelieve in he who created the earth in two days and attribute to him equals?’” (41:9). And then: “And he placed on the earth firmly set mountains over its surface, and he blessed it and determined therein its sustenance in four days without distinction” (41:10). And then: “And he completed them as seven heavens within two days and inspired in each heaven its command” (41:12). But another passage has Allah finishing the job in just six days: “Indeed, your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and earth in six days and then established himself above the throne” (7:54).

The only acceptable religion before Allah is Islam: “And whoever desires other than Islam as religion, never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the hereafter, will be among the losers” (Sura 3:85). And yet “those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans—those who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did

righteousness—will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve” (2:62).

There are numerous other contradictions, and Islamic apologists have been laboring for 1,400 years to come up with explanations for them. Every religion has aspects that are opaque to outsiders, and even to believers, and that have to be explained. However plausible the explanations for these and other Qur’an contradictions may be, their very existence in the perfect and eternal book poses an enduring problem. Muslim scholars have been aware of this from the beginning of Islam, and thus some of the explanations they have devised for it date from very early in the history of the religion.

Muhammad’s Forgetfulness

In line with this felt need to answer challenges, put down critics, reassure the doubtful, and justify variability and change within Islamic tradition, many hadiths record that even Muhammad himself forgot parts of what Allah had revealed to him. One recounts that “Allah’s Messenger heard a man reciting the Qur’an at night, and said, ‘May Allah bestow His Mercy on him, as he has reminded me of such-and-such verses of such-and-such *sura*, which I was caused to forget.’”²³

As might be expected in confessional literature, this is represented as being all part of Allah’s plan. A hadith has Muhammad himself say so: “It is a bad thing that some of you say, ‘I have forgotten such and such Verse of the Qur’an,’ for indeed, he has been caused [by Allah] to forget it. So you must keep on reciting the Qur’an because it escapes from the hearts of men faster than camels do when they are released from their tying ropes.”²⁴ Even in the Qur’an itself, Allah tells his prophet: “We will make you recite, and you will not forget, except what Allah should will. Indeed, he knows what is declared and what is hidden” (87:6–7).

Thus if Muhammad has forgotten part of what Allah revealed, it is no cause for concern: “We do not abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten except that We bring forth better than it or similar to it. Do you not know that Allah is over all things competent?” (2:106). Allah even complains that this process makes some doubt the veracity of

his prophet: “And when We substitute a verse in place of a verse—and Allah is most knowing of what he sends down—they say, ‘You are but a forger. But most of them do not know’ (16:101). If religious authorities in the Umayyad or Abbasid caliphates were busy substituting one revelation for another, such a statement from Allah himself would be exceedingly useful.

Elsewhere the Qur’an seems to address concerns about variant versions of its contents: “And say, ‘Indeed, I am the clear warner,’ just as We had revealed to the separators who have made the Qur’an into portions” (15:89–91). Some hadiths record that Muhammad himself was unconcerned with variations that early on began to appear in how Muslims were reciting his revelations—with the implication being that if Muhammad did not worry over such matters, why should his followers?

Ubayy bin Kab, whom a hadith had Muhammad praising as “the best reader [of the Qur’an] among my people,” is made to recall his shock at Muhammad’s lack of concern about these variations. The strange incident began, according to the hadith, when Ubayy heard variant readings of the Qur’an recited in the mosque: “I was in the mosque when a man entered and prayed and recited [the Qur’an] in a style to which I objected. Then another man entered [the mosque] and recited in a style different from that of his companion.” Ubayy decided to appeal to Muhammad himself: “When we had finished the prayer, we all went to Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) and said to him: This man recited in a style to which I objected, and the other entered and recited in a style different from that of his companion.”

But according to the hadith, Muhammad “expressed approval of their affairs”—that is, of their way of reciting the Qur’an. Ubayy was troubled, recalling, “And there occurred in my mind a sort of denial which did not occur even during the Days of Ignorance [before the revelation of the Qur’an].” His reaction annoyed Muhammad: “When the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) saw how I was affected [by a wrong idea], he struck my chest, whereupon I broke into sweating and felt as though I were looking at Allah with fear.” Muhammad explained that the variants, which he represented simply

as differences in the Arabic dialect used for recitation, were all parts of Allah's plan: "He [the Holy Prophet] said to me: Ubayy, a message was sent to me to recite the Qur'an in one dialect, and I replied: Make [things] easy for my people. It was conveyed to me for the second time that it should be recited in two dialects. I again replied to him: Make affairs easy for my people. It was again conveyed to me for the third time to recite in seven dialects."²⁵

If variants and changes existed and had to be explained, this was as good an attempt to do so as any.

Haphazard Collection

According to the Hadith, during Muhammad's lifetime, his Companions would memorize various portions of the Qur'an. Some had some portions committed to memory, others had others. Some of it, but not all of it, was written down. But not long after Muhammad died, the traditions say, some of those who had memorized portions of the Qur'an died in the Battle of Yamama, which according to tradition was fought in December 632, just six months after Muhammad died. According to these accounts, parts of the Qur'an died with them. This led the caliph Abu Bakr, the first successor of Muhammad, to decide to collect the various Qur'anic revelations in written form.

Zaid ibn Thabit, the same scribe featured in the story of Muhammad and the blind man, explains that "Abu Bakr As-Siddiq sent for me when the people of Yamama had been killed."²⁶ When Zaid arrived, he found Abu Bakr with Umar ibn al-Khattab, who would soon succeed Abu Bakr as caliph of the Muslims.

Abu Bakr said to Zaid: "Umar has come to me and said: 'Casualties were heavy among the Qurra of the Qur'an (i.e. those who knew the Qur'an by heart) on the day of the Battle of Yamama, and I am afraid that more heavy casualties may take place among the Qurra on other battlefields, whereby a large part of the Qur'an may be lost. Therefore I suggest, you (Abu Bakr) order that the Qur'an be collected.'²⁷

Abu Bakr notes that he was initially skeptical: "I said to Umar, 'How can you do something which Allah's Apostle did not do?'"²⁸ But Umar

was unmoved, responding: “By Allah, that is a good project.”²⁹ Abu Bakr explained to Zaid: “Umar kept on urging me to accept his proposal till Allah opened my chest for it and I began to realize the good in the idea which Umar had realized. You are a wise young man and we do not have any suspicion about you, and you used to write the Divine Inspiration for Allah’s Messenger. So you should search for (the fragmentary scripts of) the Qur’an and collect it in one book.”³⁰

Zaid recounted the subsequent exchange between him and Abu Bakr in words virtually identical to those of the conversation between Abu Bakr and Uthman that Abu Bakr had just recounted. This is an indication that in this hadith, we have a stylized, highly polished legend rather than a straight historical account. Zaid says: “By Allah, if they had ordered me to shift one of the mountains, it would not have been heavier for me than this ordering me to collect the Qur’an. Then I said to Abu Bakr, ‘How will you do something which Allah’s Messenger did not do?’ Abu Bakr replied, ‘By Allah, it is a good project.’ Abu Bakr kept on urging me to accept his idea until Allah opened my chest for what he had opened the chests of Abu Bakr and Umar.”³¹

That account from Bukhari doesn’t say so, but according to another Islamic tradition regarding the origins of the Qur’an, it was already too late to collect together the entire book: “Many [of the passages] of the Qur’an that were sent down were known by those who died on the day of Yamama...but they were not known [by those who] survived them, nor were they written down, nor had [the first three caliphs] Abu Bakr, Umar or Uthman [by that time] collected the Qur’an, nor were they found with even one [person] after them.”³²

No contemporary historical evidence establishes that there ever was a Battle of Yamama or that anyone who had memorized portions of the Qur’an died there. As we have seen, no mention of the Qur’an is made until nearly a century after this battle is supposed to have taken place. So the traditions regarding the Battle of Yamama, and the collection of the Qur’an that followed from it, probably emerged in a context in which the holy book was

undergoing editing and alteration, such that variant formulations and differences in content had to be explained.

Early Islamic sources repeatedly attest to the loss of sections of the Qur'an. Zaid ibn Thabit explains how he set to work: "I started locating Qur'anic material and collecting it from parchments, scapula, leaf-stalks of date palms and from the memories of men [who knew it by heart]. I found with Khuzaima two Verses of Surat-at-Tauba which I had not found with anybody else."³³ Khuzaima was an early Muslim who accosted Zayd when he heard his version of sura 9 recited and informed him: "I see you have overlooked [two] verses and have not written them."³⁴ Zaid duly added them.

If Khuzaima hadn't been present, apparently those two verses (9:128–129) would not have been included in the Qur'an. That loss would not have been significant to Islamic doctrine or devotions, but it does bear witness to how the Hadith explain and obliquely justify what must have been evident to many ninth-century believers: that their religion and even their holy book were going through extensive changes.

One hadith has an elderly Muslim recalling a passage from sura 98 that said: "The religion with Allah is *al-hanifiyya* [the Upright Way] rather than that of the Jews or the Christians, and those who do good will not go unrewarded." But it was gone.³⁵

Likewise vanished, according to another hadith, was the section that mandated the stoning of adulterers. Umar declared:

I am afraid that after a long time has passed, people may say, "We do not find the Verses of the Rajam [stoning to death] in the Holy Book." And consequently they may go astray by leaving an obligation that Allah has revealed. Lo! I confirm that the penalty of Rajam be inflicted on him who commits illegal sexual intercourse, if he is already married and the crime is proved by witnesses or pregnancy or confession....Surely Allah's Apostle carried out the penalty of Rajam, and so did we after him.³⁶

Sura 33 of the Qur'an, according to another hadith, was originally 127 verses longer than it is in the canonical text. In this hadith, Muhammad's wife Aisha is made to say: "Surat al-Ahzab [that is,

sura 33] used to be recited in the time of the Prophet with two hundred verses, but when Uthman wrote out the codices he was unable to procure more of it than what there is today.”³⁷

Aisha asserted that the sura originally included a verse mandating stoning: “The fornicators among the married men (*ash-shaikh*) and married women (*ash-shaikhah*), stone them as an exemplary punishment from Allah, and Allah is Mighty and Wise.”³⁸

Still another hadith records an occasion on which a venerable Muslim in the city of Basra reminisced about a lost sura of the Qur’an: “We used to recite a surah which resembled in length and severity to [Surah] Bara’at.”³⁹ Surah Bara’at (Surat al-Bara’a), more commonly known as Surat at-Tauba (Repentance), is the Qur’an’s ninth sura, and it contains the book’s fiercest exhortations to jihad warfare (9:5, 9:123, etc.), including jihad against Jews and Christians (9:29). But the old man could recall little of the lost sura: “I have, however, forgotten it with the exception of this which I remember out of it: ‘If there were two valleys full of riches, for the son of Adam, he would long for a third valley, and nothing would fill the stomach of the son of Adam but dust.’ We used to recite a sura similar to one of the *Musabihat*, and I no longer remember it, but this much I have indeed preserved: ‘O you who truly believe, why do you preach that which you do not practise?’ [61:2] [and] ‘that is inscribed on your necks as a witness and you will be examined about it on the Day of Resurrection [17:13].’”⁴⁰

Significantly, the only two verses of this sura that this man is made to recall are both found elsewhere in the Qur’an; they could they have been added into the Qur’anic text after these hadiths were produced to assert their divine origin.

The process of collecting the Qur’an was random and disorganized enough for one Muslim to warn in a hadith: “Let none of you say, ‘I have acquired the whole of the Qur’an.’ How does he know what all of it is when much of the Qur’an has disappeared? Rather let him say, ‘I have acquired what has survived.’”⁴¹ This hardly conforms with confident pronouncements that the Qur’an “has been as it is, unaltered, unedited, not tampered with in any way, since the time of its revelation.”

Aisha Admits Changes

Even Aisha, Muhammad's favorite wife, known by the honorific Mother of the Believers, is made to testify indirectly to the haphazard quality of the Qur'an's collection. A hadith has Aisha ordering one of her servants, Yunus, to write out a copy of the Qur'an. She instructed him: "When you reach this ayat ['sign,' or verse of the Qur'an] let me know, 'Guard the prayers carefully and the middle prayer and stand obedient to Allah'" (Qur'an 2:238). When Yunus reached that point, Aisha dictated an amended version of the verse to him: "Guard the prayers carefully and the middle prayer and the asr prayer [the afternoon prayer] and stand obedient to Allah."

Aisha explained: "I heard it from the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace."⁴² If Aisha heard the alternate version from Muhammad himself, how did the variant arise? Did Muhammad offer two separate versions? Or, if the Qur'an was actually put together long after the traditional date of Muhammad's death, might the variants have come from the tradition arising from two different sources or existing in two different versions, and the Aisha story was invented in order to explain the variation?

On another occasion, Aisha was discussing the bizarre Islamic doctrine that an unmarried male and female may lawfully be alone together—in, for example, a workplace environment—if she becomes his foster mother by suckling him a specified number of times. Aisha recalled that "amongst what was sent down of the Qur'an was 'ten known sucklings make haram'—then it was abrogated by 'five known sucklings.'"⁴³ That is, if a woman suckled, or breastfed, an unrelated man ten times, or five times, he would become "haram," that is, someone with whom sexual relations were forbidden, and that would make it permissible for them to be together alone.

Aisha emphasized that this counterintuitive directive was in the Qur'an as it stood when Muhammad died: "When the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, died, it was what is now recited of the Qur'an."⁴⁴ In another version, while discussing "fosterage which [makes marriage] unlawful," Aisha said: "There was

revealed in the Holy Qur'an ten clear sucklings, and then five clear [sucklings]."⁴⁵ According to Aisha's word in these hadiths, this doctrine was originally in the Qur'an itself.

Why, then, is it not in the Qur'an now? It suffered the same fate as the lost passage on stoning to which Umar referred. Aisha explained: "The Verse of stoning and of breastfeeding an adult ten times was revealed, and the paper was with me under my pillow. When the Messenger of Allah died, we were preoccupied with his death, and a tame sheep came in and ate it."⁴⁶

This is reminiscent of the old cliché excuse of every lazy schoolboy: "A dog ate my homework." But why would these words be placed in Aisha's mouth in the first place, except to explain the existence of divergences in the text of what was supposedly the perfect book that had been flawlessly transmitted from Paradise to earth?

Zaid Does the Job Again

According to Islamic tradition, after Zaid ibn Thabit finished his work collecting the Qur'an, his version was not, as one might have expected, distributed among the Muslims. One hadith holds that there weren't even any copies made of it. The original was kept in the home of Abu Bakr, and then in the home of his successor, Umar, and then in that of Umar's daughter Hafsa, one of Muhammad's wives.⁴⁷

Years later, in the early 650s, the Islamic accounts go, a Muslim named Hudhaifa bin al-Yaman approached the caliph Uthman (644–656) about the Qur'an. This was, of course, long after the Battle of Yamama, which is identified in other hadiths as the first impetus for collecting and standardizing the Qur'anic text. Hudhaifa was concerned about variations in the Qur'an among the Muslims in Syria and Iraq, and so he appealed to the caliph to save the situation: "O chief of the Believers! Save this nation before they differ about the Book (Quran) as Jews and the Christians did before."⁴⁸

Uthman responded, according to Islamic tradition, by asking Hafsa to "send us the manuscripts of the Qur'an so that we may compile the Qur'anic materials in perfect copies and return the manuscripts

to you.”⁴⁹ Hafsa sent what she had—presumably Zaid ibn Thabit’s Qur’an, but apparently more than just that. Uthman then turned, as had Abu Bakr, to Zaid, along with three other Muslims, Abdullah bin Az-Zubair, Said bin Al-As, and Abdur Rahman bin Harith bin Hisham, to make copies.

Uthman told Abdullah, Said, and Abdur Rahman: “In case you disagree with Zaid bin Thabit on any point in the Qur’an, then write it in the dialect of Quraish, the Qur’an was revealed in their tongue.”⁵⁰ This order demonstrates that there were disagreements among the various manuscripts that Uthman now wanted standardized. It also reveals another curiosity: the Quraysh were the Arabs of Mecca; Muhammad was of the Quraysh. It is very strange, then, that Uthman would have needed to issue an explicit order to harmonize the diverging Qur’anic traditions in accord with the Qurashi dialect. If Muhammad were really the source of it all, presumably it would have been in the Qurashi dialect already.

Of course, some of the material may have been altered in transmission—or it may have not been written in the Quraysh’s dialect of Arabic in the first place. Maybe, given the Qur’an’s numerous non-Arabic features, it even originated elsewhere, outside of Arabia altogether.

The similarities of this account with the earlier one about the Qur’an being compiled during the time of Abu Bakr—the presence of Zaid ibn Thabit in both, the fear that portions of the Qur’an may be lost, the need for the caliph to act to preserve the faith—strongly suggest that these are both stylized accounts not only written down long after the fact, which is generally acknowledged, but composed long after the fact. The two different accounts may have been the product of differing factions among the Muslims, or of an evolving account captured at two stages of development.

Whatever the explanation, the straightforward acknowledgment in Islamic tradition that portions of the Qur’an were lost is striking. While standardizing the Qur’anic text this time, Zaid ibn Thabit was saved once more by Khuzaima. Back at the time that Zaid was collecting the Qur’an for Abu Bakr, Khuzaima had pointed out two verses that the scribe had overlooked. Now, twenty years later,

Khuzaima recalled still another portion that otherwise would have been omitted. A hadith has Zaid recall: “When we collected the fragmentary manuscripts of the Qur’an into copies, I missed one of the Verses of *Surat Al-Ahzab* [sura 33] which I used to hear Allah’s Messenger reciting. Finally, I did not find it with anybody except Khuzaima Al-Ansari, whose witness was considered by Allah’s Messenger equal to the witness of two men. (And that verse was): ‘Among the Believers are men who have been true in their covenant with Allah....’ (33.23).”⁵¹

That separate reports exist depicting Khuzaima saving a portion of the Qur’an that would otherwise have been lost—a different one in each case—is yet another indication that these reports are themselves the product of legendary elaboration, not sober and scrupulous historical reportage.

Once his commission’s work was done, around the year 653, Uthman is supposed to have sent back Hafsa’s manuscripts and distributed the final version to all the Islamic provinces. He ordered any other Qur’anic material already in the provinces to be burned. The canonical Islamic accounts say that Hafsa’s manuscripts were spared, but the governor of Medina, Marwan ibn al-Hakam, who was later to become caliph, is supposed to have burned them too, after she died in 665.⁵²

The Battle of Siffin and the Qur’an’s Absence

If Uthman really distributed copies of a standardized Qur’an throughout the Islamic provinces, the contents of the book would have become generally known among Muslims. Sure enough, Islamic tradition has it that the Qur’an was widely copied and universally known just four years after Uthman completed his task, when the Battle of Siffin is supposed to have occurred. The battle, in a village on the banks of the Euphrates River in Syria, pitted two rival claimants for the caliphate against each other: Ali ibn Abi Talib and Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan.

According to Islamic accounts of the battle, the hostilities began when Muawiya brought a Syrian force to contest Ali’s having been chosen to succeed Uthman, who had just been murdered.

Addressing the Syrians, Ali invoked the Qur'an: "I have given you time so that you might revert to the truth and turn to it in repentance. I have argued against you with the Book of God and have called you to it, but you have not turned away from oppression or responded to truth."⁵³ On the eve of battle, he told his own men: "Tomorrow you will meet the enemy, so lengthen the night standing in prayer, make abundant recitation of the Qur'an, and ask God for help and steadfastness."⁵⁴ One of his commanders exhorted his men in a similar way: "Fight the crude tyrants and do not fear them. How can you fear them when you have in your hands the Book of God in purity and reverence?"⁵⁵

The battle was hotly contested and protracted. Finally, when it looked as if victory was in sight for Ali, one of Muawiya's commanders, Amr ibn al-As, offered his chief a plan: "What if I put something to you," he said to Muawiya, "that can only increase our unity and their division?" When Muawiya agreed, Amr suggested: "We will raise the *masahif* and say, 'their contents are to be authoritative in our dispute.'"⁵⁶ *Al-mushaf*, with its plural *al-masahif*, has been taken in Islamic tradition to refer to a codex of the Qur'an. Muawiya agreed, and so his men raised up copies of the Qur'an on their lances and called out to Ali's men: "This is the Book of God between us and you." Ali's pious Muslims responded: "We respond to the Book of God, and we turn in repentance to it."

Amr's plan was a canny one, for Ali had charged that Muawiya's forces were "men without religion and without *qur'an*."⁵⁷ He told his men that Muawiya was trying to trick them, but they were impressed by the enemy's maneuver: "If we are called to the Book of God, we are bound to respond." Ali did his best to parry this, but finally two of his men approached him with a warning: "Ali, respond to the Book of God when you are called to it. Otherwise we shall indeed deliver you up entirely to the enemy or do what we did with Ibn 'Affan"—that is, Uthman, who had recently been murdered. "It is our duty," they continued, "to act in accordance with what is in the Book of God. We have accepted it and, by God, if you do not do what we tell you, we will do what we say."⁵⁸

Ultimately Ali had to relent. He called to his men and told them, “We have agreed to make the Qur’an an authority (*hukm*) between us and them.”⁵⁹ One of his commanders, Al-Ash’ath, reported to him that “the men all seem satisfied and pleased to respond to the enemy’s summons regarding the authority of the Qur’an.”⁶⁰

In subsequent truce talks, the two sides reportedly drew up a document in which they mutually agreed to “refer to the Book of God, from its opening to its close,” and “effect what it lays down and eliminate what it does away with.”⁶¹

Thus the entire episode centered on the Qur’an, according to Islamic accounts. But such accounts date from at least two centuries after the event. One of the most detailed and compelling narratives of the battle comes from the Muslim historian Tabari. But Tabari died in 923, 266 years after the Battle of Siffin. His proximity to the events he was writing about would be comparable to that of a writer today publishing one of the first accounts of the War of the Austrian Succession—except Tabari was working in a primarily oral culture, without benefit of any significant written records.

The early records offer nothing comparably detailed to indicate that Ali and Muawiya settled their differences by recourse to the Book of Allah. In fact, as we have seen, the records left behind by the Arab conquerors—the coins they issued, their official inscriptions on public buildings—include no mention of the Qur’an. Thus it is extremely unlikely that Muawiya’s partisans raised up copies of the Qur’an on their lances—or that they had copies of the Qur’an at all. In a culture in which every copy of a book had to be painstakingly written out by hand, it is difficult to imagine that these warriors would have had that many copies of the Qur’an on hand so soon after Uthman standardized the text. It is equally difficult to believe that everyone involved—the partisans of Ali and of Muawiya and others as well—would be so familiar with the Qur’an’s contents at this early date, in a culture where literacy could not be taken for granted. And even if they somehow managed to secure all these copies of the Qur’an, would they really have risked losing or damaging the “Book of God” in the heat of battle?

Tabari's account of the Battle of Siffin makes for a good story. But it does not hold up as reliable history.

The canonical version of the early Islamic conquests holds that the conquerors stormed out of Arabia with the Qur'an in their hands and Muhammad as their inspiration. At the same time, Islamic tradition situates the collection of the Qur'an during the reign of the caliph Uthman—some two decades after the Arab conquests began. That means that even according to the canonical account, most, if not all, of the early conquerors could have had only part of the Qur'an with them, if they had any of it at all.

It is undeniable that throughout the Middle Ages, at the apex of the great Islamic empires, Arab and Muslim armies had the words of the Qur'an on their lips as they conquered huge expanses of territory. But in what are generally understood as the earliest days of Islam, when they conquered Syria in 637, Armenia and Egypt in 639, North Africa beginning in the early 650s, and probably Cyprus in 654, there was no Qur'an for them to brandish. Nor is it even certain that they had one for many years after that. Recall that the Qur'an makes no appearance in the surviving documents and artifacts of the Muslims until around six decades after the Arab conquests began.

And when the Qur'an finally emerged, it may have been considerably different from the Qur'an that Muslims revere today.

CHAPTER 9

Which Qur'an?

Ambiguous Text

To move toward a fuller answer to the question of what the Qur'an may have been originally, and what form or forms it might have taken, one must know a bit about how the Arabic alphabet works. Like Hebrew, Arabic does not have letters for short vowels (it does for long ones). Nor does it have letters for certain consonants. Many Arabic letters are identical to one another in appearance except for their diacritical marks—that is, the dots that appear above or below the character. In fact, twenty-two of the twenty-eight letters in the Arabic alphabet depend entirely on diacritical marks to distinguish them from at least one other letter.

WHAT'S IN A MARK?

Arabic letters that can be confused with one another if the diacritical marks are not present:

ba ب ta ت tha ث nun ن

jim ج ha ح kha خ

dal د dhal ذ

ra ر zay ز

sin س shin ش

ṣad ص ḍad ض

ṭa ط za ظ

ayn ع ghayn غ

fa ف qāf ق

The Arabic letter ra (ر), for example, is identical to the letter zay (ز), except that the zay carries a dot above it. The letter sin (س) looks exactly the same as shin (ش), except that the latter features three dots above the character. One symbol could be three different

letters: *ba* (ب) with a dot under it, *ta* (ت) with two dots above it, and *tha* (ث) with three dots above it; *nun* (ن) is also quite similar in form. Obviously, these similarities can make for enormous differences in meaning.

As such, diacritical marks are essential to being able to make sense of the Qur'an, or any other Arabic text. Unfortunately, the earliest manuscripts of the Qur'an do not contain most diacritical marks. A scholar of hadith named Abu Nasr Yahya ibn Abi Kathir al-Yamami (d. 749) recalled: "The Qur'an was kept free [of diacritical marks] in *mushaf* [the original copies]. The first thing people have introduced in it is the dotting at the letter *ba* (ب) and the letter *ta* (ت), maintaining that there is no sin in this, for this illuminates the Qur'an."¹ Abu Nasr does not say when these marks began to be introduced, but the fragments of Qur'anic manuscripts that many scholars date to the first century of the Arabian conquests have only rudimentary diacritical marks. Some manuscripts distinguish one set of identical letters from another—*ta* (ت) from *ba* (ب) or *fa* (ف) from *qaf* (ق)—but leave the other sets of identical letters indistinguishable. Nor are all the earliest manuscripts consistent in the sets of identical letters they choose to distinguish from one another.² <Arabic fonts?>

An Islamic scholar writing late in the tenth century recounted a story in which the confusion of two sets of letters—*zay* (ز) for *ra* (ر) and *ta* (ت) for *ba* (ب)—came into play. A young man named Hamza began reciting the Qur'an's second sura, which begins, "This is the Book with no doubt in it" (2:2). "No doubt in it" in Arabic is *la raiba fihi*, but this unfortunate young man read out *la zaita fihi*, or "no oil in it," so that the book, instead of being beyond question, was oil-free. (Hamza was thereafter known as *al-Zayyat*, or "the dealer in oil.")

Hamza may simply have slipped up or been making a joke. But since the earliest extant manuscripts of the Qur'an contain none of the marks that would have enabled him to distinguish a *ra* from a *zay* and a *ba* from a *ta*, it is entirely possible that he was doing the best he could with a highly ambiguous text.

The implications of this confusion are enormous. Hamza's error could have been committed even by those Islamic scholars who added in the diacritical marks that now form the canonical text of the

Qur'an. It is entirely possible that what is taken for one word in that canonical text may originally have been another word altogether.

Diacritical marks may have been purposefully omitted. The Qur'an begins, after all, by proclaiming itself to be "a guidance for those conscious of Allah" (2:2); it may be that that guidance was a secret given only to the initiated. If the Qur'an's instructions were to be denied anyone outside a select circle, it would explain why there is virtually no mention of the Qur'an, much less quotation of it, in the coinage and inscriptions of the Arabian conquerors. Even as the conquerors grew entrenched, some saw the introduction of diacritical marks and vowel points as an unlawful *bida* (innovation). Hence the caliph al-Mamun (813–833) forbade either one to be introduced into the Qur'anic text, confusion be damned.³

Nonetheless, the diacritical marks were ultimately introduced without causing any major conflict. Thereafter the text was largely frozen in meaning. That canonical text, however, is the one in which, as Islamic scholar and philologist Gerd-R. Puin notes, "every fifth sentence or so simply doesn't make sense." Consequently, some scholars speculate that perhaps the diacritical marks themselves caused the incoherence of the Qur'an. If these marks were added incorrectly, or with some polemical or dogmatic objective in mind, it may be that by stripping them out and applying different ones, we can discover the true meaning of difficult and borderline nonsensical Qur'anic passages.

This stripping out of the diacritical marks and reevaluation of the Qur'anic text is not an arbitrary practice: as the Qur'an contains numerous indications of a non-Arabic derivation, or at very least considerable non-Arabic influence, many of its oddities become clear when the text is reread in light of the Syriac language and other possible substrata. As we have seen, even the word *Qur'an* itself may be a Syriac word for a lectionary.⁴ Furthermore, Ibn Hisham uses language that otherwise, according to scholar Alfred Guillaume, appears only in a "Palestinian Syriac Lectionary of the Gospels which will conclusively prove that the Arabic writer had a Syriac text before him."⁵

Stripping out the canonical diacritical marks in order to examine the Qur'an for a Syriac substratum can elucidate those passages that are unclear or contain odd locutions. The Qur'anic account of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son contains this verse: "And when they had both submitted and he put him down upon his forehead" (37:103).

The passage translated as "put him down upon his forehead" is *wa-tallahu li'l jabin*. But this is the only time the word *jabin* appears in the Qur'an. Although Muslim scholars interpret the word to mean "forehead" or "face," the philologist Christoph Luxenberg reads *jabin* as a corruption of the Syriac *habbin*, firewood. The *j* in *jabin* (ج) and the *h* in *habbin* (ح) differ by only one dot. Luxenberg reads *wa-tallahu* not as "put him down," but, in light of the Syriac *tla*, "bind." Thus he renders the verse in a way that is much more consonant with the biblical account: "He bound him to the firewood."⁶

Seven Different Qur'ans

In one hadith that is rich with implications, Umar is made to recall: "I heard Hisham bin Hakim reciting *Surat Al-Furqan* [sura 25 of the Qur'an] during the lifetime of Allah's Messenger and I listened to his recitation and noticed that he recited in several different ways which Allah's Messenger had not taught me." Umar, according to the story, was incensed enough to treat Hisham roughly: "I was about to jump over him during his *Salat* [prayer], but I controlled my temper, and when he had completed his *Salat* [prayer], I put his upper garment around his neck and seized him by it and said, 'Who taught you this *Surah* which I heard you reciting?'"

Hisham's response was as surprising to Umar as Muhammad's casual reaction to the variants had been to Ubayy: "He replied, 'Allah's Messenger taught it to me.' I said, 'You have told a lie, for Allah's Messenger has taught it to me in a different way from yours.' So, I dragged him to Allah's Messenger and said [to Allah's Messenger], 'I heard this person reciting *Surat Al-Furqan* in a way which you haven't taught me!'"

Muhammad, according to the hadith, backed up Hisham, commanding, "Release him, [O 'Umar!] Recite, O Hisham!" The

prophet explained: “It was revealed in this way.” Then he turned to Umar and told him to recite as well. Again Muhammad said, “It was revealed in this way. This Qur’an has been revealed to be recited in seven different ways, so recite of it whichever [way] is easier for you (or read as much of it as may be easy for you).”⁷

On another occasion Muhammad is made to elaborate on this odd explanation for the variants: Gabriel, he explained, “recited the Qur’an to me in one way. Then I requested him [to read it in another way], and continued asking him to recite it in other ways, and he recited it in several ways till he ultimately recited it in seven different ways.”⁸

“Recited in seven different ways [*ahruf*].” In his informative guide to Qur’anic theology, *Ulum al-Qur’an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’an*, Qur’anic scholar Ahmad von Denffer explains that in Muhammad’s time, “The Arab tribes scattered all over the peninsula spoke a number of dialects, each containing peculiar words and idioms.”⁹ That is what led to the seven different recitations, which were designed, von Denffer says, “to make the reading, pronunciation and memorization more easy, as many people were illiterate in the Prophet’s time.”¹⁰

These seven variants, he maintains, were designed not to cause dissension, but “to unite the new Muslim community on the basis of one common language, the Arabic of the Quraish, with minor variations accepted, according to spoken language.”¹¹

Yet cause dissension they did, and that in itself raises questions. Is it really likely that Ubayy and Umar would have been depicted as becoming so enraged over these variants if the only difference was a matter of dialect—that is, a shift in the pronunciation of the words? Von Denffer gives a hint that more may have been involved when he records some of the opinions of Islamic scholars on what exactly the “seven different ways” really were, and in doing so demonstrates an awareness that there are actually variants in some Qur’an manuscripts, contradicting the confident assertions of the Islamic apologists who maintain that the Qur’anic text has been miraculously preserved by Allah from all alteration.

The “seven different ways,” asserts von Denffer, according to some scholars could have been different Arabic dialects that had different ways of pronouncing words “which could even affect the spelling.”¹² Another explanation he offers is that the variants could result from the “usage of synonyms in the Qur’an,” that is, the fact that “a variety of expressions describe one and the same concept.”¹³ He offers an example from 101:5, in which different Qur’an manuscripts give two different phrases that both mean “carded wool.”¹⁴ Other manuscripts, he notes, contain “slightly different wordings of a particular passage, such as e.g. in 9:100: ‘Gardens under which waters flow’ which some read as ‘Gardens from under which waters flow’, adding the word ‘from’ (*min*) to the text.”¹⁵ Some differences may result simply from “possible ways of reading words and structures in the Qur’an, e.g. the word ‘trusts’ in 23:8 which can be read both ‘trust’ (sg.) or ‘trusts’ (pl.) according to the plain text without vowels.”¹⁶

The position of von Denffer and other Islamic scholars is, thus, that there are some variations in Qur’anic manuscripts, but that these do not affect the perfect, unchanging, and unchangeable nature of the book.

The Seven Readings

These variations may have existed from the very beginning. Von Denffer reports that among the Companions of Muhammad, Ali ibn Abi Talib and Zaid ibn Thabit were among those who would recite the Qur’an, presumably from memory, along with others who knew Muhammad personally, including Ubayy in Ka’b and Abdullah ibn Masud. The recitations of these Companions were considered authoritative. Von Denffer doesn’t say whether or not their recitations differed from one another. However, he notes that “later on, with Muslims settling in many parts of the world, the Qur’an was recited in a variety of ways, some of which were not in accordance with the accepted text and transmitted readings from the Prophet and the Companions. This necessitated a thorough screening and distinction between what is *sahih* (sound) and what is *shadh* (exceptional),” that is, a reading to which a Muslim would take exception, as it deviates from the standard text.¹⁷

The necessity to sift out the authentic from the inauthentic in the Qur'an text parallels the same effort the Bukhari and the other collectors of hadith made regarding the reports about Muhammad's words and deeds. Von Denffer states that the "seven readings" were "standardized" in the eighth century in order to ensure the integrity of the Qur'anic text. Then, some three hundred years after Muhammad supposedly received the Qur'an, an Islamic scholar named Ibn Mujahid (860–936), published a book entitled *The Seven Readings*, in which he delineated the seven acceptable forms of Qur'an recitation (*qira'at*), that is, seven variant forms of the text which were within the acceptable bounds of Islamic orthodoxy.

Ibn Mujahid ascribes each of his "readings" to a different eighth-century scholar, but it cannot be known for sure whether the earlier authorities to which he ascribes the variants actually transmitted them, or if he attributed his work to them in order to give it an air of antiquity and authenticity. It seems likely that the hadiths in which Muhammad is made to speak of the Qur'an being recited in "seven different ways" were invented in order to explain the existence of these seven variant readings of the text, which had all apparently circulated so widely by the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries that they could not be ignored or all copies destroyed. Ibn Mujahid gives the names of the transmitters (*mutawatir*) of the "seven readings" as Nafi (d. 785); Ibn Kathir (d. 737); Ibn Amir (d. 736); Abu Amr (d. 770); Asim (d. 744); Hamza (d. 772); and Al-Kisa'i (d. 804).¹⁸

Thus, not only does an orthodox Islamic scholar, Ibn Mujahid, acknowledge that there are seven differing traditions of the Qur'anic text, he also attributes them to men who lived, at the earliest, one hundred years after Muhammad (who is supposed to have died in 632). These seven are of course presumed to have received their reading of the Qur'an from one of the Companions of Muhammad, but it is noteworthy that they are not ascribed directly to the Companions, but to a later generation.

The different *qira'at* were used in different areas of the Islamic world. Islamic scholar Aisha Bewley explains that in AD 815, "Basra was reciting the qira'a of Abu Amr and Ya'qub, Kufa was using Hamza and Asim, Syria was using Ibn Amir, Makka had Ibn Kathir,

and Madina was using Nafi.”¹⁹ And not only were there seven diverging traditions of the actual text of the Qur’an, but each of these has transmitters that are identified in Islamic tradition, and generally more than one. Among the transmitters of Nafi’s text is Warsh (d. 812), and among those who transmitted the text of Asim is Hafs (d. 796); both of these manuscript traditions would come to predominate in large sectors of the Islamic world.

There were, meanwhile, still more variants. The Islamic academic Shady Hekmat Nasser observed that the eleventh-century Qur’an scholar Uthman ibn Said al-Dani “chose two Rawis [transmitters] for each canonical Reading,” but “he did not exclude the other Rawis as non-canonical.”²⁰ With each of the seven original *qira’at* having first two transmitters and then others that were also considered canonical, the number of differing textual traditions begins to multiply exponentially. There could be literally thousands of variant readings.

Nasser notes that “the immediate transmissions of Nafi [one of the original seven transmitters of the Qur’an] are numerous. There are fifteen immediate transmitters from Nafi, which is a relatively large number compared to Ibn Kathir’s three immediate transmitters. It is obvious that the authentication of Nafi’s Reading started directly with the generation of his immediate transmitters and the generation of their students because there were plenty of available transmissions to compare and corroborate.”²¹

This comparing and corroborating would, in Nasser’s view, help the Muslims arrive at the true canonical text: “Ibn Mujahid received Nafi’s Reading through eighteen different ways, which should have made the comparison among the different transmissions he received yield a fairly consistent and authenticated Reading by Nafi.”²² But it could, and likely did, also make for a huge number of variants.

This is even more likely in light of the fact that the canonical transmitters were not chosen because of their putative fidelity to the supposed original text or texts of Uthman, but on sometimes jarringly arbitrary grounds. For example, Nasser identifies “the candidates who would

become the main Rawis of Nafi’s Reading” as “Ismail b. Ja’far al-Madani creating three transmission chains, al-Musayyabi creating

three, Qalun creating four, and Warsh creating three. Warsh and Qalun became the two canonical Rawis of Nafi's Reading, although Ismail b. Ja'far al-Madani continued to be a very important Rawi often cited and referred to in Qira'at works."²³ Creating transmission chains was considered a virtue, as it would ensure the wide dissemination of the Qur'anic text; but every time that text was copied, the introduction of new variants into the tradition was a live possibility.

After noting, however, that the Medina-based Ismail b. Ja'far al-Madani had more transmitters, that is, followers, than Warsh, Nasser asks: "Why and how was Warsh chosen to be a canonical Rawi of Nafi's Reading over the stronger Ismail b. Ja'far?"²⁴ Apparently the decision was based primarily, if not solely, on Warsh's location: "Warsh was known to have settled in Egypt after studying with Nafi in Medina, the fact that obliged the Qira'at scholars to travel to Egypt in order to study with Warsh or receive his transmission."²⁵

There were several transmitters in Medina, but in Egypt Warsh was unique: "Naturally, any Qira'at collector who wanted to study the Reading of Nafi as the representative of the Medinese school would have travelled to al-Madinah in order to study with Nafi's immediate students who became the authority on their master's Reading. The three major transmitters of Nafi: Ismail b. Ja'far, Qalun, and al-Musayyabi were all Medinese, and they stayed and taught in Medina until they died, unlike Warsh who resided in Egypt after mastering Nafi's Reading in Medina."²⁶ Egypt was a key location in the early Islamic caliphates, so Warsh's version of the Qur'an ended up becoming common, but because Warsh was based in Egypt, not because he was renowned for his reliability.

The problem of the *qira'at* was multiplied still more in the fifteenth century, when another Islamic scholar, al-Jazari, added three additional *qira'at* that were accepted as canonical, those of Abu Ja'far (d. 747), Ya'qub (d. 820), and Khalaf (d. 843). These differ from the seven readings in that they can be traced back to only one transmitter, rather than many. But with ten *qira'at*—and some Islamic authorities add four more as well—the possibilities for variation are staggering. Von Denffer identifies "agreement with the written text of

Uthman” as one of the primary criteria for determining the authenticity of these readings; he appears to take for granted that Uthman didn’t actually burn all the variant readings of the Qur’an, but preserved those seven different recitations that Gabriel is supposed to have taught Muhammad.²⁷

These variant traditions, acknowledged by Islamic scholars, have given rise to a dizzying multiplicity of variant texts of the Qur’an. In explaining how exactly that happened, Islamic scholar Keith Small assumes that the original Qur’an or Qur’ans came from Muhammad, which as we have seen is not necessarily the case, but otherwise provides a useful overview of why so many Qur’anic variants exist even today despite the insistent denials of Islamic theologians and apologists:

Muhammad left a variable situation with multiple forms of the Qur’an being recited. The Uthmanic *rasm* [the basic consonantal text of the Qur’an] was developed and introduced to limit this situation, though there was continued use of some of the Companions’ collections. Because of the defective script [that is, because the earliest Qur’an manuscripts lacked sufficient markings to distinguish some letters from others] and the multiple versions in use, these versions spawned at least fifty different ways of reciting the Qur’an by the fourth/tenth century [the 900s, the fourth Islamic century]. Ibn Mujahid’s action could only limit this to seven based on a largely unified consonantal text, and three more were later found which met the same criteria. Then from these ten, eighty further versions have come to be recognized, eight for each of the ten. The ten may have been a refining measure to stop the excesses of forty-plus wrong recitations, but then they themselves developed into eighty precise recitations, all of which had not been committed to writing prior to 936 [AD]/324 [AH].²⁸

Even some early Islamic authorities noticed and acknowledged these variants. The jurist al-Maziri (d. 1141) suggested that the variants came from the practice of including commentary along with the Qur’anic text:

As for Ibn Masud then, much has been narrated from him including that which is not reliably established according to the people of transmission. And that which is established which differs from what we say (i.e., recite in our *mushaf*), then it is interpreted to mean that he wrote in his *mushaf* some rulings and *tafsir* which he believed to not be Qur'an, and he did not believe that to be impermissible as he saw it as a parchment upon which to write what he willed. While Uthman and the community deemed that to be prohibited lest with the passage of time it be assumed to be Qur'an. Al-Maziri said: So the disagreement goes back to a jurisprudential matter (*masalah fiqhiyah*) and that is whether it is allowed to include commentary interspersed in the *mushaf*.²⁹

The scholar Ibn al-Jazari (d. 1206) speculates that the Companions of Muhammad originated this mixing: "It was possible that they (i.e., the companions) would include *tafsir* [commentary] in the *qira'ah* [reading], as clarification and elucidation (*idahan wa bayan*). This is because they were well-versed in what they had learned directly from the Prophet as Qur'an, so they were secure from confusing between them. And it was possible that some of them would write it (i.e., *tafsir*) alongside it (i.e., Qur'an)."³⁰

That may be, but the problem that this explanation immediately encounters is that the diverging manuscripts betray no indication of any distinction being made between the actual Qur'anic text and what is presumably commentary. Perhaps it was assumed that the reciter would know the difference. Or perhaps the variants have another explanation.

Hafs, Warsh, and Other Variants

It is likely that these variants have another explanation, because there have been concerted efforts to stamp them out, beginning with Uthman himself and his burning of all the variants after Zaid ibn Thabit finalized the canonical version. Islamic apologists view this tendency toward uniformity as the action of Allah. Ammar Khatib and Nazir Khan of the Yaqeen Institute depart from the mainstream

Islamic position in acknowledging the existence of the variants, but they see them as all part of the working-out of Allah's ongoing plan:

The variant reading was revealed by God, yet because God did not intend for it to be included in the final Qur'an, it became abandoned as per the Divine Decree (*qadar*) of God. One can say that here abrogation is seen as effectively taking place by God's Divine Will (*iradah kawuniyah*) rather than an explicit revealed instruction (*iradah shariyah*). Divine Will has effectively excluded those variant readings from the *mushaf* of this *ummah* [worldwide Islamic community], and since history is intended by God, then the Qur'an we have in our hands today is exactly the Qur'an that God wanted us to have, and the loss of variations that did not make it into the *mushaf* was also intended by God. What the Muslim *ummah* would collectively agree upon (*ijma*), recite, and practice was included in the foreknowledge of God prior to the creation of the universe.

With the passage of time, some variant readings were effectively ruled extinct by Allah's Divine Decree concerning the consensus of the community, just *as if* such readings were abrogated by legislation—and this is precisely what some scholars said. Makki ibn Abi Talib (d. 437 AH) wrote, "As for what it is in our hands of the Qur'an, it is that which conforms to the script of that (Uthmanic) *mushaf*, from those *qira'at* with which the Qur'an was revealed, and upon which the community unanimously agreed. No longer practiced are those *qira'at* that differ from the script of the *mushaf*. So it is *as if they were abrogated* by the consensus upon the script of the *mushaf*.³¹

Thus the variants are of no importance for the pious Muslim. The loss of sections of the Qur'an and the extinction of various textual traditions are all manifestations of Allah's will. This view has led to efforts, particularly in the twentieth century, to standardize the canonical text and achieve the uniformity that Islamic theologians insist that the different copies of the Qur'an have.

That effort began in earnest in 1907 at Egypt's venerable al-Azhar University and took seventeen years to complete. The fruit of these

labors was a Qur'an that was published in Cairo in 1924 and has since then become the dominant edition of the Muslim holy book all over the world, as it has won wide acceptance as an accurate reflection of the Uthmanic text. This edition represents the Hafs tradition, which is derived from the reading of another one of the seven original transmitters, Asim. But however painstakingly this edition was compiled, the claim that the Cairo edition reflects Uthman's text faithfully preserved is at this point more of an article of the Islamic faith than a thoughtful consideration based on the available evidence. This causes little controversy among Muslims, however, as most today are not even aware of the existence of an entirely separate and officially sanctioned manuscript tradition, or of other variants besides this. Yet despite this immense effort at standardization, the Warsh tradition of the Qur'anic text still predominates in western and northwest Africa.

Most of the differences between the Hafs and Warsh traditions are ones of orthography, some of which can be significant. There are also several instances of small but unmistakable divergences in meaning. In Qur'an 2:125, for example, the Hafs text has Allah commanding the Muslims: "Take the station of Abraham as a place of prayer." The Warsh tradition, however, has no imperative, saying merely: "They have taken the station of Abraham as a place of prayer."³² In Qur'an 3:13, Allah recalls of the Battle of Badr that there was "one army fighting in the way of Allah, and another disbelieving, whom they saw as twice their number, clearly, with their very eyes." At least so goes the Hafs text. In the Warsh, the pronoun is different, so that the text reads "whom you saw," rather than "whom they saw."³³ In the Hafs Qur'an, sura 3:146 asks, "And with how many a prophet have there been a number of devoted men who fought?" The Warsh question is significantly different: "And with how many a prophet have there been a number of devoted men who were killed?"³⁴

In recent decades, numerous other Qur'ans have been published that differ markedly in orthography from the Cairo text.³⁵ In 1998, the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an in Saudi Arabia released an edition that in the *Fatiha* calls Allah "Master of

the Day of Judgment” (1:4). The word *malik* means “master” with a long *alif* (a). With a short *alif*, however, the word means “sovereign” or “king.” “King of the Day of Judgment” is exactly how some other texts of the Qur’an render this verse, including a text published in Istanbul in 1993.³⁶

This variant is relatively well known. Syed Abul Ala Maududi noted in 1971 that some manuscripts of Qur’an 1:4 call Allah “master of the day of judgment,” while others call him “sovereign of the day of judgment,” but insisted that this was nothing about which Muslims needed be concerned: “These two readings make the meaning of the verse all the more clear.”³⁷

That is not the only differing text in Qur’an manuscripts of the first sura, the *Fatiha*, or “Opening.” This sura is the most common prayer in Islam; a pious Muslim who prays five times a day will repeat it seventeen times daily. Yet as a prayer and a liturgical text, it may have been added to the Qur’an later. According to hadiths, Abdullah ibn Masud, one of Muhammad’s Companions, did not have this sura in his version of the Qur’an, and other early Islamic authorities expressed reservations about its inclusion also.³⁸ The sura does not fit in with the rest of the Qur’an, in that it is in the voice of the believer offering prayer and praise to Allah, not Allah addressing Muhammad. Islamic orthodoxy has it that Allah is the speaker in every part of the Qur’an, so with the *Fatiha*, the believer must accept that the deity is explaining how he should be prayed to, without explaining directly that that is what he is doing.

Not only was there early uncertainty about whether the *Fatiha* should be in the Qur’an, but there are also other variations in its text besides in 1:3. One version of the prayer that circulates among the Shi’ites says to Allah, “You direct us to the path of the Upright One,” rather than the canonical, “Show us the straight path” (1:6). The historian Arthur Jeffery found in Cairo a manual of Islamic law of the Shafii school that contained the same variant, along with other departures from the canonical text.³⁹

At least one variant in modern Qur’ans involves a flat contradiction. The Hafs tradition presents Qur’an 3:158 this way: “And if you die, or are slain, lo, it is certainly to Allah that you are gathered.” On the

other hand, a Qur'an published in Tehran in 1978 asserts: "And if you die, or are slain, lo, it is not to Allah that you are gathered."⁴⁰

Shi'ite Variations

Shi'ite Muslims have their own *qira'at*. The Muslim geographer and historian Ahmad al-Yaqubi (d. 897) states: "It is said that Ali b. Abi Talib was making an edition of the Qur'an when the Prophet of God passed away, and he brought it along on a camel and said—'this is the Qur'an that I have edited.'"⁴¹

A century later, the Shi'ite Persian encyclopedist Ibn al-Nadim stated that Ali's descendants still had a near-complete copy of Ali's Qur'an. The chief difference between the Shi'ite and the Sunnis was that the Shi'ite maintained that the leader of the Muslims must be a relative of Muhammad. The Shi'ite accordingly charged that in Uthman's version of the Qur'an, material that was favorable to the *ahl al-bayt*, the "people of the house," that is, Muhammad's household, was either left out or edited to change its meaning. The Qur'an says: "Indeed, Allah chose Adam and Noah and the family of Abraham and the family of Imran over the worlds" (3:33). In 1843, however, the Qur'anic scholar Mirza Alexandre Kazem-Beg suggested that the original version of this passage read, "Indeed, Allah chose Adam and Noah and the family of Abraham and the family of Muhammad over the worlds," in line with the importance the Shi'ite place upon Muhammad's family.⁴²

Other passages of the Qur'an which some Shi'ites claim have been changed to remove evidence of the correctness of their position include 2:59, which currently reads: "But those who did wrong changed a statement to other than that which had been said to them, so We sent down upon those who did wrong a punishment from the sky because they were defiantly disobeying." The Shi'ite version: "But those who wronged the family of Muhammad changed a statement to other than that which had been said to them, so We sent down upon those who wronged the family of Muhammad a punishment from the sky because they were defiantly disobeying."⁴³

Qur'an 3:7 states: "It is he who has sent down to you the Book; in it are precise verses—they are the foundation of the Book—and others

unspecific. As for those in whose hearts is deviation, they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation. And no one knows its interpretation except Allah. But those firm in knowledge say, 'We believe in it. All is from our Lord.'" A Shi'ite reading has the last section of the passage as, "And no one knows its interpretation except Allah. But those firm in knowledge know, and they say, 'We believe in it. All is from our Lord.'" Those who are "firm in knowledge" know the true interpretation of the Qur'an's mysterious passages, whereas in the standard Sunni version they do not, they merely affirm their belief in it nonetheless. The strong implication in the Shi'ite reading is that the firm in knowledge are the Shi'ites themselves.

Some Shi'ite variants quite explicitly enjoin Muslims to obey the household of Muhammad, that is, the Shi'ite leadership. "O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best and best in result," says Qur'an 4:59. The Shi'ite alternative is explicit as to whom is owed obedience: "O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you, the family of Muhammad. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best and best in result."⁴⁴

However, Moojan Momen, a scholar of Shi'ite Islam, notes that there was disagreement among the early Shi'ites on the question of whether the Qur'an had really been altered. Some "believed that the Qur'an has been altered and parts of it has been suppressed."⁴⁵ The powerful and influential al-Nawbakhti family, which flourished between the eighth and eleventh centuries (AD) and produced numerous Islamic scholars and theologians, are recorded as having held this view. The Shi'ite hadith collector al-Kulayni (d. 940) "seems to have given some substance to this view in several of the Traditions that he relates."⁴⁶

Another renowned Shi'ite scholar, al-Mufid (d. 1022), "appears to have wavered somewhat on this point during his lifetime. He seems

to have accepted the fact that parts of the Qur'an had been excised by the enemies of the Imams in some of his early writings, although he refused even then to state that anything had been added. In his later writings, however, al-Mufid had reinterpreted the concept of omissions from the text of the Qur'an to mean that the text of the Qur'an is complete (although he does allow that the order needs to be changed) but that what has been omitted is the authoritative interpretation of the text by Ali. In this manner, al-Mufid and most subsequent Shi'i writers were able to fall into line with the rest of the Islamic world in accepting the text of the Qur'an as contained in the recension of Uthman."⁴⁷

However, Arthur Jeffery notes that "the Shi'a objection to the Uthmanic recension of the text was very early," as is clear "from the fact that Sunni orthodoxy found it necessary to invent traditions in which Ali is made to express his unqualified approval of the text published by Uthman."⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Jeffery examines lists of variants in the Qur'an reading of Zaid ibn Ali, the great grandson of Ali ibn Abi Talib, and finds hundreds of departures from the Uthmanic text, while cautioning even these likely provide only a partial picture: "We must remember that these are only what has been preserved to us in Sunni sources, whose custom...was only to record such variant readings as were not too far removed from the accepted consonantal text."⁴⁹ Others may have departed to a greater degree. However, here again, the existence of any variants at all, however minor, testifies to a much more fluid development of the Qur'an than even Islamic tradition records, with its talk of a tame sheep eating a passage and others being forgotten and lost.

The Shi'ite Suras

Around 1655, the Persian-language book *Dabistan-e Mazaheb* (School of Religions) was published in India, containing the texts of two chapters of the Qur'an, Sura al-Wilaya (The Guardian) and Sura al-Nurayn (The Two Lights). These two chapters are clearly meant to bolster the Shi'ite case. Al-Wilaya says: "You who are believers, believe in the prophet and the guardian which we sent, they will guide you to the straight path. A prophet and a guardian (belong to)

each other, and I am the all-knowing, the experienced.”⁵⁰ The prophet is, of course, Muhammad, and the guardian is Ali ibn Abi Talib. Similarly, al-Nurayn says: “O you who believe, believe in the two lights. He has revealed them unto you, warning you against the torture of the Great Day—two lights emanating from one another, for I am the All-Hearing and the All-Knowing.”⁵¹ The two lights are obviously Muhammad and Ali.

There is no mention of these suras in extant literature before the publication of *Dabistan-e Mazaheb*, although Arabic versions of both were discovered in Bankipur, India in 1912 in a Qur’an manuscript that was at least 200 or 300 years old.⁵² The historian and philologist William St. Clair Tisdall explains why:

The reader (of the original Arabic especially) is irresistibly led to the conclusion that the whole of these Additions,—with the possible exception of Sûratu’n Nûrain,—are forgeries. The style is imitated from that of the Koran, but not always very successfully. There are some grammatical errors, unless these are due to the transcriber. Occasionally the meaning which the context shews to be that in which a word is used is later than the time to which the Koran belongs. The verses are largely, however, centos of Koranic passages taken from their context. The amount of repetition shews the writer’s determination to prove what he wished to prove at all costs. If it could be demonstrated that a single one of these passages was genuine and really formed part of the Koran as it left Mohammed’s hands,—or lips,—then undoubtedly the Shi’ite form of Islam would have proved its right to prevail over the Sunnite, and the whole line of Khalîfahs since ‘Alî’s time, together with the three who preceded him, would have to be admitted to be usurpers.⁵³

There can be no doubt, given their late appearance and clear apologetic intent, that these two Shi’ite suras are forgeries. However, given the superabundance of grammatical errors in the Qur’an as it stands, as well as its frequent repetitions, Tisdall might have been excused if he had contended that these aspects of the two new suras were arguments in favor of their authenticity.

Changing the Meaning

Although most of the variants in Qur'an manuscripts are minor, there do exist some Qur'ans that change the meaning of the Qur'anic passage in question. The standard rendering of one disputed passage is, "Our Lord, I have settled some of my descendants in an uncultivated valley near Your sacred House, our Lord, that they may establish prayer. So make the people incline their hearts toward them and provide for them from the fruits that they might be grateful" (14:37). Other manuscripts, however, have the second sentence as: "So you incline their hearts toward them and provide for them from the fruits that they might be grateful."⁵⁴ Still other manuscripts speak of making the people "incline their group toward them," rather than their "hearts."⁵⁵

Similarly, Qur'an 14:41 reads, "Our Lord, forgive me and my parents and the believers the Day the account is established."⁵⁶ However, seventeen early Qur'an manuscripts omit a single letter (*alif*), which could make the passage read, "Our Lord, forgive me and my children and the believers the Day the account is established."⁵⁷

None of these divergences in meaning (even the contradiction) is so significant as to affect Islamic doctrine or practice. But the very existence of discrepancies, like the many hints of a Christian Syriac substratum, suggest that the Qur'an is the product of many hands and that its text was at one point considerably more fluid than Islamic orthodoxy acknowledges. In an examination of Islam's origins, this fluidity becomes a matter of no small significance. Like so much else about the accepted story of how Islam began, the standard Islamic account of how the Qur'an came about falters in the face of the facts.

The San'a Palimpsest

In 1972, very early fragments of the Qur'an were discovered in the loft of the Great Mosque in San'a, Yemen. Gerd-R. Puin examined in immense detail "the fragments of roughly nine hundred different parchment *Mushafs*," that is, written copies of the Qur'an, and found that many contained deviations from the standard text.⁵⁸ Many of

these variants had not been seen before. Between 1982 and 1985, Islamic scholars published a massive eight-volume collection of all the Qur'an variants that were known at the time. They included about ten thousand such variants, including about a thousand in which the basic text, not just the vowels or diacritical marks which were added to Qur'an manuscripts later than the basic consonantal text, differed from the standard edition.

These differences have been explained as the result of the differing canonical readings allowed for by the different transmitters, but Puin states that the San'a manuscripts "contain many more *Qira'at* than are recorded by the old authorities"—that is, the San'a fragments of the Qur'an have more variations than are accepted by the Islamic authorities (that is, those who acknowledge that there are any variants at all in the Qur'anic text) as legitimate because they derive from one of the canonical *qira'at*. Puin concludes: "The systems of the seven, ten, or fourteen *Qira'at* are, consequently, younger than the variants observed in in San'a."⁵⁹ That is, the San'a Qur'an manuscripts predate the codification of the differing manuscript traditions of the Qur'an, and are the result of a time in which the text of the Qur'an was in considerably more flux than it was later.

One of these manuscripts has come to be known as the San'a Palimpsest, that is, a text that has been written over an earlier text that has been erased, but of which traces still remain on the parchment. It has been dated to the late seventh or early eighth century. The top layer contains a standard Uthmanic Qur'an text, but the lower, older text reveals numerous departures from the wording of the Qur'an as it stands today. The Qur'an researchers Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi posit that the lower text is a fragment of the copy of the Qur'an that was owned by one of Muhammad's Companions, Abdullah ibn Masud, who is identified in Islamic tradition as one of the sources of the Qur'an text of Abu Abdul Rahman al-Sulami, who passed on his text to Asim, the authority for one of the "seven readings" and a primary transmitter of the Hafs text that has become the standard Qur'anic text for most of the Islamic world.⁶⁰ Abdullah ibn Masud's text, Sadeghi and Goudarzi assert, was based on the "Prophetic prototype"; that claim, however,

makes its departures from the standard Hafs text of today all the more noteworthy.⁶¹

Another scholar who has closely examined the San'a Palimpsest, Elisabeth Puin, agrees that the lower text is a "non-Uthmanic Qur'an," but dismisses the possibility that it is the edition of Abdullah ibn Masud for lack of evidence. She suggests that the lower text is a copy of the Qur'an that was being worked over in order to bring it more into line with the canonical text.⁶² A Muslim scholar, Asma Hilali, dismisses this possibility because, based on the ink used to write the lower text, it was most likely not visible when the upper text was written. "This means," she says, "that the reasons for writing the upper text do not derive from the necessity to correct the lower text."⁶³

That may be, but the fact that the lower text contains variations from what is now generally accepted as the standard Hafs version of the Qur'an is significant in itself, regardless of what the explanation of these variants may ultimately be. These variants testify to the fact that in the seventh century, when Muhammad is supposed to have received the Qur'an and Uthman codified and standardized it, the text was actually being edited and revised.

Among these variants is the ordering of the chapters (suras) of the Qur'an. Gerd-R. Puin discovered that some of the San'a *mushafs* have the Qur'an's chapters in an order different from the canonically accepted one—yet another indication that the Qur'an, rather than having been centrally codified and standardized under the authority of Uthman, went through a long period of fluidity and alteration.

Nor is this a trivial difference. Here again, this challenges the canonical account of the origins of Islam. In his 1936 book *A Geographical History of the Qur'an*, the Indian Muslim writer Syed Muzaffar-Ud-Din Nadvi states unequivocally: "It is an untruth to say that the verses and chapters of the Qur'an were collected after the Prophet's death; for there is strong historical evidence to prove that all verses of the Qur'an were collected and all the surahs (chapters) named under the direct instruction of the Prophet himself."⁶⁴ As the San'a manuscripts show, that is not in fact the case.

Signs That the Text Has Been Altered

Even aside from the divergences that are found in various Qur'an manuscripts, there are telling indications even in the canonical text of the Qur'an that it has been altered. This is yet more evidence that makes it extraordinarily unlikely that the Qur'an was the product of one man, whether a historical person named Muhammad or someone else; rather, these evidences of alterations indicate again that the text has undergone extensive revision, consistent with the likelihood that it was developed over time by a series of people.

The pioneering Qur'anic scholar Richard Bell (1876–1952) closely examined the Qur'anic text and identified numerous signs that the text had been changed. Lack of continuity and inherent contradictions are two of the most common indications. One curious passage Bell highlighted comes in a polemic against the Jews and Christians (2:116–21):

116. They say, "Allah has taken a son." Exalted is he! Rather, to him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth. All are devoutly obedient to him,

117. originator of the heavens and the earth. When he decrees a matter, he only says to it, 'Be,' and it is.

118. Those who do not know say, 'Why does Allah not speak to us or there come to us a sign?' Thus spoke those before them like their words. Their hearts resemble each other. We have shown clearly the signs to a people who are certain.

119. Indeed, We have sent you with the truth as a bringer of good tidings and a warner, and you will not be asked about the companions of hellfire.

120. And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion. Say, 'Indeed, the guidance of Allah is the guidance.' If you were to follow their desires after what has come to you of knowledge, you would have against Allah no protector or helper.

121. Those to whom We have given the Book recite it with its true recital. They believe in it. And whoever disbelieves in it, it is they who are the losers.

Bell points out that all the polemical assertions in verses 116–117 answer the claim in verse 120, that the Jews and Christians will never be satisfied with the Muslim believers until they convert to their religions. He suggests that these verses were inserted later and were originally intended to follow verse 120.⁶⁵ It also appears that verses 118 and 119 introduce some other argument, against those who demand miracles of the Muslim prophet, whose only miracles are the verses of the Qur'an themselves. As presented in the Qur'an we know today, these verses unaccountably interrupt the polemic against the People of the Book. The passage reads much more logically in this order:

120. And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion. Say, 'Indeed, the guidance of Allah is the guidance.' If you were to follow their desires after what has come to you of knowledge, you would have against Allah no protector or helper.

116. They say, "Allah has taken a son." Exalted is he! Rather, to him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth. All are devoutly obedient to him,

117. originator of the heavens and the earth. When he decrees a matter, he only says to it, 'Be,' and it is.

121. Those to whom We have given the Book recite it with its true recital. They believe in it. And whoever disbelieves in it, it is they who are the losers.

Bell also sees considerable manipulation of the text in this passage from sura 4 regarding women it was permissible and impermissible to marry:

23. Prohibited to you are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your father's sisters, your mother's sisters, your brother's daughters, your sister's daughters, your mothers who nursed you, your sisters through nursing, your wives' mothers, and your step-daughters under your guardianship of your wives unto whom you have gone in. But if you have not gone in unto them, there is no sin upon you. And the wives of your sons who are from your loins, and that you take two sisters simultaneously, except for

what has already occurred. Indeed, Allah is ever forgiving and merciful.

24. And married women except those your right hands possess. This is the decree of Allah upon you. And lawful to you are all beyond these, that you seek them with your property, desiring chastity, not unlawful sexual intercourse. So for whatever you enjoy from them, give them their due compensation as an obligation. And there is no blame upon you for what you mutually agree to beyond the obligation. Indeed, Allah is ever knowing and wise.

25. And whoever among you cannot find the means to marry free, believing women, then from those whom your right hands possess of believing slave girls. And Allah is most knowing about your faith. You are of one another. So marry them with the permission of their people and give them their due compensation according to what is acceptable. Chaste, neither those who commit unlawful intercourse randomly nor those who take lovers. But once they are sheltered in marriage, if they should commit adultery, then for them is half the punishment for free women. This is for him among you who fears sin, but to be patient is better for you. And Allah is forgiving and merciful.

26. Allah wants to make clear to you and guide you to the practices of those before you and to accept your repentance. And Allah is knowing and wise.

Bell posits that “the marriage laws in Sura IV are a clear case of alternative continuations”—that is, an instance in which an editor simply tacked on his addition to an already complete passage, doing nothing to address the resulting contradictions. The first verse above, says Bell, “lays down the forbidden degrees of relationship, and reproduces the Mosaic list with some adaptation to Arab custom.” This was deliberate, Bell argues, as indicated by verse 26: “Allah wants to make clear to you and guide you to the practices of those before you.” But, Bell continues, “at a later time...some relaxation appeared necessary.” Thus verse 25 was added, “allowing

marriage with slaves,” and finally verse 24, which “gives ample liberty.”

Bell points out that the similar endings of verse 24 (“Allah is ever knowing and wise”), the first part of verse 25 (“Allah is most knowing about your faith”), and the latter part of verse 26 (“Allah is knowing and wise”) provide evidence that “substitutions have been made.”⁶⁶ Repeating whole phrases as taglines may have been an attempt to make sense out of what would otherwise be the most awkward of rhyme schemes—an attempt to make poetry out of prosaic, didactic material.⁶⁷

Of course, many passages in the Qur’an can be adduced in which such recurring taglines are the only unifying aspect. The Qur’an, as we have seen, is remarkably devoid of context.⁶⁸ Islamic spokesmen in the West frequently argue that those who point out the book’s violent and hateful passages are taking them out of context, but there is hardly any context to begin with.

Nonetheless, when one encounters discussions of a subject that is interrupted and then resumed, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the textual integrity of the passage has been compromised. Such interruptions appear fairly often in the Qur’an. Another example is Qur’an 2:221–242. For seventeen straight verses this passage discusses women, marriage, and divorce, but suddenly verses 238 and 239 interrupt the discussion to exhort the Muslims to maintain regular prayers and instruct them on how to maintain prayers while in fear of an enemy. Then, just as suddenly, the passage returns to the subject of divorce. Those two intervening verses, 238 and 239, have nothing to do with what came either before or after.

All the Major Manuscripts are Late

The standard Qur’anic text that circulates today is supposed to be based on the version Uthman distributed, but there is no direct evidence of that. Only fragments of Qur’an manuscripts date back to the seventh century, and as these mostly do not contain diacritical marks, there is no absolute indication that they were written as the Qur’an in the first place, rather than as some other document that was adapted as part of the Qur’an.⁶⁹ There is also no telling what

textual alterations might have been made before the time of the earliest surviving manuscripts.⁷⁰

Historian John Gilchrist notes that “the Samarqand and Topkapi codices are obviously two of the oldest sizeable manuscripts of the Qur’an surviving, but their origin cannot be taken back earlier than the second century of Islam. It must be concluded that no such manuscripts of an earlier date have survived. The oldest manuscripts of the Qur’an still in existence date from not earlier than about one hundred years after Muhammad’s death.”⁷¹

There are fragments of the Qur’an that are quite ancient. One in the University of Tübingen Library in Germany has been dated to between 649 and 675. But there is no extant complete copy of the Qur’an dating from the first century of the Arabian conquests.⁷² In the words of historian John Wansbrough, “There is no Muslim literature which can be dated, in the form in which it is available to us, earlier than 800 C.E.”—that is, well over a century and a half after Muhammad supposedly died.⁷³

One Manuscript May Be Too Early

That appeared to change in the summer of 2015, when Alba Fedeli, a doctoral student at the University of Birmingham in England, discovered two pages of an ancient Qur’an containing segments of chapters 18 to 20. It was a momentous find: the University of Birmingham stated that fragment was “among the earliest written textual evidence of the Islamic holy book known to survive.”⁷⁴

According to Birmingham Professor David Thomas, the fragments “could well take us back to within a few years of the actual founding of Islam.”⁷⁵ He added: “We have now in our collection what must be one of the oldest Qurans in the world. It might not be the oldest. But if the dating we’ve been given is at all reliable then we’ve got fragments from a Quran that will have been copied by somebody who either knew the Prophet Mohammed himself, or knew somebody who had known him.”⁷⁶

It had gone unnoticed for so long because “for many years, the manuscript had been misbound with leaves of a similar Qur’an manuscript, which is datable to the late seventh century.”⁷⁷

Thomas asserted that the fragments supported the traditional Islamic idea that the Qur'anic text has remained miraculously unchanged for fourteen centuries: "These portions must have been in a form that is very close to the form of the Qur'an read today, supporting the view that the text has undergone little or no alteration and that it can be dated to a point very close to the time it was believed to be revealed."⁷⁸ Likewise Islamic apologist Omid Safi, director of the Duke Islamic Studies Center, opined that the fragments provided "further evidence for the position of the classical Islamic tradition that the Quran as it exists today is a seventh-century document."⁷⁹

Thomas, according to the *New York Times*, posited other implications of the find, stating that "it provided tantalizing clues to help settle a scholarly dispute about whether the holy text was actually written down at the time of the prophet, or compiled years later after being passed down by word of mouth. The discovery also offered a joyful moment for a faith that has struggled with internal divisions and external pressures."⁸⁰

Muhammad Isa Waley, curator at the Persian and Turkish Section at London's British Library, said that the discovery was "exciting" and added: "We know now that these two folios, in a beautiful and surprisingly legible Hijazi hand, almost certainly date from the time of the first three caliphs."⁸¹ Mustafa Shah of the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies was certain: "If anything, the manuscript has consolidated traditional accounts of the Quran's origins."⁸²

In the midst of this joy and excitement, however, Saud al-Sarhan of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, sounded a sour note, saying that "he doubted that the manuscript found in Birmingham was as old as the researchers claimed, noting that its Arabic script included dots and separated chapters—features that were introduced later. He also said that dating the skin on which the text was written did not prove when it was written. Manuscript skins were sometimes washed clean and reused later."⁸³ Sarhan said that the discovery would make little

difference anyway, since Muslims believe that “the Quran has not been changed since the Prophet Muhammad.”⁸⁴

Graham Bench of the Center for Accelerator Mass Spectrometry at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory also counseled caution: “You’re dating the parchment. You’re not dating the ink. You’re making the assumption that the parchment or vellum was used within years of it being made, which is probably a reasonable assumption, but it’s not watertight.” Another Saudi Islamic scholar, Abdul Sattar Al Halouji, agreed: “It is not possible to ascertain that the parchments were written close to the time of the Prophet....The university should have examined the ink not the hide on which it was written.”⁸⁵

The Saudi archaeologist Adnan Al Sharif of Umm Al Qura University found other anomalies: “The manuscript might possibly be from the time of Othman Bin Affan who became Caliph many years after the death of the Prophet,” he said. “During the time of the Prophet (*pbuh*), the Quran was not organised or put in its present day form. Also, there were no colours used.” But there are colors in the Birmingham fragments. Al Sharif explains: “One of these is the red-colour separation between the Bismillah and the two Surahs of Mariam and Taha. It was not customary during the Prophet’s time to separate between the Surahs. This copy seems to be organised in [an] order which was not so during the time of the Prophet.”⁸⁶

There is another problem as well. The University stated, “Radiocarbon analysis has dated the parchment on which the text is written to the period between AD 568 and 645 with 95.4 percent accuracy.”⁸⁷ The United Arab Emirates publication *The National* concluded: “As the Prophet Mohammed lived from AD 570 to 632, this means that at the very latest the fragment was produced no more than 13 years after his death.”⁸⁸

At the very latest. But what about at the very earliest? How could a fragment of the Qur’an have been produced two years before Muhammad was born? If the fragments actually date from anywhere between 568 and 610, they come from before the time that Islamic tradition pinpoints as the date when Muhammad proclaimed himself to be a prophet. Keith Small noted that the possibility of the early

dating “gives more ground to what have been peripheral views of the Quran’s genesis, like that Muhammad and his early followers used a text that was already in existence and shaped it to fit their own political and theological agenda, rather than Muhammad receiving a revelation from heaven.”⁸⁹

That text that was already in existence may not even have been written in Arabic at all.

CHAPTER 10

The Non-Arabic Arabic Qur'an

A Book in Pure and Clear Arabic (with Some Non-Arabic Thrown In)

The twentieth-century translator of the Qur'an Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, an English convert to Islam, once declared that the Qur'an in Arabic was an "inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy."¹ Pickthall would not have dared to claim the same about any translation of the Muslim holy book, including his own English translation. For Muslims, the Arabic of the Qur'an is essential, such that in any other language, the book may contain the meaning of the Qur'an but is no longer truly the Qur'an.

This belief stems from the Qur'an itself, which insists on its Arabic character so often that Islamic theologians have quite understandably understood Arabic to be part of the Qur'an's very essence. The Qur'an says that it is written in "a clear Arabic language" (16:103). It is "revealed...as an Arabic legislation" (13:37). It is "the revelation of the Lord of the worlds," and "the trustworthy spirit has brought it down upon your heart, that you may be of the warners, in a clear Arabic language" (26:192–195). Allah says that he has "sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an that you might understand" (12:2). It is "an Arabic Qur'an that you might understand" (43:3).

The Qur'an is not only a guide to understanding but is also intended for those Arabic speakers who already grasp its message: it is "a Book whose verses have been detailed, an Arabic Qur'an for a people who know" (41:3). Allah even explains that if he had sent down the Qur'an in any other language, people would have

complained: “And if We had made it a non-Arabic Qur’an, they would have said, ‘Why are its verses not explained in detail? Is it a foreign recitation and an Arab messenger?’” (41:44). It is, quite simply, an “Arabic Qur’an” (12:2; 20:113; 39:28; 41:3; 42:7).

Islamic tradition reinforces this point. In one hadith, an early Muslim, al-Hasan, recounts of a ninth-century Muslim philologist and jurist: “I heard Abu Ubaida say that whoever pretends that there is in the Qur’an anything other than the Arabic tongue has made a serious charge against God, and he quoted the verse ‘Verily we have made it an Arabic Qur’an.’”² Ibn Kathir, author of a renowned medieval commentary on the Qur’an that is still widely read by Muslims, elaborated the orthodox view: “The Arabic language is the most eloquent, plain, deep and expressive of the meanings that might arise in one’s mind. Therefore, the most honorable Book was revealed in the most honorable language, to the most honorable Prophet and Messenger, delivered by the most honorable angel, in the most honorable land on earth, and its revelation started during the most honorable month of the year, Ramadan. Therefore, the Qur’an is perfect in every respect.”³

There is only one problem with the widespread assertion that the Qur’an was written in Arabic: it doesn’t seem to be true. Even the most cursory examination of the evidence indicates that “the most honorable Book” in its original form was not actually “in the most honorable language” at all.

Thou Doth Protest Too Much, Methinks

The very fact that the Qur’an asserts so many times that it was handed down in Arabic raises questions. Why would a clear and easily understandable book need to assert more than once that it was clear and easy to understand? Why would an Arabic book need to insist again and again that it was in Arabic? The various authors of the Greek New Testament never feel the need to assert the fact that they’re writing in Greek; they’re simply doing so. This is a point that they take for granted.

Of course, the New Testament doesn’t make the claims about Greek that the Qur’an makes about Arabic. Greek in Christianity is

not the language of God; it has no more significance than any other language. But that in itself is part of the mystery of the Qur'anic claims: Why did they need to be made at all? Why was there such anxiety about the Arabic character of the Qur'an that it had to be repeated so many times? This peculiar insistence on the Arabic character of the Qur'an even became part of Islamic theology, which affirms that Arabic is the language of Allah and that the deity who created every human being and presumably understands every human tongue will not accept prayers or recitations of the Qur'an in any other language.

When the Qur'an repeatedly insists that it is written in Arabic, it is not unreasonable to conclude that someone, somewhere was saying that it wasn't in Arabic at all. A point needs emphasis only when it is controverted. As the nineteenth-century man of letters and Roman Catholic theologian John Henry Cardinal Newman wrote in a vastly different context, "No doctrine is defined till it is violated."⁴ In other words, the assertion of a religious doctrine, in an environment involving a competition of religious ideas, doesn't generally take place *except* as a response to the contrary proposition. The Qur'an thus may insist so repeatedly on its Arabic essence because that was precisely the aspect of it that others challenged.

Discussing the work of John Wansbrough on this point, Ibn Warraq notes that "all the claims of the Koran that it is 'clear' Arabic only make sense in this sectarian milieu of contending cultures, prophets, and, of course, languages. The Arabic of the Koran is only clear if we assume that the target group of these texts knew other languages like Syriac as well and understood the allusions to the religious debates of the time."⁵ It appears that extensive efforts were made to buttress the Qur'an's claims to be in Arabic: "At least some of the so-called pre-Islamic poetry was composed after the Koran, and many of the verses adduced by lexicographers of Classical Arabic were ad hoc forgeries to prove that a certain word in the Koran was indeed Arabic, had this or that specific meaning and was of great antiquity."

The Qur'an itself also addresses these challenges to its Arabic character, as is to be expected since it is so very highly polemical. It answers the theological claims of Judaism and Christianity and

responds to the arguments of the unbelievers and hypocrites against Muhammad's prophetic claims and its own divine origins. On practically every page there is a denunciation of the unbelievers, and many of these contain reports of what those unbelievers are saying against Muhammad and Islam, and why it is false. It would not be unusual if it also took on challenges to its Arabic origins. But simply the fact that those challenges existed is noteworthy.

Muhammad's Non-Arabic Sources

The Qur'an itself tells us of people who contradicted claims of the book's Arabic origins. According to the Qur'an, Muhammad's detractors charged the prophet of Islam with getting material from non-Arabic sources and then passing off what he received as divine revelation. The Qur'an responds furiously to those who deride the prophet for listening intently—perhaps to the Jewish and Christian teachers whose teachings ended up as part of Qur'anic revelation: "And among them are those who abuse the Prophet and say, 'He is an ear.'" Allah tells Muhammad how to respond to those who make fun of him in this way: "Say, 'an ear of goodness for you that believes in Allah and believes the believers and a mercy to those who believe among you.' And those who abuse the Messenger of Allah, for them is a painful punishment" (9:61).

Muhammad's foes apparently charged him with getting material from a non-Arabic speaker as well: "And We certainly know that they say, 'It is only a human being who teaches the Prophet.' The tongue of the one they refer to is foreign, and this Qur'an is a clear Arabic language" (16:103).⁶ This mysterious foreigner has often been identified as one of Muhammad's early Companions, Salman the Persian. The Arabic word translated as "foreign" in this Qur'an verse is *ajami*, which means Persian or Iranian, or is more generalized as "foreigner." Ibn Hisham identifies the foreigner of Qur'an 16:103 as "Jabr the Christian, slave of the B. al-Hadrami" and teacher of Muhammad.⁷

Another *ajami* identified in Islamic tradition is Abu Fukayha Yasar. The Qur'anic scholar Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767) says Yasar was "a Jew, not an Arab," who spoke Greek.⁸ The modern-day Islamic

scholar Claude Gilliot observes that it is more likely he spoke Aramaic, of which Syriac is a dialect.⁹ Muqatil also recounts accusations from Muhammad's opponent an-Nasr ibn al-Harith that mention both Jabr and Yasar: "This Qur'an is naught but lies that Muhammad himself has forged....Those who help him are Addas, a slave of Huwaytib b. Abd al-Uzza, Yasar, a servant of Amr b. al-Hadrami, and Jabr who was a Jew, and then became a Muslim....This Qur'an is only a tale of the Ancients, like the tales of Rustam and Isfandiyar. These three [were] teaching Muhammad at dawn and in the evening."¹⁰

This accusation recalls the criticism to which the Qur'an heatedly responds: "And those who disbelieve say, 'This is nothing except a falsehood he invented, and another people assisted him in it.' But they have committed an injustice and a lie. And they say, 'Legends of the former peoples which he has written down, and they are dictated to him morning and afternoon'" (25:4–5).

The Hadith offer yet another candidate for the man who was "foreign": Waraqa bin Naufal, the uncle of Muhammad's first wife, Khadija. Islamic tradition holds that after Muhammad's confusing and terrifying first encounter with the angel Gabriel, it was Waraqa who told Muhammad that he had been called to be a prophet. According to one hadith, Waraqa, like Abu Fukayha Yasar, was a Jew. The hadith says that "during the [pre-Islamic] Period of Ignorance [Waraqa] became a Christian and used to write the writing with Hebrew letters. He would write from the Gospel in Hebrew as much as Allah wished him to write."¹¹ In keeping with the Qur'an's repeated insistence that it is written in Arabic, in some variants of the accounts of Waraqa bin Naufal recognizing Muhammad as a prophet, Waraqa writes the Gospel not in Hebrew, but in Arabic.¹²

Even Khadija herself, according to the Persian Muslim Bal'ami (d. 974), "had read the ancient writings and knew the history of the prophets, and also the name of Gabriel."¹³

Why would the Qur'an acknowledge critics who accused the book of having non-Arabic origins? And why would hadiths tell us of various people of foreign tongue instructing Muhammad? If the Qur'an arose long after Muhammad is supposed to have lived, as

appears to have been the case, then the editors of the Qur'an would have been working with non-Arabic material and rendering it into Arabic. In that case, they would have needed to explain the non-Arabic elements in the Qur'an.

“The Legends of the Former Peoples”

There appear to be efforts in the Qur'an to bury suspicions about the Qur'an's influence under a mountain of scorn. The sneers of the doubters are recorded: “And when Our verses are recited to them, they say, ‘We have heard. If we willed, we could speak like this. This is nothing but legends of the former peoples’” (8:31). “We have been promised this, we and our forefathers, before; this is nothing but legends of the former peoples” (23:83). Then, as defensive as he was when responding to the claim that the Qur'an was dictated by a foreigner, Allah responds to this charge directly: “And those who disbelieve say, ‘This is not except a falsehood he invented, and another people assisted him in it.’ But they have committed an injustice and a lie. And they say, ‘Legends of the former peoples which he has written down, and they are dictated to him morning and afternoon.’ Say, ‘It has been revealed by he who knows secrets within the heavens and the earth. Indeed, he is ever Forgiving and Merciful’” (25:4–6).

The prophet's detractors are depicted as making this charge out of the hardness of their hearts: “And among them are those who listen to you, but We have placed over their hearts coverings, lest they understand it, and in their ears deafness. And if they should see every sign, they will not believe in it. Even when they come to you arguing with you, those who disbelieve say, ‘This is nothing but legends of the former peoples’” (6:25).

The Qur'an responds with unrestrained fury to one person who made these charges. “And do not obey every worthless habitual swearer and scorner, going about with malicious gossip, a preventer of good, transgressing and sinful, cruel, moreover, and an illegitimate pretender, because he is a possessor of wealth and children. When Our verses are recited to him, he says, ‘Legends of the former peoples.’ We will brand him upon the snout” (68:10–16).

Borrowings from Judaism

Nonetheless, the Qur'an's dependence on non-Arabic Jewish and Christian sources for much of its theological and cultural milieu is well known. Historian Peter Stein states that "there can be no doubt that the Qur'an was put into writing under the influence of the Christian (i.e., Syriac, and probably also Ethiopian) and Jewish literary traditions. The Christians and Jews who were present in the urban centers of the Arabian Peninsula must have brought their holy scriptures with them into the region, and liturgical practices in these communities must have involved some use of written documents."¹⁴ Isabel Toral-Niehoff, a historian of pre-Islamic Arab Christianity, posits that it is "probable that at least some biblical and Christian notions made their way to Mecca via al-Hira" in Iraq, where an Arab Christian community survived until the very beginning of the seventh century.¹⁵

Even while insisting that it is an Arabic book, the Qur'an situates itself squarely within the salvation history of the Jews. In the Qur'anic scheme, Muhammad is the last and greatest of a long succession of prophets that includes those in the Biblical line and others. After Satan deceived Adam and Eve into turning away from the truth (in a story imported straight from Genesis, with important modifications and embellishments), Allah sent prophets to call people back to true worship.

Several Qur'anic passages list as prophets figures from both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures: "And We gave to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—all We guided. And Noah, We guided before; and among his descendants, David and Solomon and Job and Joseph and Moses and Aaron. Thus do We reward the doers of good. And Zechariah and John and Jesus and Elias—and all were of the righteous. And Ishmael and Elisha and Jonah and Lot—and all We preferred over the worlds" (6:84–86). Allah adds his new prophet to this illustrious group in one of the passages that is universally taken today as referring to Muhammad but does not name him: "Indeed, We have revealed to you, as We revealed to Noah and the prophets after him. And we revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the

Descendants, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David We gave the book" (4:163).

Along with the Biblical prophets, the Qur'an is full of stories from the Bible. The twelfth sura tells the story of Joseph and his brothers, although it is shorn of its significance for Israel as a nation. Noah's ark appears in sura 10, Jonah and his whale in sura 37. Moses figures prominently throughout the book—notably in a curious series of allegorical tales in sura 18.

The Qur'an's Jewish sources are not limited to the Hebrew Scriptures. In its story of the creation and fall of Adam and Eve (2:30–39; 7:11–25; 15:28–42; 20:115–126; and 38:71–85), Allah creates Adam and then orders the angels to prostrate themselves before him (2:34, 7:11; 15:29; 18:50; 20:116). Satan refuses, saying: "I am better than he. You created me from fire and created him from clay" (7:12; 38:76; cf. 15:33; 17:61). Allah thereupon curses Satan (38:77–78) and banishes him from Paradise (7:13; 15:34). The order to the angels and Satan's refusal is not in the Bible but is found in Jewish apocryphal and rabbinic literature.¹⁶

The Qur'anic account of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (27:16–44) contains material that was likely derived from another Jewish source, the Targum of Esther. Tisdall notes that "the story of Balkis, Queen of Saba, as told at length in the Koran, corresponds so closely with what we find in the II. Targum of the Book of Esther, that it was evidently taken from it, as heard by Mohammed from some Jewish source...in respect of the Queen of Saba, her visit to Solomon, the letter sent by him to her, etc., there is a marvellous resemblance between the two, excepting this, indeed, that in place of the Lapwing of the Koran, the Targum Speaks of a Red-cock, n\ot a very vital difference after all!"¹⁷

One of the most celebrated passages of the Qur'an comes from the Talmud. Compiled in the second century AD, the Talmudic writings circulated among Arabia's Jews, but of course also among Jews in all the surrounding area. In any case, some of their divergences from or additions to Biblical accounts made it into the Qur'an. In the Qur'anic version of "the story of Adam's two sons" (Qur'an 5:27), Cain and Abel, Allah sends Cain a raven to show him

what to do with his brother's body: "Allah sent a raven searching in the ground to show him how to hide the disgrace of his brother. He said, 'O woe to me! Have I failed to be like this crow and hide the body of my brother?' And he became of the regretful" (5:31).

The raven does not appear in the Genesis story of Cain and Abel, but it does appear in several Jewish rabbinical documents, including the *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, a recreation of Biblical history from creation to the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness. Islamic apologists point out that the *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* in its present form dates from the eighth or ninth century, as do several of the other writings in which the raven story appears—so it is possible that the rabbis were borrowing from the Islamic tradition. However, the next verse of the Qur'an makes clearer the direction of the borrowing. Qur'an 5:32 says:

Because of that, We decreed upon the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption in the land—it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one—it is as if he had saved mankind entirely. And our messengers had certainly come to them with clear proofs. Then indeed many of them, after that, throughout the land, were transgressors.

There is no stated reason why this injunction against murder follows the story of Cain and Abel, when Cain's murder of Abel did not endanger a whole people. Nor is the connection clear from the context. But it is clear in the Talmud:

We find it said in the case of Cain who murdered his brother, "The voice of thy brother's bloods crieth" (Gen. 4:10). It is not said here blood in the singular, but bloods in the plural, that is, his own blood and the blood of his seed. Man was created single in order to show that to him who kills a single individual it shall be reckoned that he has slain the whole race, but to him who preserves the life of a single individual it is counted that he hath preserved the whole race.¹⁸

Here the connection between the killing of Abel and that of the whole human race comes from the interpretation of the plural word

“bloods” in Genesis 4:10. Shorn of its link to a Bible verse, this connection as it appears in the Qur’an suggests to numerous readers across the centuries that the Qur’an’s author or compiler was depending on the Jewish source.

Likewise, in the Qur’an, the patriarch Abraham smashes some of the idols worshipped by his father and his people. Enraged, the people throw him into a fire, but Allah cools the flames and saves Abraham: “They said, ‘Burn him and support your gods, if you are to act.’ Allah said, ‘O fire, be coolness and safety upon Abraham’” (21:68–69). An account of Abraham being thrown into a fire appears in the Talmud—*Midrash Genesis Rabbah*, which was compiled in the sixth century AD.¹⁹

Borrowings from Christianity

“The holy book of Islam,” observes the linguist Robert M. Kerr, “presumes a prior knowledge of oriental Christianity.”²⁰

Islamic tradition betrays an awareness of this. Bukhari records a hadith about an unnamed figure who “was a Christian who embraced Islam and read *Surat-al-Baqarah* [sura 2 of the Qur’an] and *Al-Imran* [sura 3], and he used to write (the revelations) for the Prophet.” The job of transcribing Muhammad’s Qur’anic recitations, however, apparently disabused him of the notion that they were divinely inspired, for “later on he returned to Christianity again and he used to say: ‘Muhammad knows nothing but what I have written for him.’”²¹

It is indisputable that the Qur’an makes use of Christian as well as Jewish sources, and that some of the “legends of the former peoples” that found their way into the Qur’an are not from the canonical gospels but from the traditions of Christian sects that had been declared heretical in the Byzantine Empire and had made their way east, to the area where Islam developed.

The Jesus of the Qur’an, although not divine, is a powerful miracle worker. He even speaks in His cradle: “He will speak to the people in the cradle and in maturity and will be of the righteous” (3:46). His mother Mary, knowing this, directs those who doubt her chastity upon seeing the baby Jesus to ask the baby himself: “So she pointed to him. They said, ‘How can we speak to one who is in the cradle a

child?’ He said, ‘Indeed, I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet. And he has made me blessed wherever I am and has enjoined upon me prayer and zakah as long as I remain alive, and dutiful to my mother, and he has not made me a wretched tyrant. And peace is on me the day I was born and the day I will die and the day I am raised alive’” (19:29–33).

In an Arabic Infancy Gospel that dates from the sixth century, “Jesus spoke, and, indeed, when He was lying in His cradle said to Mary His mother: I am Jesus, the Son of God, the Logos, whom thou hast brought forth, as the Angel Gabriel announced to thee; and my Father has sent me for the salvation of the world.”²²

In the same Infancy Gospel, when Jesus was seven, he “made figures of birds and sparrows, which flew when He told them to fly, and stood still when He told them to stand, and ate and drank when He handed them food and drink.”²³

In the Qur’an, this story becomes another indication of the treachery of the Jewish unbelievers: “When Allah will say, ‘O Jesus, Son of Mary, remember my favor upon you and upon your mother when I supported you with the Pure Spirit and you spoke to the people in the cradle and in maturity; and when I taught you writing and wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel; and when you designed from clay like the form of a bird with my permission, then you breathed into it, and it became a bird with my permission; and you healed the blind and the leper with my permission; and when you brought forth the dead with my permission; and when I restrained the Children of Israel from you when you came to them with clear proofs and those who disbelieved among them said, ‘This is nothing but obvious magic’” (5:110).

In a similar way, the Qur’an’s presentation of the crucifixion of Christ is derived from Gnostic Christianity. The Jews are depicted as thinking they had actually killed Jesus, but in fact it was an imposter who was crucified: “They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but another was made to resemble him to them” (4:157). Gnostics held that physical matter was evil and that therefore Jesus, as the savior of the world, could not have taken on a physical body, and certainly could not have been crucified. God just made it seem as if he was on

the cross—or, according to some Gnostic texts, made Thomas the apostle or Judas the betrayer to resemble Jesus and put him on the cross in his place. The second-century Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter has the apostle Peter recounting: “I saw him seemingly being seized by them. And I said ‘What do I see, O Lord? That it is you yourself whom they take, and that you are grasping me? Or who is this one, glad and laughing on the tree? And is it another one whose feet and hands they are striking?’”²⁴ Jesus answers: “He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness. But look at him and me.”²⁵ The “living Jesus” who is “glad and laughing on the tree” is not on the tree of the cross, for “this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails” is “the substitute being put to shame.” In other words, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but another was made to resemble him to them.

The story of the “Companions of the Cave and of the Inscription” (18:9–26) is an Islamic version of the Christian account of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, which was well known in Eastern Christianity at the time that Islam was taking shape. And when the Qur’an writes of the child Jesus fashioning clay birds and then bringing them to life (Qur’an 3:49), it recounts something that is recorded in the second-century Infancy Gospel of Thomas.²⁶

Borrowing Paradise

The Qur’an’s descriptions of Paradise are many and vivid. The blessed will be adorned “with bracelets of gold and pearl, and their garments therein will be silk” (22:23), indeed, “fine silk and brocade” (44:53). They will recline “on green cushions and beautiful fine carpets” (55:76), sit on “thrones woven” (56:15), and be served from “plates and vessels of gold”—on which will be “whatever the souls desire and delights the eyes” (43:71), including “much fruit” (43:73), along with “palm trees and pomegranates” (55:68). They will also enjoy “the meat of fowl, from whatever they desire” (56:21). Paradise itself consists of “gardens beneath which rivers flow” (3:198; cf.

3:136; 13:35; 15:45; 22:23). In it are “two springs, spouting” (55:66), along with “rivers of water unaltered, rivers of milk the taste of which never changes, rivers of wine delicious to those who drink, and rivers of purified honey” (47:15). That wine has “no bad effect,” so that those who drink it will not be intoxicated (37:47).

“Reclining therein on adorned couches,” the blessed “will not see therein any sun or cold. And near above them are its shades, and to be picked its fruit will be lowered in compliance” (76:13–14). The food and comforts would never run out: “Its fruit is lasting, and its shade. That is the consequence for the righteous, and the consequence for the disbelievers is the Fire” (13:35).

Above all, there will be “full-breasted women of equal age” (78:33), “women limiting their glances, with large eyes” (37:48), “fair women with large eyes” (44:54), “as if they were rubies and coral” (55:58), to whom the blessed will be “joined” (52:20). These women would be “limiting their glances, untouched before them by man or jinn [spirit being]” (55:56). Allah “made them virgins” (56:36), and according to Islamic tradition, virgins they would remain forever. Also “there will circulate among them boys for them, as if they were pearls well-protected” (52:24), “young boys made eternal” (56:17), “you would think them scattered pearls” (76:19).

All this can be found in the writings of the Zoroastrians of Persia, who were a considerable presence in the areas around the Persian Empire before the advent of Islam. According to Tisdall, “The books of the Zoroastrians and Hindus...bear the most extraordinary likeness to what we find in the Koran and Hadith. Thus in Paradise we are told of ‘houris having fine black eyes,’ and again of ‘houris with large black eyes, resembling pearls hidden in their shells.’ [...] The name *houry* too is derived from an Avesta or Pehlavi Source, as well as *jinn* for genii, and *bihisht* (Paradise), signifying in Avestic ‘the better land.’ We also have very similar tales in the old Hindu writings, of heavenly regions with their boys and girls resembling the houris and *ghilman* of the Koran.”²⁷

This dependence on non-Arabic sources indicates that the Qur’an in its original form was something quite different from what Muslims have always taken it to be, and that its very character as an Arabic

book is the product of later development, not a feature of the original text. In fact, there is evidence within the Qur'an itself that it was not originally an Arabic book at all.

Incomprehensible

One element of that evidence is the Qur'an's manifest lack of clarity, despite its boasts to the contrary. Many words in this self-proclaimed clear Arabic book are neither clear nor Arabic. Gerd-R. Puin explains: "The Koran is a kind of cocktail of texts that were not all understood even at the time of Muhammad. Many of them may even be a hundred years older than Islam itself. Even within the Islamic traditions there is a huge body of contradictory information, including a significant Christian substrate; one can derive a whole Islamic anti-history from them if one wants."²⁸

As for the Qur'an, Puin notes that it "claims for itself that it is '*mubeen*,' or 'clear.' But if you look at it, you will notice that every fifth sentence or so simply doesn't make sense. Many Muslims—and Orientalists—will tell you otherwise, of course, but the fact is that a fifth of the Koranic text is *just incomprehensible*. This is what has caused the traditional anxiety regarding translation. If the Koran is not comprehensible—if it can't even be understood in Arabic—then it's not translatable. People fear that. And since the Koran claims repeatedly to be clear but obviously is not—as even speakers of Arabic will tell you—there is a contradiction. Something else must be going on."²⁹

Islamic apologists have been sanguine about the incomprehensible sections of the Qur'an: Allah knows what they mean, and their very presence indicates that the book was written by someone whose understanding is beyond that of ordinary mortals. The Qur'an itself acknowledges that portions of the book cannot be understood and warns Muslims not to waste their time trying: "It is He who has sent down to you the Book; in it are precise verses—they are the foundation of the Book—and others unspecific. As for those in whose hearts is deviation, they will follow that of it which is unspecific, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation. And no one knows its interpretation except Allah. But those firm in

knowledge say, 'We believe in it. All is from our Lord.' And no one will be reminded except those of understanding" (3:7).

Perhaps such passages were placed in the book to explain the anomalies created by the rendering of considerable material that was not originally Arabic into Arabic.

Theodor Nöldeke, the great nineteenth-century scholar of Islam, explains what makes so much of the Qur'an incomprehensible:

On the whole, while many parts of the Qur'an undoubtedly have considerable rhetorical power, even over an unbelieving reader, the book, aesthetically considered, is by no means a first-rate performance....Let us look at some of the more extended narratives. It has already been noticed how vehement and abrupt they are where they ought to be characterized by epic repose. Indispensable links, both in expression and in the sequence of events, are often omitted, so that to understand these histories is sometimes far easier for us than for those who learned them first, because we know most of them from better sources. Along with this, there is a great deal of superfluous verbiage; and nowhere do we find a steady advance in the narration. Contrast, in these respects, "the most beautiful tale," the history of Joseph (xii.), and its glaring improprieties, with the story in Genesis, so admirably executed in spite of some slight discrepancies. Similar faults are found in the non-narrative portions of the Qur'an. The connection of ideas is extremely loose, and even the syntax betrays great awkwardness. Anacolutha are of frequent occurrence, and cannot be explained as conscious literary devices. Many sentences begin with a "when" or "on the day when," which seem to hover in the air, so that the commentators are driven to supply a "think of this" or some ellipsis. Again, there is no great literary skill evinced in the frequent and needless harping on the same words and phrases; in xviii., for example, "till that" (*hatta idha*) occurs no fewer than eight times. Muhammad, in short, is not in any sense a master of style.³⁰

More precisely, that clumsy stylist was Muhammad, or whatever committee that may have finalized the Qur'anic text in his name.

Whole phrases of this “pure and clear” book are unclear. Qur’an 2:29 reads this way: “It is he who created for you all of that which is on the earth. Then he directed himself to the heaven and made them seven heavens, and he is knowing of all things.” The contemporary Islamic scholar Ibn Warraq points out that “the plural pronoun ‘them’ in this verse has resisted all explanation.”³¹ Many translators smooth over the difficulty by reducing the “them” to an “it.” Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, for example, renders this verse as: “He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth. Then turned He to the heaven, and fashioned it as seven heavens. And He is knower of all things.” But in the Arabic, the first “heaven” is singular and yet the pronoun is unaccountably plural. To what, then, does the “them” refer? Any answer would be pure conjecture.

Nonce Words

There is more that makes the Qur’an incomprehensible. A number of words in the Qur’an simply don’t make any sense: not only are they not Arabic words, but they have no meaning in any known language. Islamic scholars who have translated the Qur’an into other languages for the purposes of proselytizing and to aid non-Arabic-speaking Muslims have generally agreed on the meaning of these words; often, however, this agreement is simply a matter of convention, without any grounding in linguistic analysis. And sometimes there is no agreement at all. For example, the historian and Qur’anic scholar Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839–923) details three different definitions, supported by twenty-seven witnesses through different chains of transmission, circulating among Islamic authorities for the word *kalala* in Qur’an 4:12. It is not clear, in a passage that is foundational for Islamic law regarding inheritance, whether this word refers to the person who has died or to his heirs—a crucial distinction.³²

Some words have no clear referent. In Qur’an 2:62 and 5:69, salvation is promised to those who believe in the Qur’an, as well as to Jews, Christians, and Sabians. Muslim exegetes identify the Sabians as the followers of the Israelite King David. The word “Sabians” means “baptizers.”³³ The Qur’an identifies David as a

prophet, and Allah gives him the book of Psalms (4:163). The Sabians are thus supposed to be followers of David and readers of the Psalms for whom baptism was a central ritual. But the only Sabians of whom something is known historically, the Sabians of Harran, did not practice baptism or notably revere the Psalms. There is no record independent of Islamic literature of any group of Sabians that actually did do those things. Thus the actual recipient of the Qur'anic promise of salvation remains unclear.³⁴

The Qur'an also coins such terms as *sijjin*, which appears in 83:7–9: “No! Indeed, the record of the wicked is in *sijjin*. And what can make you know what is *sijjin*? It a register inscribed.” *Sijjin* is not an Arabic word; nor is it a recognizable word from any other language. Even this brief Qur'an passage is bewildering, as *sijjin* is first identified as the place where the “Book of the libertines”—apparently the record of the evil deeds of the damned—is stored (it is “in *sijjin*”) and then, almost immediately afterward, as that record itself (*sijjin* is “a register inscribed”).³⁵ Perhaps *sijjin* is a larger written record of which the “record of the wicked” is just a part—but that is just the sort of intellectual contortion that the Qur'an forces the attentive reader into.

A similar word is *sijill* in Qur'an 21:104: “The Day when We will fold the heaven like the folding of a *sijill*.” A. J. Arberry, author of a popular and scrupulously faithful translation of the Qur'an translates *sijill* as a “scroll...rolled for the writings.” Pickthall translates the word as “a written scroll,” and that is the accepted understanding today—perhaps owing to its similarity to *sijjin*, which the Qur'an identifies as “a register inscribed.” But *sijill* could also be a proper name, or something else altogether.³⁶ Arthur Jeffery, author of the important book *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, notes that the meaning of *sijill* was “unknown to the early interpreters of the Qur'an.” He adds, “Some took it to be the name of an Angel, or of the Prophet's amanuensis.”³⁷ The fourteenth-century Islamic scholar Ibn Kathir reflects the confusion in his commentary on the passage:

What is meant by *Sijill* is book. As-Suddi said concerning this Ayah: “As-*Sijill* is an angel who is entrusted with the records;

when a person dies, his Book (of deeds) is taken up to *As-Sijill*, and he rolls it up and puts it away until the Day of Resurrection.” But the correct view as narrated from Ibn Abbas is that *as-Sijill* refers to the record (of deeds). This was also reported from him by Ali bin Abi Talhah and Al-Awfi. This was also stated by Mujahid, Qatadah and others. This was the view favored by Ibn Jarir, because this usage is well-known in the (Arabic) language.³⁸

The parenthetical “Arabic” was added by the English translator. In reality, according to Jeffery, *sijill* is not an Arabic word at all, but is derived from Greek *sigillon*, meaning an “imperial edict.” Jeffery notes that the first Arabic use appears to be in this very passage of the Qur’an; at least no earlier Arabic usage has been found.³⁹

Equally puzzling is the term *Allahu as-samad*, which is found in Qur’an 112:2. Mainstream twentieth-century Muslim translators of the Qur’an render this term alternately as “God, the Everlasting Refuge” (Arberry), “Allah, the Eternal, Absolute” (Abdullah Yusuf Ali), and “Allah, the eternally Besought of all!” (Pickthall). But no one is sure what *as-samad* really means; it is another Qur’anic nonce word that has puzzled scholars through the ages. It is commonly translated as “eternal,” but that is a matter of convention more than of any actual discernment of its meaning. Tabari offers a variety of meanings for the word, including “the one who is not hollow, who does not eat and drink,” and “the one from whom nothing comes out,” the latter being a familiar Qur’anic designation of Allah as the one who does not beget and is not begotten.⁴⁰ After examining the available evidence, the Yale philologist and historian Franz Rosenthal concludes that *as-samad* may be “an ancient Northwest Semitic religious term, which may no longer have been properly understood by Muhammad himself.”⁴¹ Or by whoever actually compiled the Qur’an.

Another mysterious Qur’anic word is *al-kawthar*, the title of sura 108. The first verse of that sura is “Lo! We have given you *al-kawthar*”; the word, unknown outside of this phrase, is commonly rendered as “abundance,” “bounty,” or “plenty.” But this, too, is a

matter of convention. The popular Qur'an commentary known as the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* explains that "*Kawthar* is a river in the Garden from which the Basin of his Community is watered. *Kawthar* means immense good, in the form of Prophethood, Qur'an, intercession and other things."⁴² Other Muslim scholars, however, are not so sure. The Qur'anic scholar al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) offers seventeen different interpretations of *al-kawthar*; al-Qurtubi's contemporary Ibn an-Naqib (d. 1298) offers twenty-six.⁴³ The multiplicity of explanations testifies to the fact that no one really knew what the word meant at all; everyone was simply hazarding his best guess.

There is also an abundance of non-Arabic words in this most self-consciously Arabic book. Many Islamic exegetes have understood that the Qur'an contains no non-Arabic words at all, since the Qur'an is in "a clear Arabic language" (16:103), and Allah has explained that he would not have "made it a non-Arabic Qur'an" (41:44).⁴⁴ The renowned Islamic jurist ash-Shafii, for instance, argues that "the Book of God is in the Arabic language without being mixed with any [foreign words]."⁴⁵

Yet this position is impossible to sustain. As both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have noted, the Qur'an is full of non-Arabic loan words.

A Syriac Religious Universe

Since the Qur'an frequently retells biblical stories and refers to biblical prophets, one might expect the Qur'anic names for those prophets to be informed by Hebrew usage. But the Jews in the Near East no longer spoke Hebrew. Rather, they spoke Aramaic, Greek, and other languages. And the names in the Qur'an consistently show signs of having been derived from Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic that was the primary literary language in Arabia and the surrounding regions during the time Muhammad is supposed to have lived, as well as for two centuries before and after him.

The modern scholar Christoph Luxenberg explains that Syriac, also known as Syro-Aramaic, "is the branch of Aramaic in the Near East originally spoken in Edessa and the surrounding area in Northwest Mesopotamia and predominant as a written language

from Christianization to the origin of the Koran. For more than a millennium Aramaic was the lingua franca in the entire Middle Eastern region before being gradually displaced by Arabic beginning in the 7th century.”⁴⁶

Alphonse Mingana (1878–1937), the pioneering Assyrian historian of early Islam, explains that “the proper names of biblical personages found in the Qur’an are used in their Syriac form. Such names include those of Solomon, Pharaoh, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Noah, Zachariah and Mary.”⁴⁷

In fact, “there is not a single biblical name with an exclusively Hebrew pronunciation in the whole of the Qur’an,” and “the Jewish influence on the religious vocabulary of the Qur’an is indeed negligible,” although by no means entirely absent.⁴⁸ But the Syro-Aramaic influence is so considerable that Robert M. Kerr concludes: “Based on archaeology, script geography and areal linguistics in the Late Antique Roman-Byzantine Middle East (including Arabia), the Qur’an could not have originated in the Arabic script or language in the Mecca/Medina region. Current epigraphic and linguistic knowledge decisively contradicts the traditional narrative; one must instead look more closely at greater Syria, toward the Ghassanids and in particular the Lakhmids or the descendants of deported Arabs from in and around Merv. This is where the translation from *Aramaic* to *Arabic* script was completed. If these arguments for how and where the Qur’an was written down are examined, then much of its content will be easier to understand.”⁴⁹

In fact, “almost all the religious terms in the Qur’an,” Mingana notes, “are derived from Syriac.”⁵⁰ These include words that have come to be closely identified with Islam itself, including *Allah*; *ayah* (sign, in the sense of a divine manifestation, or verse of the Qur’an); *kafir* (unbeliever); *salat* (prayer); *nafs* (soul); *jannah* (Paradise); *taghut* (infidelity); and *masih* (Christ).⁵¹ The Qur’anic word for Christians is *nasara*; according to Mingana, “There is no other language besides Syriac in which the word ‘Christians’ is expressed by the word *nasara* or anything near it....There is no doubt whatever that in the Persian Empire, and to some extent also in the Roman Empire, the Christians were called by non-Christians *nasraye* (the

Nasara of the Qur'an), and that the Prophet took the word from the Syrians."⁵²

Even the Five Pillars of Islam, the core of the Islamic faith, betray a Syriac influence:

1. The profession of faith (*shahada*). Kerr points out that the Arabic root *shd*, meaning "to testify," is derived from the Syriac *shed*, as in the Syriac translation of Deuteronomy 5:20: *la tsahed al hbarin sahdua d-daggalta*, "Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor."⁵³ The word witness, or martyr, is *shahid* in Arabic and *sahda* in Syriac.
2. Prayer (*salat*). The Aramaic *sla*, says Kerr, means "the physical act of bowing."⁵⁴
3. Almsgiving (*zakat*). The Syriac word *zakuta* means "acquittal, innocence," and thus may be related to the idea of zakat as cleansing the sins of the donor; alternatively, some forms of Aramaic have *zekuta*, "reward" or "commendable deed."⁵⁵
4. Fasting (*sawm*). The Hebrew word *som*, "to fast," appears to be the antecedent here.⁵⁶
5. Pilgrimage (*hajj*). "In Biblical Hebrew," says Kerr, "the root *hgg* is defined as a religious festival in general" and is derived from a root meaning "to take part in a procession."⁵⁷

Other Qur'anic words were common in Syriac but rare in Arabic before the composition of the Qur'an. These include *rahman* (compassionate), which forms part of the Qur'anic invocation *bismilla ar-rahman ar-rahim*, "In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful."

Even the word *Qur'an* itself may come from the Syriac, in which language it refers to a liturgical reading from scripture, a lectionary.⁵⁸

The Qur'an also features traces of Syriac grammatical constructions. Mingana notes that sura 2:79 "has: *thumma'antum ha'ula'i taqtuluna 'anfusakum*. 'Then are you the very persons who kill yourselves.' The use of *hawila'* is here very peculiar and denotes the Syriac *halain*." Among many other such examples is the Qur'an's use of the word *shai*, usually translated as "wives," in sura 62:11.

Says Mingana: “I believe that the word *shai* applied to a human being is not Arabic at all, and betrays the Syriac *middaim*, which is applied to reasonable beings (*n s’mdm*). This *shai* is an insurmountable difficulty to the commentators [that is, the Muslim scholars explaining the Qur’anic text], who resort in it to worthless compromises.”⁵⁹

The Syriac influence is not restricted simply to word usage and grammar. The Qur’an in sura 18 (verses 83–101) tells the curious story of Dhul-Qarnayn, “the one with two horns,” who traveled to “the setting of the sun,” where “he found it setting in a muddy spring” (18:84–86), and then journeyed on until “he came to the rising of the sun, he found it rising on a people for whom We had not made against it any shield” (18:90).⁶⁰ Who was this mysterious traveler? Islamic tradition has identified him frequently, albeit not unanimously, as Alexander the Great. The Alexander legend circulated in many languages, but none had any presence in Arabia at the time of Muhammad except the Syriac. As a result, after eliminating other possibilities, Mingana declares that “we have only the Syrians left from whom the Prophet, or the editor of the Qur’an, could have derived his information.”⁶¹

It is not outside the realm of possibility, of course, that these Syriac words were circulating in seventh-century Arabia. But in view of the Qur’an’s self-conscious insistence that it is an Arabic book, they provide additional evidence that the Qur’an originated in circumstances quite different from the standard Islamic picture of a lone prophet huddled in a cave on Mount Hira, where he encountered the angel Gabriel.

Not Just the Religious Vocabulary, but the Cultural Vocabulary Also

There is more evidence. Arthur Jeffery wrote in 1938 that “not only the greater part of the religious vocabulary, but also most of the cultural vocabulary of the Quran is of non-Arabic origin.”⁶²

That is a staggering claim to make about a book that presents itself as having been delivered by an Arabian prophet for Arabic speakers. Yet Jeffery notes an anomaly: despite the fact that the Qur’an is

supposed to have originated in Arabia, it breathes very little of the air of that time and place. “From the fact that Muhammad was an Arab, brought up in the midst of Arabian paganism and practising its rites himself until well on into manhood, one would naturally have expected to find that Islam had its roots deep down in this old Arabian paganism. It comes, therefore, as no little surprise, to find how little of the religious life of this Arabian paganism is reflected in the pages of the Qur’an.”⁶³

One explanation for this odd absence may be that the Qur’an didn’t originate in the milieu of Arabian paganism, or in Arabia at all.

To examine the “cultural vocabulary” of the Qur’an, consider one of the most notable non-Arabic words in the book: *jizya*. This word appears in the Qur’an only once, but it became extremely significant in the Muslim world. Qur’an 9:29 says: “Fight those who do not believe in Allah nor the last day, and do not forbid what has been forbidden by Allah and his messenger, and do not acknowledge the religion of truth, of the People of the Book, until they pay the *jizya* with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.”

The *jizya* was a poll tax the Islamic state levied on the *dhimmis*, or the People of the Book (primarily Jews and Christians), as a symbol of their submission and subservience. In Islamic law this payment was (and is) the cornerstone of the humiliating and discriminatory regulations meant to deprive those who rejected Muhammad’s prophetic claim. “The subject peoples,” according to a classic manual of Islamic law, must “pay the non-Muslim poll tax (*jizya*)”—but that is by no means all. They “are distinguished from Muslims in dress, wearing a wide cloth belt (*zunnar*); are not greeted with ‘as-Salamu ‘alaykum’ [the traditional Muslim greeting, “Peace be with you”]; must keep to the side of the street; may not build higher than or as high as the Muslims’ buildings, though if they acquire a tall house, it is not razed; are forbidden to openly display wine or pork... recite the Torah or Evangel aloud, or make public display of their funerals or feastdays; and are forbidden to build new churches.”⁶⁴ If they violated these terms, they could lawfully be killed or sold into slavery.

But there are problems with the Qur'anic passage from which such Islamic laws supposedly derive. The People of the Book must be made to "pay the jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (*al-jizyata 'an yadin wa-humma saghirun*). Although *saghirun* clearly means "subdued," or "humbled," or "lowly," the words *al-jizya* and *'an yadin* do not appear anywhere else in the Qur'an, and their meaning is not entirely clear. Of *jizya*, Jeffery notes a Syriac word from which the Arabic one may be derived. He says that the word "looks very much like an interpolation in the Qur'an reflecting later usage. In later Islam, *jizya* was the technical term for the poll-tax imposed on the Dhimmis, i.e., members of protected communities."⁶⁵

'An yadin, meanwhile, can be understood in different ways. It has been rendered above (following the translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali) as "with willing submission," but it could also mean "out of hand," in the sense not just of submission but of direct, in-person payment, as the thirteenth-century Qur'anic commentator al-Baydawi explains: "Out of hand, indicating the condition of those who pay the tribute. Out of a hand that gives willingly, in this way indicating that they submit obediently; or out of their hand, meaning that they pay the tribute with their own hands, instead of sending it through others; no one is allowed to use a proxy in this case."⁶⁶ There are many other possible understandings of this text. The great scholar Franz Rosenthal observes that *'an yadin* has "completely defied interpretation. All post-Qur'anic occurrences of it are based upon the Qur'an."⁶⁷

What's more, although the Islamic law regarding the *dhimmis* was elaborated from supposed commands of the Muslim prophet, the regulations centered on the *jizya* were not codified in so specific a form until several centuries after Muhammad's time.⁶⁸ Rather, it seems that the term was elaborated in later Islam—when the great corpus of Islamic law was being formulated and codified—but was read back into a much earlier setting and incorporated into the Qur'an. And when it was elaborated, the strong evidence of Syriac linguistic influence suggests that it could have been done in a Syriac environment, farther north than the Arabian setting it so self-

consciously insists upon. It is noteworthy in this connection that Abd al-Malik and his fellow Umayyad caliphs were centered not in Arabia but in Damascus.

A Text Converted to Arabic

It may be, then, that the Qur'an's foreign derivation is one of the primary reasons why the book takes pains to establish itself as an Arabic text. One reason for the Qur'an's Arabic protestations, other than the charges that Muhammad was listening to a nonnative speaker of Arabic, may be that the Qur'an was not originally written in Arabic at all but was eventually rendered in Arabic as the new religion was being developed. Because the empire that it was designed to buttress was an Arabic one, it was essential that the new holy book be in Arabic. The political imperative was to provide the new and growing empire with a religious culture distinct from that of the Byzantines and Persians—one that would provide for the loyalty, cohesiveness, and unity of the newly conquered domains.

This was not done, and probably could not have been done, in a neat and orderly fashion, as is demonstrated by the startling number of variations in what is often affirmed to be an unchanging Qur'anic text.

CHAPTER 11

What the Qur'an May Have Been

A Clue

What, then, was the Qur'an in its original form?

One indication of this comes from Qur'an 25:1: "Blessed is he who sent down the criterion upon his servant that he may be to the worlds a warner." The word translated here as "the criterion" is *al-furqan*, which is also the name of the sura as a whole. Islamic tradition generally identifies the criterion, *al-furqan*, as the Qur'an, and Muhammad as the "warner" to the people of the earth. The mainstream Qur'an commentary known as the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* says that the Qur'an is called the furqan "because it discriminates [*faraqa*] between the true and the false."¹ If the *furqan* is that which discriminates between truth and falsehood, then it is the criterion by which one distinguishes one from the other.²

In Syriac, *furqan* means "redemption" or "salvation." And "warner," *nadhir*, is a word that is constructed from three consonants—*n*, *dh*, and *r*—that in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac all have the principal meaning of "to vow." The particular form *nadhir* is a verbal adjective meaning "vowed," "votive gift," or "sacrifice."

Accordingly, a more precise, albeit less traditionally Islamic, translation of Qur'an 25:1 would be, "Blessed is he who sent down the redemption on his servant that he might be a sacrifice for the peoples."

This is a Christian statement: it is Jesus Christ who was sent down (John 1:1, 1:14) to be a sacrifice (Ephesians 5:1; Hebrews 10:10–14) for the redemption (Ephesians 1:7) of all people (I John 2:2).³

Of course, it may appear preposterous on its face that the Qur'an, which contains so much polemical material attacking orthodox Christianity, would make a Christian statement. But as we have seen, the early historical records contain elements that seem equally odd when compared to the canonical account of Islam's origins. These records, including official Arab inscriptions and coins bearing crosses, show that the Arab conquerors, though generally hostile to the concepts of the divinity and redemption of Christ, had a much freer attitude toward Christian symbols than mature Islam would later display. The Arab attitude toward Christianity and Judaism in this era appears to have been far more fluid and in many ways more welcoming than it would ultimately become in Islam.

Moreover, on close examination, the Qur'an itself betrays evidence of having been adapted from a Christian text.

A Christian Lectionary

Numerous scholars have noted traces of a Christian text underlying the Qur'an. In line with the meaning of the Syriac word *Qur'an*, that Christian text may have been a lectionary. The Qur'anic scholar Erwin Gräf declares that the Qur'an, "according to the etymological meaning of the word, is originally and really a liturgical text designed for cultic recitation and also actually used in the private and public service. This suggests that the liturgy or liturgical poetry, and indeed the Christian liturgy, which comprises the Judaic liturgy, decisively stimulated and influenced Mohammed."⁴

Similarly, the German philologist Günter Lüling posits that "the text of the Koran as transmitted by Muslim Orthodoxy contains, hidden behind it as a ground layer and considerably scattered throughout it (together about one-third of the whole Koran text), an originally pre-Islamic Christian text."⁵ Earlier Qur'anic scholars such as Alois Sprenger and Tor Andrae have also identified a Christian substratum to the Qur'an.⁶

Luxenberg states that if *Qur'an* "really means *lectionary*, then one can assume that the Koran intended itself first of all to be understood as nothing more than a liturgical book with selected texts from the

Scriptures (the Old and New Testament) and not at all as a substitute for the *Scriptures* themselves, i.e. as an independent *Scripture*.”⁷

But what, then, of passages in which the Qur’an seems to refer to itself as exactly that, an independent scripture? Consider, for example, Qur’an 12:1–2: “These are the verses of the clear Book. Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur’an that you might understand.” Referring to Syriac to elucidate the Arabic, Luxenberg translates the passage in this way: “This is the written copy of the elucidated Scripture: We have sent it down as an Arabic lectionary so that you may understand it.”⁸

Luxenberg explains the implications: “It is thus not surprising that Jesus (*Isa*) is cited 25 times in the Koran and that he is there referred to as the Messiah (*al-Masih*) eleven times. Thus it is only logical to see other Syro-Christian passages being a part of this foundation which constitutes the origin of the Koran.”⁹

Luxenberg is among the scholars who have pioneered the critical examination of the *rasm*—that is, the basic form of the Qur’anic text without diacritical marks. Since diacritical marks are not found in the earliest Qur’an manuscripts, these scholars posit that the Qur’an originally had a meaning quite different from that of the now-standard Arabic text. Luxenberg notes that many of the Qur’an’s linguistic peculiarities vanish when one strips out the Arabic diacritical marks, which were added later, and reads the book as a Syriac document. He even contends that Syriac was the original language of the Arab conquerors—an entirely plausible claim in light of the fact that it was the chief literary language of the Middle East from the fourth to the eighth centuries, although other scholars dispute this.

By referring to the Syriac and examining the *rasm*, Luxenberg solves the difficulties of a passage that has puzzled readers of the Qur’an for centuries. Just as Mary gives birth to Jesus in the Qur’anic account, there is this: “But he called her from below her, ‘Do not grieve; your Lord has provided beneath you a stream’” (19:24). It is unclear from the text who is speaking (the newborn Jesus or someone else?) and what the nature of this stream is. Luxenberg, however, finds that this passage has nothing to do with streams. Rather, it refers to Mary’s delivering a virgin birth. In Luxenberg’s

philological reconstruction, the infant Jesus (who speaks elsewhere in the Qur'an) is telling Mary: "Do not be sad, your Lord has made your delivery legitimate."¹⁰

Raisins, Not Virgins

Luxenberg's investigations won international attention for his reinterpretation of Qur'anic passages referring to the virgins of Paradise (44:51–57; 52:17–24; 56:27–40). These passages are among the most famous in the entire Qur'an, promising "the women of Paradise...virgins devoted and of equal age" (56:35–37) to the inhabitants of Paradise. Most notably, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks many news stories focused on the Qur'anic promise of virgins in Paradise as the reward for Islamic martyrs.

The Arabic word *hur*, which is usually translated as "virgins," is central to the canonical understanding of these passages (it appears in 44:54 and 52:20). But *hur* does not actually mean "virgins," as even Arabic philologists acknowledge. Rather, it is the plural form of an Arabic feminine adjective that means simply "white." Qur'an commentators and Arabic scholars often explain that it actually means "white-eyed," an expression that Qur'an translators have taken as an expression of the beauty of these virgins, translating it as "large-eyed," "wide-eyed," "with lustrous eyes," and similar expressions.

However, Luxenberg argues that this not only contradicts Arabic usage, but doesn't even make sense as a sign of beauty: "When one describes the beauty of eyes, it is said as a rule, and not just in Arabic, 'beautiful *black*, beautiful *brown* and beautiful *blue* eyes,' but never 'beautiful *white* eyes,' unless of course one is *blind*. For instance, in the Koran it is also said of Jacob that from all his crying over his son Joseph his eyes have become 'white' (Sura 12:84), i.e. they have been *blinded*. The further explanation given by the Arabic commentators that the white particularly emphasizes the beauty of (big) *black* eyes is only an invented makeshift explanation."¹¹

According to Islamic tradition, *hur* is the equivalent of *houri*, which does mean virgin, but Luxenberg argues that this is a clear misreading of the text. Examining the *rasm*, the other contexts in

which *hur* appears in the Qur'an, and the contemporary usage of the word *houris*, he concludes that the famous passages refer not to virgins but instead to white raisins, or grapes.

Yes, fruit. Strange as that may seem, given all the attention paid to the Qur'an's supposed promises of virgins in Paradise, white raisins were a prized delicacy in that region. As such, Luxenberg suggests, they actually make a more fitting symbol of the reward of Paradise than the promise of sexual favors from virgins. He also points out that the idea of the virgins contradicts the Qur'an's promise that the blessed will enter Paradise with their wives (43:70), unless the earthly wives are supposed to watch in rage and sorrow as their husbands cavort with the heavenly virgins.¹² Indeed, Luxenberg shows that the Arabic word for "Paradise" can be traced to the Syriac word for "garden," which stands to reason, given the common identification of the garden of Adam and Eve with Paradise. Luxenberg further demonstrates that metaphorical references to bunches of grapes are consonant with Christian homiletics expatiating on the refreshments that greeted the blessed in Heaven. He specifically cites the fourth-century hymns "on Paradise" of St. Ephraem the Syrian (306–373), which refer to "the grapevines of Paradise." Luxenberg explains that the fact that the Syriac word Ephraem used for "grapevine" was feminine "led the Arabic exegetes of the Koran to this fateful assumption" that the Qur'anic text referred to sexual playthings in Paradise.¹³

Similarly misleading is the standard translation of the famous Qur'anic passages regarding the boys of Paradise ("There will circulate among them young boys made eternal. When you see them, you would think them scattered pearls," [76:19]; "There will circulate among them boys for them, as if they were pearls well-protected," [52:24]; "There will circulate among them young boys made eternal," [56:17]). Luxenberg shows that these passages refer not to boys but, again, to grapes—the refreshment of the blessed. For example, he renders Qur'an 76:19 as: "Iced fruits pass around among them; to see them, you would think they were loose pearls."¹⁴ Luxenberg concludes: "Through the philologically based misinterpretation, until now, of both the *huris* or *virgins of Paradise*

and the *youths of Paradise*, one can gauge the extent to which the Koranic exegesis has become estranged vis-à-vis the original Christian symbolism of the wine of Paradise.”¹⁵ “The wine of Paradise” harks back again to Ephraem the Syrian, in which all of these images—white grapes, iced fruits, and wine—refer to the refreshment of the blessed in the hereafter.

Luxenberg also looks at the Qur’anic verses (44:54 and 52:20) in which, according to the typical understanding, Allah promises that virgins will be given in marriage to the blessed. He suggests that the word understood to mean “marriage,” *zawwagnahum*, could be a misreading of *rawwahnahum*, which refers to giving rest to the departed in heaven, for without diacritical marks, the differing letters, such as the *r* and the *z*, are interchangeable. Here again, then, the verses would have nothing to do with virgins. Instead, they would be prayers for God to grant eternal rest to the souls of the deceased. Such prayers are part of Christian memorial observances. Other evidence supports Luxenberg’s position. For instance, ancient North African inscriptions use *r-ww-H*, the root of *rawwahnahum*, in exactly this Christian liturgical context of praying for God to give eternal rest to the souls of the departed.¹⁶

All this evidence reinforces the possibility that Arabic exegetes of the Qur’an were working with what was originally a Christian text.

The Last Supper

The Qur’an’s Christian substratum can be seen in what Islamic tradition regards as chronologically the Qur’an’s very first segment. In what now stands as sura 96, the angel Gabriel appears before Muhammad in the cave on Mount Hira and exhorts him to “Recite!”:

1. Recite in the name of your Lord who created,
2. created man from a clinging substance.
3. Recite, and your Lord is the most generous,
4. who taught by the pen,
5. taught man that which he did not know.
6. No indeed! Man transgresses
7. because he sees himself self-sufficient.

8. Indeed, to your Lord is the return.
9. Have you seen the one who forbids
10. a servant when he prays?
11. Have you seen if he is upon guidance
12. or enjoins righteousness?
13. Have you seen if he denies and turns away?
14. Does he not know that Allah sees?
15. No indeed! If he does not desist, We will surely drag him by the forelock,
16. a lying, sinning forelock.
17. Then let him call his associates;
18. We will call the angels of Hell.
19. No indeed! Do not obey him. But prostrate and draw near.

This text is, in the words of the contemporary pseudonymous Islamic scholar Ibn Rawandi, “for the most part, incoherent nonsense” that “makes a mockery of the Koran’s description of itself as ‘clear Arabic language.’”¹⁷ For example, the word *kalla*, “no indeed,” occurs three times in sura 96: in verses 6, 15, and 19. According to Ibn Rawandi, “Its first appearance at XCVI.6 is senseless, since it cannot be a negation of the preceding section no matter how those verses are interpreted.”¹⁸ The Qur’an translator Rudi Paret draws out that senselessness in his rendering of verses 4–6: “[He] who has taught the use of the writing cane has taught unto man what he didn’t know. Not at all! Man is really rebellious....”¹⁹

Anomalies abound. The sura shows signs of editing, appearing to be in two parts: Verses 1–8 fit in with the traditional Muslim setting, in which Gabriel approached Muhammad on Mount Hira. But then the subject abruptly and unaccountably changes in verses 9–19, denouncing some unnamed person who prevents a “servant” (or “slave,” as many other translations have it) from praying.

Günter Lüling explains this sudden shift by suggesting that the text of sura 96 was originally a strophic Christian hymn that had been reworked to fit it into an Islamic setting. In Lüling’s reconstruction, based on an original reading of the Arabic text, “Recite in the name

of your Lord” becomes, “Invoke the Name of your Lord.” Lüling translates the Arabic verb *iqra* as “invoke” rather than “recite,” pointing out that the Arab philologist Abu Ubaida (d. 818), author of *Strange Matters of Hadith* (*Gharib al-Hadith*), explained that the verb *qara’a*—“to recite,” with *iqra* as its imperative form—meant the same thing as the verb *dakara*: “invoke, laud, praise.”²⁰ Ibn Rawandi supports Lüling’s argument, noting that “understanding ‘*iqra*’ as ‘invoke,’ rather than ‘read’ or ‘recite,’ becomes plausible when it is realized that in the ancient world reading was invariably reading aloud, so that the distinction between reading and invoking would not have been what it is today.” Thus to “recite” would mean essentially the same thing as “invoke”: to proclaim aloud.²¹

The entire phrase, “Invoke the Name of your Lord,” recalls the common Hebrew phrase *qara’ be shem Yahwe*, “Invoke the name of the Lord” (cf. Genesis 4:25–26). It also recalls Psalm 130, known in Latin as *De profundis*, “Out of the depths I call to you,” in which “to call to God,” *qeraatiikha* in Hebrew, is rendered in Latin as *Clamavi ad te Domine*, which obviously means “to pray to God.”

In Lüling’s reconstruction, the digressive, “He who forbids a servant when he prays” becomes a confession of God’s faithfulness: “Have you ever seen that He denies a servant when he prays?”

The warning questions, “What thinkest thou? If he cries, lies, and turns away—Did he not know that God sees?” become, “Have you ever seen that He betrayed and turned away? Have you not learned that God sees?” The odd, “So let him call on his concourse! We shall call on the guards of Hell,” Lüling renders as an exhortation to call on the members of the heavenly court: “So call for His High Council! You will then call up the High Angelship!”²²

Lüling’s reconstruction of sura 96 as a Christian hymn exhorting the pious to call on God’s name and assuring them of his faithfulness makes more sense than the cryptic, abrupt, and decontextualized canonical text of sura 96.

Examining the Syriac substratum, Luxenberg goes even further. He agrees with Lüling that *iqra* is more accurately rendered “invoke” rather than “recite.” But he contends that the sura does not simply fit into a Christian liturgical context but actually calls its followers to

participate in that Christian liturgical service. Luxenberg writes that “the lexicological and syntactical analysis of this sura, examined under its Syriac connection, has revealed—contrary to the confusion which has reigned in its Arabic reading up to now—a clear and coherent composition in which the faithful is entreated to pray and participate in the liturgical service that the Koran designates as the Eucharist, corresponding to *iqtarib*, taken from the Syriac liturgical term *etqarrab*, which signifies ‘take part in a liturgical service’ as well as ‘to receive the Eucharist.’”²³

Specifically, he renders the segment of the sura’s last verse not as, “Bow thyself, and draw nigh,” but as a call to participate in the Eucharistic celebration: “Return to your religious practices and take part in the offering,” that is, the Eucharist.²⁴ Luxenberg explains that the word *iqtarib*, normally translated as “draw nigh,” is “in fact Arabic only in form and corresponds in reality to the liturgical Syriac term *e/qarra / ethqarrab*, meaning ‘to take part in the offering (Eucharistic)’ as well as ‘to receive the Eucharist.’”²⁵

In the Qur’an, Jesus prays: “O Allah, our Lord, send down to us a table from the heaven to be for us a festival for the first of us and the last of us and a sign from you. And provide for us, and you are the best of providers” (5:114). Allah replies: “Indeed, I will send it down to you, but whoever disbelieves afterwards from among you, then indeed will I punish him with a punishment by which I have not punished anyone among the worlds” (5:115). This has long been seen as a vestige of the Christian doctrine of the Eucharist, but Luxenberg sees it as much more than just a vestige. Jesus’s prayer in Qur’an 5:114 asks Allah that this table from heaven be “a festival (*‘id*) for the first of us and the last of us and a sign (*ayah*) from you.” Notes Luxenberg: “The Arabic word *‘id*, borrowed from the Syriac, has been, in conformity with its Arabic meaning, correctly translated by ‘celebration’ [or ‘feast,’ in the liturgical sense].”

Luxenberg is not alone. In fact, in the words of the scholar of Islam and Jesuit priest Samir Khalil Samir, “According to unanimous scholarly opinion [the Arabic word *‘id*] is a borrowing from the Syriac *‘ida*, which signifies ‘Feast’ or ‘liturgical festival.’”²⁶ Noting that this verse is the only place in the Qur’an where the word *‘id* appears,

Samir concludes, “This *ma’ida* [table] is thus defined by two terms: ‘*id* and *aya*, a ‘Feast’ or ‘liturgical festival’ and a ‘sign.’ Is this not the most appropriate definition of the Eucharist of Christians, which is a festive celebration and a sacramental sign? Even more, it seems evident that in this passage we are dealing with a rather faithful description of Christian faith, otherwise not shared by Muslims.”²⁷

Luxenberg adds even more:

The table being laid out, one could have thought, in fact, that the passage was talking about “having a celebration.” However, the same writing or script transcribed in Syriac and pronounced ‘*yadda* has the meaning “liturgy.” Thus one must understand this verse as follows: “Lord our God, send us down from the sky a Last Supper which would be a liturgy for the first and last of us.” In his reply, God says...“I am going to send it down to you. Whoever is then impious among you will receive from me a torment the like of which I will not inflict on anyone else in the world.”²⁸

“For the first of us and the last of us” in 5:114 (*li-awwalina wa-akhirina*) is another phrase found nowhere else in the Qur’an; literally it means “all, nobody excluded.” Samir relates this to the Christian liturgical phrase regarding the Body and Blood of Christ, “which is offered for you and for many for the remission of sins.”²⁹ Thus this brief and mysterious Qur’an passage likely contains yet another hint of Christian Eucharistic theology.

Accordingly, Luxenberg concludes: “Islam was not impressed by this divine injunction with its threats of the most severe punishments, not having grasped its significance. If the Muslim exegetes had understood these passages as the Koran intended them, there would have been a liturgy of the Last Supper in Islam.”³⁰

A Christian Confession of Faith

One Qur’anic passage that shows obvious signs of editing is sura 74, reproduced here in its entirety in order to demonstrate an obvious anomaly in the verse structure and rhythm (even in English translation):

1. O you who covers himself,
 2. Arise and warn
 3. and your Lord glorify
 4. and your clothing purify
 5. and uncleanness avoid
 6. and do not confer favor to acquire more
 7. but for your Lord be patient.
 8. And when the trumpet is blown,
 9. that day will be a difficult day
 10. for the disbelievers—not easy.
 11. Leave me with the one I created alone
 12. and to whom I granted extensive wealth
 13. and children present
 14. and spread before him, easing,
 15. then he desires that I should add more.
 16. No indeed! He has been toward our verses obstinate.
 17. I will cover him with arduous torment.
 18. Indeed, he thought and deliberated.
 19. So may he be destroyed, how he deliberated.
 20. Then may he be destroyed, how he deliberated.
 21. Then he considered;
 22. then he frowned and scowled;
 23. then he turned back and was arrogant
 24. and said, “This is nothing but magic imitated.
 25. “This is nothing but the word of a human being.”
 26. I will drive him into *saqar*.
 27. And what can make you know what is *saqar*?
 28. It lets nothing remain and leaves nothing,
 29. blackening the skins.
 30. Above it are nineteen.
 31. And We have not made the keepers of the Fire except angels.
- And We have not made their number except as a trial for those who disbelieve, that those who were given the scripture will be convinced and those who have believed will increase in faith and those who were given the scripture and the believers will not doubt and that those in whose hearts is hypocrisy and the disbelievers will say,

“What does Allah intend by this as an example?” Thus Allah leaves astray those whom he wills and guides those whom he wills. And none knows the soldiers of your Lord except him. And mention of the fire is nothing but a reminder to humanity.

32. No! By the moon
33. and the night when it departs
34. and the morning when it brightens,
35. indeed, the fire is of the greatest,
36. as a warning to humanity,
37. to whoever wills among you to proceed or stay behind.
38. Every soul, for what it has earned, will be retained
39. except the companions of the right,
40. in gardens, questioning each other
41. about the criminals,
42. “What put you into *sagar*?”
43. They will say, “We were not of those who prayed,”
44. nor did we feed the poor.
45. And we used to enter into vain discourse with those who engaged,
46. and we used to deny the day of recompense
47. until there came to us the certainty.
48. So there will not benefit them the intercession of intercessors.
49. Then what is with them that they are, from the reminder, turning away
50. as if they were alarmed donkeys
51. fleeing from a lion?
52. Rather, every person among them desires that he would be given scriptures spread about.
53. No! But they do not fear the hereafter.
54. No! Indeed, the Qur’an is a reminder,
55. then whoever wishes to will remember it.
56. And they will not remember except that Allah wills. He is worthy of fear and adequate for forgiveness.

Even in English, the lengthy, discursive verse 31 does not appear to be an original part of this passage. It looks immediately as if it has

been added to the sura from another source—possibly some other sura of the Qur'an itself. It breaks the flow of the clipped, spare verses of the rest. The verse sounds more like the prosaic ruminations of what Islamic tradition considers to be the Qur'an's chronologically later passages than the vivid poetic visions of those traditionally held to be the chronologically early suras.

Lüling observes that Qur'an 74:1–30 “is composed in a very homogeneous form, in that every verse has the same rhythmic style and approximate length of, on average, three to four words (indicating its having originally been a strophic text).” Even Muslim scholars acknowledge that the sura was edited, he points out: “Islamic Koran scholarship has...classified this over-length-verse 74.31 as a late insertion into an earlier text.” According to those scholars, the editing took place during Muhammad's life, originating “in the Medinan period of the Prophet's activities as against his earlier Meccan period.”³¹ But the very fact that Islamic scholars admit that changes were made to the perfect book is significant.

The last line of the “homogeneous” section, verse 30, could be a fragment of what was originally a longer (and clearer) statement. Neither this verse nor any other states explicitly what there are “nineteen” of, or what these nineteen are exactly “over.” Apparently they are above “Sakar,” which is often translated as “the burning.” Accordingly, the Qur'an commentator Ibn Kathir explains that the nineteen are “the first of the guardians of Hell. They are magnificent in [their appearance] and harsh in their character.”³² While this interpretation is plausible, the cryptic nature of the verse has led many Islamic theologians and apologists to speculate about the mystical significance of the number nineteen.

To shed some light on this puzzling sura, Lüling looks closely at verses 11–17. In the traditional rendering, this passage is full of questionable material. Like Qur'an 96:9–19, it denounces an anonymous miscreant. Of whom is Allah, the sole creator and judge of all things, demanding that he be left alone to deal with? Again by examining the *rasm* and noting grammatical and other anomalies in the Arabic, Lüling smooths out the difficulties and presents a reconstruction that makes more sense than the standard Qur'anic

text. This reconstruction reveals the text as a Christological confession:

11. He has created me and the one He has created as a unique being.

12. And He has made him a property obedient to His will.

13. And He has testified to him by witnesses.

14. And He paved for him the way.

15. Then he desired that he might be increased.

16. Not at all that he was rebellious against His commandments.

17. So finally He has made him step through death up to the heights.³³

Among other emendations, Lüling reads *dharni*, the contextually bizarre imperative in 74:11 to “leave me alone” or “dismiss me,” as *dharaani*, “He has created me.” And so, he argues, this passage begins to become clear as a Christian confession of faith—but not one reflecting the theology of the Byzantine Empire or the Church of Constantinople. Rather, it is a rejection of Trinitarian Christology.

For centuries the Byzantine Empire had been convulsed by controversy over the nature of Christ. Once the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and issued the Edict of Milan decriminalizing Christianity in 313, the rapidly growing new faith became important for the unity of the empire. Constantine sought to safeguard that unity by calling the first ecumenical council—that is, a meeting of all the bishops in the empire—to settle the question of the nature of Christ. This council met at Nicaea in 325.

At Nicaea the theology of Arius, a priest of the Church of Alexandria, was anathematized, and Arius himself was defrocked and excommunicated. Arius taught that Christ was not coeternal with God, as the victorious party taught, but was a created being, albeit an exalted one. After the council, Arians still wielded considerable influence within the empire; they came close on more than one occasion to becoming the dominant form of Christianity and reversing the decision of Nicaea. Their power waned, however, and eventually the political and social restrictions that the empire

imposed on them became so onerous that they left its domains for points east: Syria and Arabia.³⁴

The Arians were by no means the first Christian group to view Christ as created. The Jewish-Christian Ebionites viewed Jesus as the Messiah but not in any sense divine. Their influence spread to Syria and the surrounding areas in the centuries just before the advent of Islam.³⁵

Thus it is entirely possible that the Christian substratum of the Qur'an reflects a Christology that views Christ as a created being. In Lüling's reconstruction of this passage, God created Jesus Christ as a unique being, "a property obedient to His will." Jesus is not, in other words, the coeternal Son of God who existed for all eternity and became man. Lüling presents sura 74 as the product of a Christian group that rejected the high Christology of the great Church of Constantinople and maintained that Jesus was nothing more than a servant of God and His messenger. In his reconstruction, the entire sura 74 becomes a Christian hymn recounting Christ's descent into hell and affirming him as a created being.

As for the obviously interpolated verse 31, Lüling explains it as a later Islamic commentary on a pre-Islamic Christian text that was reworked and Islamized in verses 1–30.³⁶ Whereas Qur'an commentators assert that verse 31 was added during the Medinan period of Muhammad's career, Lüling argues that "this traditional [Meccan/Medinan] division must be given up in favour of the contrast 'pre-Islamic Christian strophic texts' and 'Islamic texts.'"³⁷

According to Lüling, 74:31 is an Islamic commentary on the cryptic 74:30, "Above it are nineteen." The added verse is designed to affirm that the "nineteen" are the angels who are the guardians of hell, but there follows the odd warning that Allah has made this number "as a trial for the unbelievers; that those who were given the Book may have certainty, and that those who believe may increase in belief, and that those who were given the Book and those who believe may not be in doubt." Lüling takes this strange warning as an indication that the Qur'an's explanation of "above it are nineteen" in 74:30 was controversial at the time it was written. He concludes that 74:31 is "not merely a sober commentary on that immediately preceding

verse, but it is the emphatic reminder, most urgently put forward, to endorse the belief that these enigmatic words of verse 74.30 ‘on it are nineteen’ should actually mean ‘on it (the hellfire) are 19 (angels) appointed (as custodians).’ This urgent reminder is combined with threats against those who were unwilling to believe in this interpretation, obviously because they rejected this ‘simile’ (*matal* as the text of verse 31 calls it itself) as inappropriate or even as wrong.”³⁸

And they rejected it as wrong, and had to be threatened with becoming one of those whom Allah led astray, because “most probably they still knew the original meaning of this pre-Islamic Christian hymn in general, and therefore also the original meaning of verse 74.30 in particular, within its pre-Islamic Christian context. The Islamic interpretation, on which the inserted commentary verse 74.31 insists with intimidating warnings, represents indeed no biblical or other religious topos or well-known simile, so that from our point of view, based on the pre-Islamic hymnody so far uncovered in the Koran, this Islamic interpretation of 74.30 is nothing but the reinterpretation of an original Christian strophic text—which at that time of early Islam a lot of people still knew and tried to defend.”³⁹

Hanifs—Pagans or Monotheists?

The Qur’an’s Christology, both in the canonical Islamic text and in the pre-Islamic Christian substratum that many scholars see in the book, is defiantly anti-Trinitarian. The Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, three Christian writings falsely attributed to St. Clement of Rome but which actually appear to be fourth-century Jewish Christian texts, declare that “our Lord neither asserted that there were gods except the Creator of all, nor did He proclaim Himself to be God, but He with reason pronounced blessed him who called Him the Son of that God who has arranged the universe.” They reject the idea that “he who comes from God is God.”⁴⁰

The Qur’an goes even further, of course, rejecting also the idea that Jesus is the Son of God. Above all, it denounces those who take Christ to be part of the Godhead: “Say, ‘He is Allah, one, Allah, the eternal refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to him any

equivalent.” (112:1–4). The phrase “nor is there to him any equivalent” may be a denial of the orthodox Christology holding the Son of God to be equal to the Father, and the assertion that God neither begets nor was begotten is clearly a response to the orthodox Christian designation of Christ as the “only begotten Son of God.”

Lüling sees traces of the Christian controversies over the nature of Christ in the Qur’an’s denunciations of those who associate partners with Allah. Lüling sees the Muslim charge that the pagan Quraysh of Mecca were *mushrikun*, those who associated others with Allah in worship, as an indication that they had actually converted to orthodox Trinitarian Christianity, thereby reinforcing their rejection of Islam’s hardline monotheism and rejection of Christ’s divinity. As the Islamic faith began to develop as a distinct religion, it decisively rejected this faith in Christ and reinterpreted the Qur’an to fit its developing new theology. The *hanifs*, who were overwhelmed by the coming of Islam and its success, were the last remnants of those who held to creedally vague monotheism.⁴¹

Thus the Qur’an speaks of them gently, even ascribing this faith to the prophets. In the Qur’an (3:67), the word *hanif* refers to the pre-Islamic monotheism adhered to by the patriarch Abraham and the prophets. But it is cognate with *hanpe*, or “pagan”—this is the word used for “pagan” in the Syriac rendering of the Bible, the Peshitta. The medieval Christian apologist al-Kindi (not to be confused with the Muslim Arab philosopher of the same name) writes, “Abraham used to worship the idol, i.e., the one named al-Uzza in Harran, as a *hanif*, as you agree, O you *hanif*....He abandoned *al-hanifiyya*, which is the worship of idols, and became a monotheist....Therefore we find *al-hanifiyya* in God’s revealed scriptures as a name for the worship of idols.”⁴²

Al-Kindi’s reliability has been questioned, but the point here is not his assertions but his usage of the word *hanif* as referring to an idol-worshipper rather than to a pre-Islamic monotheist. It is odd that the word *hanif* in the Qur’an, as Islamic tradition explains it, means a pre-Islamic monotheist, not a pagan, as it means for al-Kindi and in the Peshitta. This may suggest an intermediate step between pagan

idolatry and the development of a full-blown Islam featuring Muhammad and his Qur'an: in this interim stage, some of the idolatrous *hanifs* may have embraced a vague monotheism that identified itself with, or considered itself akin to, Judaism and Christianity. Such *hanifs* would have endorsed a creedal statement such as Lüling's version of Qur'an 74:11–17, with its strong emphasis on Jesus Christ as a created being and messenger of God, not as God become man. As we have seen, the first decades of the Arab conquest show the conquerors as holding not to Islam as we know it but to a vague creed with ties to some form of Christianity and Judaism. Perhaps this was the very embodiment of *al-hanifiyya*: arising out of Arab paganism, embracing monotheism, and then being overwhelmed by the development of the specific faith of Islam.

Christmas in the Qur'an

There is a great deal more in the Qur'an that suggests the presence of an originally Christian substratum. Luxenberg explains: "It is not just on the level of simple isolated words but also at the level of syntax that the Arab commentators have misunderstood the Koranic text, to the extent of misinterpreting entire suras. Thus the Arab exegetes saw in the title of Sura 108 (*al-Kawthar*), among other things, the name of a river in Paradise reserved exclusively for the Prophet or Muslims, and in the subsequent text the reprobation of an opponent of the Prophet who must have despised the latter for having been deprived of children. However the Syriac reading of this sura calls to mind the First Epistle of St Peter, Chapter 5 verses 8–9, according to which—and in accordance with the introduction to the compline of the Roman service—the faithful are exhorted to persevere in their prayers by which their adversary, Satan, is routed."⁴³

Many of the Quran's more obscure passages begin to make sense when read in light of its having a foundation in Christian theology. For example, there is an enigmatic sura on the Night of Power, *al-Qadr* ("Power"): "Indeed, We sent the Qur'an down during the Night of Power. And what can make you know what is the Night of Power? The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. The angels

and the Spirit descend therein by permission of their Lord for every matter. Peace it is until the emergence of dawn” (97:1–5). Muslims associate the Night of Power with the first appearance of Gabriel to Muhammad and the first revelation of the Qur’an; they commemorate this night during the fasting month of Ramadan. But the Qur’an makes no explicit connection between the Night of Power and the revelation of the Qur’an. The book doesn’t explain what the Night of Power is, except to say it is the night on which the angels (not just one angel) and the Spirit descend and proclaim Peace.

In light of the Qur’an’s Syriac Christian roots, there is another plausible interpretation—that sura 97 refers to Christmas.

The Qur’anic scholar Richard Bell saw in the night, angels, Spirit, and peace of the sura a hint of the Nativity even without a detailed philological examination: “The origin of the idea of the Night of Power is unexplained. The only other passage in the Quran which has any bearing on it is XLIV, 2a, 3. In some ways what is here said of it suggests that some account of the Eve of the Nativity may have given rise to it.”⁴⁴

Luxenberg points out that because the Night of Power is associated with the revelation of the Qur’an, Muslims undertake vigils during Ramadan. “However,” he notes, “with regard to the history of religions this fact is all the more remarkable since Islam does not have a nocturnal liturgy (apart from the *tarawih*, prayers offered during the nights of Ramadan). There is thus every reason to think that these vigils corresponded originally to a Christian liturgical practice connected to the birth of Jesus Christ, and which was later adopted by Islam, but re-interpreted by Islamic theology to mean the descent of the Koran.”⁴⁵

A close textual analysis supports this argument. *Al-qadr*, the Arabic word for “power,” also means “fate” or “destiny.” Luxenberg observes that the Syriac *qaaf-daal-raa*—the *q-d-r* root of the Arabic word *al-qadr*—has three meanings, designating, “i) the birth (meaning the moment of birth); ii) the star under which one is born and which determines the fate of the newly born; iii) The Nativity, or Christmas.” He continues: “Thus defined, the term *al-qadr*, ‘destiny,’ is related to the star of birth, which the Koranic *al qadr* applies, in the context of

this sura, to the Star of Christmas. As a result, a connection is found to be established with Matthew II.2, 'Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and are come to worship him.'"⁴⁶ Then the verse, "The Night of Power is better than a thousand months" (97:4), would be rendered, "Christmas night is better than a thousand vigils."⁴⁷

The Qur'an concludes the Night of Power passage with, "Peace it is, till the rising of dawn" (97:5). Luxenberg notes that this verse "sends us back to the hymn of the Angels cited by Luke II.14: 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.' This chant of the Angels has always constituted the principal theme of the Syriac vigils of the Nativity which lasts into Christmas night, with all sorts of hymns, more than all the other vigils." Indeed, in the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Divine Liturgy of the Nativity was traditionally celebrated at dawn, after a nightlong vigil—"Peace it is until the emergence of dawn."⁴⁸

In addition, the thirteenth-century Arabic lexicon *Lisan al-Arab* (*The Language of the Arabs*) quotes the ninth-century Arab philologist al-Asmai referring to a winter night that "lasts so long that all the stars appear during it. It is also the night of the birth of Jesus—on our Prophet and on him blessing and well-being—and the Christians honour it and hold vigils during it."⁴⁹

In time, however, this connection was forgotten, such that, says Luxenberg, "The Muslims of today are no longer aware that the night that they celebrate and honour with so much fervour is in reality the night of Christmas."⁵⁰

Cultural Interaction between Different Religious Communities

Possibly relevant in this connection is the fact that in 2018, the French scholar Dr. Eléonore Cellard discovered fragments of a Qur'an manuscript dating from the eighth or ninth century that had been written over a section of the Book of Deuteronomy written in the Coptic language. "This is a very important discovery," Cellard declared, "for the history of the Qur'an and early Islam. We have here a witness of cultural interactions between different religious communities."⁵¹

Romain Pingannaud of Christie's auction house, where Cellard found the fragment, agreed. "It's quite extraordinary," he said. "And what's even more fascinating is it is on top of passages from the Old Testament....It shows the contact between communities in the first centuries of Islam; it's very relevant."⁵² Pingannaud noted that Qur'an palimpsests of this kind were quite rare, explaining: "We think this is because the Qur'an is such an important text and although vellum was very expensive, the Qur'an was always written on new material. It's highly revered and so they would use brand new material."⁵³

Could Cellard have found evidence of much more than just "cultural interactions between different religious communities"? Is it possible that this Qur'an fragment was written over the Coptic text of Deuteronomy while the Qur'an was being composed, and the Deuteronomy text was being used as one of the source materials for the new holy book? Given the numerous resonances of Biblical accounts in the Qur'an, the possibility of something like this would be unwise to discount.

CHAPTER 12

Who Collected the Qur'an?

The First Mention of the Qur'an

Clearly the text of the Qur'an has been worked over. Even Islamic scholars acknowledge that diacritical marks were added to the Arabic, and that other additions were made after the revelation of the Qur'an. And as we have seen, a host of other evidence indicates that much of the text was reworked from Christian source material.

But who would have taken this Christian text and adulterated it, and why? If a new religious text or even a new religion had to be constructed, why not start from scratch rather than rework existing material? The answers to these questions are elusive, although a number of clues enable us to piece together a coherent narrative.

If the canonical stories about Zaid ibn Thabit and Uthman were true, one would expect to see references to the Qur'an in other records. But no such references are to be found in the historical records of the mid-seventh century. As we have seen, the coinage of the early caliphate and the edifices that survive from that period bear no Qur'anic inscriptions, quotes, or references of any kind. And although the Arab invaders poured through the Middle East and North Africa, the peoples they conquered seemed to have had no idea that the conquerors, whom they called "Hagarrians," "Saracens," "Muhajirun" or "Ishmaelites," had a holy book at all. Christian and Jewish writers of the period never made even the smallest reference to such a book. Crone and Cook observe: "There is no hard evidence for the existence of the Koran in any form before the last decade of the seventh century, and the tradition which places this

rather opaque revelation in its historical context is not attested before the middle of the eighth.”¹

Not until the early part of the eighth century do mentions of the Qur’an begin to appear in the polemical literature of non-Muslims and Muslims alike. The first reference to the Qur’an by a non-Muslim occurred around the year 710—eighty years after the book was supposedly completed and sixty years after it was supposedly collected and distributed. During a debate with an Arab noble, a Christian monk of the monastery of Beth Hale (of which there were two, one in northern Iraq and the other in Arabia; it is not known in which one this monk lived) cited the Qur’an by name. The monk wrote, “I think that for you, too, not all your laws and commandments are in the Qur’an which Muhammad taught you; rather there are some which he taught you from the Qur’an, and some are in *surat albaqrah* and in *gygy* and in *twrh*.”²

By this point Arab armies had conquered a huge expanse of territory, stretching from North Africa, across the Levant, Syria, and Iraq, and into Persia, and yet those eight decades of conquest had produced scarcely a mention of the book that supposedly inspired them. And when the Qur’an finally was mentioned, it appears that the book was not even in the form we now know. *Surat albaqrah* (or *al-Baqara*) is “the chapter of the Cow,” which is the second, and longest, sura of the Qur’an. The eighth-century monk thus quite clearly knew of a Qur’an that didn’t contain this sura; he considered *surat albaqrah* to be a stand-alone book, along with *gygy* (the Injil, or Gospel) and *twrh* (the Torah). It is unlikely that the monk simply made an error: who would mistake a chapter of a book for a separate book? If the Qur’an’s largest sura was not present in the Muslim holy book by the early eighth century, it could not have been added by Muhammad, Zaid ibn Thabit, or Uthman.

There is other evidence that the “chapter of the Cow” existed as a separate book and was added in to the Qur’an only at a later date. As noted, John of Damascus, writing around 730, referred to the “text of the Cow” (as well as the “text of the Woman” and the “text of the Camel of God”), giving the impression that it existed as a stand-alone text. Even Islamic tradition points to the “chapter of the Cow”

as a separate book. The Islamic chronicler Qatada ibn Dima (d. 735) makes one of the earliest mentions by a Muslim of any part of the Qur'an when he records that during the Battle of Hunayn in 630, during the lifetime of Muhammad, Muhammad's uncle al-Abbas rallied the troops by crying out, "O companions of the chapter of the Cow [*ya ahab surat al-Baqara*]!"³ Qatada ibn Dima does not have al-Abbas saying, "O companion of the Qur'an," but instead fixed on one sura of the Muslim holy book, albeit its longest and arguably most important one. This suggests that even by Qatada's time, the Qur'an was not yet fixed in its present form.

Abd al-Malik and Hajjaj ibn Yusuf: Collectors of the Qur'an?

In light of all this evidence, the Islamic traditions pointing to the caliph Abd al-Malik and his associate Hajjaj ibn Yusuf as collectors of the Qur'an take on new significance. Abd al-Malik, who reigned from 685 until his death in 705, claimed to have been responsible for the collection of the Qur'an when he said: "I fear death in the month of Ramadan—in it I was born, in it I was weaned, in it I have collected the Qur'an (*jama'tul-Qur'ana*), and in it I was elected caliph."⁴ Remember, too, the hadiths that record Hajjaj ibn Yusuf as collecting and editing the Qur'an during Abd al-Malik's caliphate.

From the historical records available to us, it makes sense that the Qur'an was not collected until Abd al-Malik's reign. If Uthman had indeed collected the standard book and sent copies to all the Muslim provinces in the 650s, it is inexplicable that the Muslims would have made no reference to it for decades thereafter. The first Qur'anic references, as we have seen, did not appear until the time of Abd al-Malik and his Dome of the Rock inscriptions. And even then, it is not certain whether the inscriptions were quoting the Qur'an or the Qur'an was quoting the inscriptions.

Abd al-Malik may also have been responsible for the development of some of the traditions about Muhammad that began to come to light in the eighth century. His son Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik, who himself reigned as caliph from 715 to 717, is said to have asked a scribe to record the traditions of Muhammad, but then destroyed the result because his father opposed keeping a written record of any

Islamic knowledge besides what was included in the Qur'an. However, Abd al-Malik is supposed to have changed his mind about the usefulness and propriety of having what Muhammad said and did recorded in writing.⁵ This change may have been the impetus for the proliferation of material about Muhammad in the ensuing years.

Meanwhile, among the hadiths pointing to Hajjaj ibn Yusuf as a collector of the Qur'an, one cites a Muslim recalling: "I heard al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf say, in a speech delivered from the pulpit (*minbar*), 'compose the Qur'an as Gabriel composed it: the writings that include the mention of the cow, and the writings that include mention of women, and the writings that include mention of the family of 'Imran.'" ⁶ The Cow is sura 2 in the standard text of the Qur'an; Women is sura 4; and the Family of Imran is sura 3. This hadith thus suggests that the Qur'an had not yet been collected at the time of Abd al-Malik and Hajjaj. The fact that Hajjaj mentioned the suras out of their canonical order adds to that impression, for one who knew Hajjaj well recalled: "When I heard al-Hajjaj reading, I realized that he had long studied the Qur'an."⁷ Hajjaj is even said to have altered eleven words of the Qur'anic text.⁸

Hadiths show Hajjaj throwing himself into the work of collecting the Qur'an. One reports him as taking to the task with an incandescent ferocity; in the hadith, he pronounced that if he heard anyone reading from the Qur'an of Abdullah ibn Masud, "I will kill him, and I will even rub his *mushaf* with a side of pork."⁹ On occasion he even dared to boast about his work. When Muhammad died, the prophet's slave Umm Ayman (who had been his daughter-in-law, as the wife of his former adopted son, Zayd) cried disconsolately, "I know well that God's Messenger has left for something better than this lowly world. I am crying because the inspiration has stopped."

When Hajjaj heard about what Umm Ayman had said, he responded: "Umm Ayman lied: I only work by inspiration."¹⁰ Such a statement is placed in the context of Hajjaj's work on the Qur'an. Of course, the Abbasids, who replaced the Umayyads, are known to have fabricated numerous hadiths portraying their rivals in a bad light. So this hadith may have been an invention of Hajjaj's enemies, along with Hajjaj's more famous, or notorious, statement to Abd al-

Malik that Allah's caliph was more important to him than his prophet.¹¹ Even if that is the case, however, it testifies to Hajjaj's fame as the editor of the Qur'an—if not its actual author.

Like Uthman, Hajjaj is said to have sent official copies of his revised Qur'an to all the Muslim provinces. The jurist Malik ibn Anas (d. 796) said that al-Hajjaj "sent the *mushaf* [the codex of the Qur'an] to the capitals. He sent a large one to Medina. He was the first to send the *mushaf* to the cities."¹² Also like Uthman in the canonical account, Hajjaj ordered all variants burned. The original copy that Uthman approved did not survive, even according to Islamic tradition. A hadith holds that when Hajjaj's *mushaf* arrived in Medina, Uthman's family indignantly asked that it be compared with the Qur'an of their illustrious forbear, saying: "Get out the *mushaf* of Uthman b. Affan, so that we may read it."¹³ Someone asked Malik ibn Anas what had happened to it; Malik answered, "It has disappeared."¹⁴ It was said to have been destroyed on the same day Uthman was assassinated.¹⁵

Coming from hadiths, the information about Hajjaj and the collection of the Qur'an has no more presumption of authenticity than the reports in any other hadith. But it is easy to understand why Hajjaj and Abd al-Malik, if they were collecting and editing the Qur'an, would have ascribed their work to Uthman, so as to give it a patina of authority and authenticity. It is much harder to understand why any Muslim would have invented hadiths saying that Abd al-Malik and Hajjaj did this work if Uthman had already done it decades earlier and the standardized Qur'an had been available throughout the Islamic world all that time.

In any case, hadiths are not the only sources for the claim that Abd al-Malik and Hajjaj collected the Qur'an. Another indication can be found in polemical letters that the iconoclastic Byzantine emperor Leo III the Isaurian (717–741) purportedly wrote to the caliph Umar II (717–720). No text of these letters survives that goes back earlier than the late eighth century, so it cannot be said with certainty that Leo III actually wrote them, at least in the form in which they have come down to us.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the letters offer evidence that the Qur'an was widely believed to be Hajjaj's work:

It was Umar, Abu Turab and Salman the Persian who composed that (“your *P’ourkan*” [or *Furqan*]), even though the rumour has got around among you that God sent it down from the heavens.... As for your [Book], you have already given us examples of such falsifications and one knows among others of a certain Hajjaj, named by you as governor of Persia, who had men gather your ancient books, which he replaced by others composed by himself according to his taste and which he disseminated everywhere in your nation, because it was easier by far to undertake such a task among a people speaking a single language. From this destruction, nonetheless, there escaped a few of the works of Abu Turab, for Hajjaj could not make them disappear completely.¹⁷

Abu Turab, “Father of the Soil,” was a title of Ali ibn Abi Talib—earned by his many prayers, which involved prostrations that resulted in a permanent mark on his forehead.

The Christian al-Kindi, who wrote between 813 and 833—well before the supposedly most authoritative Hadith collections came together—asserted that Hajjaj “gathered together every single copy” of the Qur’an he could find “and caused to be omitted from the text a great many passages. Among these, they say, were verses revealed concerning the House of Umayyah with names of certain persons, and concerning the House of Abbas also with names.” Then Hajjaj “called in and destroyed all the preceding copies, even as Uthman had done before him.”¹⁸

Al-Kindi contended that the text of the Qur’an had been altered, noting that “the enmity subsisting between Ali and Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman is well known; now each of these entered in the text whatever favored his own claims, and left out what was otherwise. How, then, can we distinguish between the genuine and the counterfeit?”¹⁹ He continued: “And what about the losses caused by Hajjaj? [...] How can we make an arbiter as to the Book of God a man who never ceased to play into the hands of the Umayyads whenever he found opportunity?”²⁰

How indeed? The answer to Al-Kindi's question is not clear. What can be determined is that the dominant Qur'anic text today appears to derive from Hajjaj, not Uthman. There are other hints that this is the case, and that the Qur'an, and Islam as a whole, began to emerge decades later than the standard account states. Even if the Dome of the Rock inscriptions are taken at face value as a declaration of the Islamic faith as we know it today, it is exceedingly strange that they are the first clear declaration of Islamic faith. Dating from 691, they were written six decades after the Arab conquests began. Similarly, the textual variants in the Qur'an are striking enough simply for existing; after all, if the Qur'an was standardized and distributed early on, and the alternate copies burned, variants should not have emerged.

And in the same vein, if it was well established that Uthman collected the Qur'an, and if a common Qur'an was in widespread use among the early Arab conquerors, there is no clear reason why alternative explanations for the origins of the book would have been invented.

Islamic tradition also shows signs that way the faith was practiced at some point changed. Bukhari records two provocative hadiths: "Anas said, 'I do not find (nowadays) things as they were (practiced) at the time of the Prophet.' Somebody said 'The prayer (is as it was.)' Anas said, 'Have you not done in the prayer what you have done?'"²¹ And: "Narrated Az-Zuhri that he visited Anas bin Malik at Damascus and found him weeping and asked him why he was weeping. He replied, 'I do not know anything which I used to know during the lifetime of Allah's Apostle except this prayer which is being lost (not offered as it should be).'"²²

All this, and as we have seen, much more demonstrates that the canonical account of the origins of Islam is far shakier than most people realize.

CHAPTER 13

Making Sense of It All

The Canonical Story

In broad outline, the accepted story of Islam's origins is well known. It begins with an Arabian merchant of the Quraysh tribe of Mecca, known to the world as Muhammad, a name that means the "praised one." He rejected the polytheism of his tribe and was given to frequent prayer in the hills and caves outside Mecca. In the year 610, when he was forty, he was praying in the cave on Mount Hira, about two miles from Mecca, when he was suddenly confronted by the angel Gabriel, who commanded him to *recite*.

For the next twenty-three years, until his death in 632, Muhammad did just that: he recited the messages he received from Gabriel, presenting them to his followers as the pure and unadulterated word of the supreme and only God. Many of his followers memorized portions. The Arabia in which Islam was born was an oral culture that respected poetic achievement, and thus the prodigious feats of memory required to memorize lengthy suras were not so unusual.

After Muhammad's death, the revelations he had received were collected together into the Qur'an, or "Recitation," from the accounts of those who had memorized them or written them down.

Muhammad began his career simply as a preacher of religious ideas. But his uncompromising monotheism cut directly against the entrenched polytheism of the Quraysh—and against their lucrative business in the Ka'ba, the shrine that attracted pilgrims from all over Arabia. The Quraysh scoffed at the preacher, his words of Allah, and his prophetic pretensions. Tensions steadily increased until finally Muhammad fled from Mecca after learning of a plot to assassinate

him. In 622 he and the Muslims left Mecca and settled in the city of Yathrib. This was the *hijra*, which marks the beginning of Islam. Because of this momentous migration, Yathrib came to be known as the *Madinat an-Nabi*, or the City of the Prophet—Medina.

Once the Muslims were in Medina, the revelations Muhammad received began to change in character. In addition to warning of the impending judgment of Allah, he called the believers to take up arms in the defense of the new community and ultimately to fight offensive wars against nonbelievers. Muhammad himself led the Muslims into battle against the Quraysh and other pagan Arab tribes. This series of battles forms the backbone of Islamic salvation history, illustrating the core point that obedience to Allah brings success in this world as well as the next, and that the converse is also true: disobedience will bring earthly disaster as well as hellfire.

After Muhammad died, his teachings lived on. Muslim warriors, energized by the prophet's exhortations to jihad and his example in unifying Arabia, embarked on a series of conquests unprecedented in their breadth and swiftness: Syria and the Holy Land by 637; Armenia and Egypt in 639; Cyprus in 654; and North Africa in the 650s and 660s. By 674 the Muslims were besieging Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. A century after the death of their warrior prophet, they controlled a vast empire stretching across the Middle East and North Africa. Even as the Islamic empire's political fortunes waned, its cultural and religious grip did not loosen. Now, fourteen hundred years after its birth, Islam has receded from only a handful of areas it conquered.

And it all depends on the words and example of Muhammad, the last prophet. The billion-plus Muslims around the globe are not the only ones who take this account for granted; even non-Muslims generally accept the broad contours of this narrative, which has been told and retold for centuries.

By now, however, it is clear that, aside from the Arab conquests themselves, virtually none of the standard account could have happened as stated.

A Revisionist Scenario

After the investigations of the preceding chapters, here is what we know about the traditional account of Muhammad's life and the early days of Islam:

- No record of Muhammad's reported death in 632 appears until more than a century after that date.
- A Christian account apparently dating from the mid-630s speaks of an Arab prophet "armed with a sword" who seems to be still alive.
- The early accounts written by the people the Arabs conquered never mention Islam, Muhammad, or the Qur'an. They call the conquerors "Ishmaelites," "Saracens," "Muhajirun," and "Hagarians," but never "Muslims."¹
- The Arab conquerors, in their coins and inscriptions, don't mention Islam or the Qur'an for the first six decades of their conquests. Mentions of "Muhammad" are nonspecific and on at least two occasions are accompanied by a cross. The word "Muhammad" can be used both as a proper name and as an honorific.
- The Qur'an, even by the canonical Muslim account, was not distributed in its present form until the 650s. Contradicting that standard account is the fact that neither the Arabians nor the Christians and Jews in the region mention the Qur'an until the early eighth century.
- The Qur'an contains numerous characters and stories that have been taken over from Judaism, Christianity, and other sources.
- The Qur'an contains a great many words that make little or no sense in Arabic, but are clearly derived from Syro-Aramaic, or become clear when they are read as Syro-Aramaic. Even the Arabic words for the Five Pillars of Islam are derived from Syriac and Hebrew.
- During the reign of the caliph Muawiya (661–680), the Arabs constructed at least one public building whose inscription was headed by a cross.

- We begin hearing about Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, and about Islam itself in the 690s, during the reign of the caliph Abd al-Malik. Coins and inscriptions reflecting Islamic beliefs begin to appear at this time also.
- Around the same time as the reign of Abd al-Malik, Arabic became the predominant written language of the Arabian empire, supplanting Syriac and Greek.
- Abd al-Malik claimed, in a passing remark in one hadith, to have collected the Qur'an, contradicting Islamic tradition that the collection was the work of the caliph Uthman forty years earlier.
- Multiple hadiths report that Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, governor of Iraq during the reign of Abd al-Malik, edited the Qur'an and distributed his new edition to the various Arab-controlled provinces—again, something Uthman is supposed to have done decades earlier.
- Even some Islamic traditions maintains that certain common Islamic practices, such as the recitation of the Qur'an during mosque prayers, date from orders of Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, not to the earliest period of Islamic history.
- While the canonical Islamic account holds that Muhammad was born in Mecca, which was a thriving center for trade and pilgrimage, the extant records show that during the time Muhammad is supposed to have lived, it was not a city of any importance.
- Although the directive to Muslims to pray toward Mecca is supposed to have been revealed during Muhammad's time, the earliest mosques were built facing Petra in Jordan, up until the early years of the eighth century. Some of these ancient mosques face Petra to this day.
- In the middle of the eighth century, the Abbasid dynasty supplanted the Umayyad line of Abd al-Malik. The Abbasids charged the Umayyads with impiety on a large scale. In the Abbasid period, biographical material about Muhammad began

to proliferate. The first complete biography of the prophet of Islam finally appeared during this era—nearly 150 years after the traditional date of his death.

- The proliferation of hadith literature, including biographical material about Muhammad, reached its zenith in the ninth century, over two hundred years after Muhammad is traditionally said to have died.
- The biographical material that emerged situates Muhammad in an area of Arabia that never was the center for trade and pilgrimage that the canonical account of Islam's origins depends on it to be.

In short, the lack of confirming detail in the historical record, the late development of biographical material about the Islamic prophet, the atmosphere of political and religious factionalism in which that material developed, and much more beyond suggest that the Muhammad of Islamic tradition did not exist, or if he did, he was substantially different from how that tradition portrays him.

How to make sense of all this? If the Arab forces who conquered so much territory beginning in the 630s were not energized by the teachings of a new prophet and the divine word he delivered, how did the Islamic character of their empire arise at all? If Muhammad did not exist, why was it ever considered necessary to invent him?

Any answer to these questions will of necessity be conjectural—but in light of the facts above, so is the canonical account of Islam's origins.

The Creation of the Hero

The immutable fact in this entire discussion is the Arab empire. The Arab conquests (whatever may have precipitated them) and the empire they produced are a matter of historical record.

Some historians have minimized the martial aspect of the Arab conquests, contending that the Byzantines were exhausted after their protracted wars with the Persians and simply withdrew from the area, leaving a vacuum that the Arabs filled.² That may be true to a

degree,³ but in any case, the result was the same: the Arabs built a mighty empire.

Every empire of the day was anchored in a political theology. The Romans conquered many nations and unified them by means of the worship of the Greco-Roman gods. This Greco-Roman paganism was later supplanted by Christianity. The Christological controversies of the early Church threatened to tear the empire asunder, so much so that the newly Christian emperors felt compelled to get involved in ecclesiastical affairs. They called the first ecumenical councils primarily to secure unity within the empire, and the Christology of the first four councils became so closely identified with the empire in the East that to oppose one was essentially to oppose the other. Many of those Christian groups whom the ecumenical councils deemed heretical left the empire.

The realm of political theology, then, offers the most plausible explanation for the creation of Islam, Muhammad, and the Qur'an. The Arab empire controlled, and needed to unify, huge expanses of territory in which different religions predominated. Arabia, Syria, and other lands the Arabs first conquered were home to many of the Christian groups, such as Nestorians and Jacobites, that had fled the Byzantine Empire after the ecumenical councils judged their views heretical. Persia, meanwhile, was home to Zoroastrians, who had an imperial theology—that is, a conviction that a common religion would unify an empire of diverse nationalities—akin to that of the Romans and to some degree even based on it. This was an understandable influence given that the Persian emperor Chosroes had spent time in Constantinople and was married to two Christian women.⁴

But at first, the Arab empire did not have a compelling political theology to compete with those it supplanted and solidify its conquests. The earliest Arab rulers appear to have been adherents of a monotheistic religion centered around Abraham and Ishmael, which Crone and Cook dubbed “Hagarism.”⁵ They frowned upon the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ—hence Muawiya’s letter to the Byzantine emperor Constantine, calling on him to “renounce this Jesus and convert to the great God whom I serve, the God of our father Abraham.”

This umbrella monotheistic movement saw itself as encompassing the true forms of the two great previous monotheistic movements, Judaism and Christianity. Traces of this perspective appear in the Qur'an, such as when Allah scolds the Jews and Christians for fighting over Abraham, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian but a Muslim *hanif*—that is, in the Qur'anic usage, a pre-Islamic monotheist (3:64–67). In its earliest form, Islam was probably much more positive toward both Christianity and Judaism than it later came to be. Evidence of this openness can be found in the crosses on the early Arab coinage and caliphs' inscriptions, and in the indications from adversarial literature that the Arabian prophet was making common cause with the Jews.

An early Islam that counted Jews and Christians as within the fold could help account for the Qur'an passage promising salvation to various groups: "Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans, those who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness, will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve" (2:62).⁶

From Monotheism to Muhammad

This Abrahamic monotheism, conceiving of Christ as the servant of Allah and his messenger, probably reached its apotheosis in 691 in Abd al-Malik's Dome of the Rock inscriptions, which could well refer to Jesus. During the same period, the nascent religion began to take shape as an entity in its own right—a forthrightly, even defiantly, Arabic one. The specific features that emerged revolved around the person of the "praised one," *Muhammad*, an Arabian prophet who may have lived decades before and whose words and works were already shrouded in the mists of history.

The historical data about this Muhammad were sparse and contradictory, but there were certain raw materials around which a legend could be constructed. There was the mysterious Arabian prophet to whom the *Doctrina Jacobi* refers, whose words and deeds somewhat resemble those of the prophet of Islam and differ from them sharply in important ways. There was the "*Mhmt*" to whom

Thomas the Christian priest refers in the 640s, whose *Taiyaye* were doing battle with the Byzantines. There was the Muhammad of the cross-bearing coins struck in the early years of the Arab conquests. Did this “Muhammad” refer to an actual person bearing that name, whose deeds are lost, or was it a title for Jesus, or did it refer to someone or something else altogether? The answer is not known.

Whatever the case, the records make clear that toward the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth, the Umayyads began to speak much more specifically about Islam, its prophet, and eventually its book. The Dome of the Rock’s insistent assertion that the “praised one” was only Allah’s messenger and not divine lent itself well to the creation of a whole new figure distinct from Jesus: a human prophet who came with the definitive message from the supreme God.

Muhammad, if he did not exist, or if his actual deeds were not known, would certainly have been politically useful to the new Arab empire as a legendary hero. The empire was growing quickly, soon rivaling the Byzantine and Persian empires in size and power. It needed a common religion—a political theology that would provide the foundation for the empire’s unity and secure allegiance to the state.

This new prophet needed to be an Arab, living deep within Arabia. If he had come from anywhere else within the new empire’s territory, that place could have made claims to special status and pushed to gain political power on that basis. Muhammad, significantly, is said to have come from the empire’s central region, not from borderlands.

He had to be a warrior prophet, for the new empire was aggressively expansionistic. To give those conquests a theological justification—as Muhammad’s teachings and example do—would place them beyond criticism.

This prophet would also need a sacred scripture to lend him authority. Much of the Qur’an shows signs of having been borrowed from the Jewish and Christian traditions, suggesting that the founders of Islam fashioned its scripture from existing material. The new scripture had to be in Arabic in order to serve as the foundation for an Arabic empire. But it did not have an extensive Arabic literary

tradition to draw on, especially because Abd al-Malik and his fellow Umayyad caliphs were centered not in Arabia but in Damascus. It is perhaps no coincidence that this Arabic scripture contains numerous non-Arabic elements and outright incoherencies. Their conquest had brought them to Damascus, but as Arabians they wanted to establish their empire with Arabic elements at its center: an Arabian prophet and an Arabic revelation.

Demonizing the Umayyads

Although the Qur'an issues furious warnings of judgment and divine exhortations to warfare and martyrdom that would have been useful for an expanding empire, it leaves the figure of Muhammad, the "praised one," sketchy at best. By investing Muhammad with prophetic status and holding him up as the "excellent example" of conduct for the Muslims (33:21), the Qur'an sparked a hunger to know what he actually said and did. Thus a larger body of traditions painting the picture of this prophet would have been necessary, not only as a matter of pious interest but also to formulate Islamic law.

The real proliferation of material about Muhammad's words and deeds apparently began in the late Umayyad period but reached its apex during the Abbasid caliphate. The Abbasids replaced the Umayyads in AD 750; the great canonical Hadith collections were all compiled early in the ninth century.

Hadiths about Muhammad, as we have seen, were minted by the dozen in order to support one political position or another. The Umayyads created hadiths of Muhammad saying negative things about the Abbasids; the Abbasids developed hadiths in which Muhammad said exactly the opposite. The Shi'ites wrote hadiths of their own to support their champion, Ali ibn Abi Talib.

The Abbasids emerged as the dominant party, and not surprisingly the bulk of the traditions that survive to the present day reflect favorably on them. Many hadiths denounce the Umayyads for their irreligion. But the desire to portray their rivals in a bad light would not have been the only motivation for the Abbasids. They also needed to convince the people that these stories about the prophet of Islam and his new religion were not actually new at all. How to explain the

sudden appearance of accounts of what had supposedly taken place in Arabia well over a century earlier? How to explain the fact that fathers and fathers' fathers had not passed down the stories of this great warrior prophet and his wondrous divine book?

The answer was to blame the Umayyads. They were impious. They were irreligious. Although they were the sons and immediate heirs of those who had known Muhammad, they were indifferent to this legacy and let the great message of the Seal of the Prophets fall by the wayside. Now the Abbasids had come along—and Muhammad emerged! His teachings would be taught throughout the empire. His Qur'an would sound from every mosque. His faithful would be called to prayer from every minaret.

The late appearance of the biographical material about Muhammad, the fact that no one had heard of or spoken of Muhammad for decades after the Arab conquests began, the changes in the religion of the Arab empire, the inconsistencies in the Qur'an—all of this needed to be explained. The hadiths pinning blame on the Umayyads helped, but other explanations would have been necessary too. A common justification emerged in the hadiths: it was all part of the divine plan. Allah caused even Muhammad to forget portions of the Qur'an. He left the collection of that divine book up to people who lost parts of it—hence its late editing and the existence of variants. It was all in his plan and thus should not disturb the faith of the pious.

Explaining a Political Religion

This reconstruction of events has a good deal to recommend it. It explains the curious silence of the early Arab conquerors, and of those whom they conquered, about Muhammad and the Qur'an. It explains why the earliest extant records of an Arab prophet speak of a figure who displayed some kinship with both Judaism and Christianity, contrary to the portrayal of Muhammad in the canonical Islamic texts. It explains why Islamic tradition speaks of the Qur'an as the perfect and eternal book of Allah while simultaneously depicting the almost casual loss of significant portions of the holy

book. It explains why Islam, the supposed impetus for the Arab conquests, is such a late arrival on the scene.

This scenario also explains why Islam developed as such a profoundly political religion. By its nature, Islam is a political faith: the divine kingdom is very much of this world, with God's wrath and judgment not just coming in the next life but also being delivered by believers in this one. In considering its adherents to be the instruments of divine justice on earth, Islam departs from its Abrahamic forerunners. This departure could reflect the circumstances of Islam's origins: whereas Christianity began as a primarily spiritual construct and gained worldly power only much later (forcing its adherents to grapple with the relationship between the spiritual and temporal realms), Islam was unapologetically worldly and political from the beginning.

Allah says in the Qur'an: "And as for those who disbelieved, I will punish them with a severe punishment in this world and the hereafter, and they will have no helpers" (3:56). Allah also exhorts Muslims to wage war against those infidels, apostates, and polytheists (2:191; 4:89; 9:5; 9:29). In the Qur'an Allah even commands the Islamic faithful to expand the domains of the believers by waging war against and subjugating those outside the fold (9:29), including those among the "People of the Book" who "disbelieve" (98:6)—in other words, the other monotheists who dare to reject the Qur'an's claims. These various teachings could, and did, coalesce easily in Islamic history: they put vengeance against the enemies of Allah into the hands of the faithful.

Compare the perspective on display in such Qur'anic verses with the attitude encapsulated by the lapidary phrase, "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay" (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19). However much Christians at various points in history may have departed from both the letter and the spirit of that directive, the sharp contrast between the two sets of teachings underscores an important difference between the faiths. In one, believers are told, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). In the other, they're told "Muhammad is the

messenger of Allah; those with him are ruthless against the disbelievers, merciful among themselves” (Qur’an 48:29).

The political, and indeed the martial and imperial, components are intrinsic to the Islamic faith, and they are evident from the earliest records. Did the political arise from the spiritual imperatives of the faith, or was it the other way around? The alternative scenario we have considered explains the uniquely political nature of Islam by suggesting that the empire came first and the theology came later. In this reconstruction, the spiritual propositions that Islam offers were elaborated in order to justify and perpetuate the political entity that generated them.

Did Muhammad Exist?

Did Muhammad exist? Late in her scholarly career, a pioneering historian of skepticism about Muhammad, Patricia Crone, retreated somewhat from her earlier views on the origins of Islam, asserting that “the evidence that a prophet was active among the Arabs in the early decades of the 7th century, on the eve of the Arab conquest of the middle east, must be said to be exceptionally good.” While this represented a sharp departure from her earlier position, Crone offered no new findings or evidence to explain why she had changed her views; instead, she left her earlier reasoning and the evidence presented standing untouched.

Her new statement, moreover, was carefully worded, and should not be taken as saying more than she actually said. There is “exceptionally good” evidence, she wrote in 2008, for the existence of a prophet who was “active among the Arabs in the early decades of the 7th century,” but that is not the same thing as to say that Muhammad as depicted in the hadith and sira literature was that prophet.⁷

In a similar vein, Crone stated: “Everything else about Mohammed is more uncertain, but we can still say a fair amount with reasonable assurance. Most importantly, we can be reasonably sure that the Qur’an is a collection of utterances that he made in the belief that they had been revealed to him by God. The book may not preserve all the messages he claimed to have received, and he is not

responsible for the arrangement in which we have them. They were collected after his death—how long after is controversial. But that he uttered all or most of them is difficult to doubt. Those who deny the existence of an Arabian prophet dispute it, of course, but it causes too many problems with later evidence, and indeed with the Qur'an itself, for the attempt to be persuasive.”⁸

This actually leaves the principal findings of Crone's earlier scholarship in place. She says that there was a prophet in Arabia and that his utterances form most or all of the Qur'an, which was collected sometime after his death. This is a long way from the exceptionally detailed portrait of Muhammad that emerges from the earliest available Islamic sources about the origins of the religion and the life of its prophet, and leaves the door open for the numerous questions to which the anomalies in those sources give rise.

As a prophet of the Arabs who taught a vaguely defined monotheism, Muhammad, or someone who did some of the things that Islamic tradition later attributed to Muhammad, may have existed. But beyond that, his life story is lost in the mists of legend, like those of Robin Hood and Macbeth. As the prophet of Islam, who received (or even claimed to receive) the perfect copy of the perfect eternal book from the supreme God, Muhammad almost certainly did not exist. There are too many gaps, too many silences, too many aspects of the historical record that simply do not accord, and cannot be made to accord, with the traditional account of the Arabian prophet teaching his Qur'an, energizing his followers to such an extent that they went out and conquered a good part of the world.

A careful investigation makes at least one thing clear: the details of Muhammad's life that have been handed down as canonical—that he unified Arabia by the force of arms, concluded alliances, married wives, legislated for his community, and did so much else—are a creation of political ferments dating from long after the time he is supposed to have lived. Similarly, the records strongly indicate that the Qur'an did not exist until long after it was supposed to have been delivered to the prophet of Islam.

In light of this evidence, there is compelling reason to conclude that Muhammad the messenger of Allah came into existence only after

the Arab empire was firmly entrenched and casting about for a political theology to anchor and unify it. Muhammad and the Qur'an cemented the power of the Umayyad caliphate and then that of the Abbasid caliphate. That is the most persuasive explanation for why they were created at all. And once legends about Muhammad began to be elaborated, his story took on a life of its own: one legend begat another, as people hungered to know what their prophet said and did regarding issues that vexed them. Once Muhammad was summoned, he could not be sent away. One pious legend fabricated for political purposes would lead to another, and then another, to fill in holes and address anomalies in the first; then those new stories would lead in turn to still newer ones, until finally the faithful Muslims were able to fill wheelbarrows with volumes of hadiths, as is the case today.

As long as the oddities, inconsistencies, and lacunae exist in the traditional Islamic narratives and the records of early Islam, there will arise people with the courage to seek answers to the questions we have considered here. Up to now, however, those brave scholars have been relatively few in number. This is both unusual and unfortunate. It is unusual in that the world's other major religions have undergone thorough historical investigation; the "quest for the historical Jesus," a parallel to inquiries into the historical Muhammad, has been a prominent field of scholarly inquiry for two centuries. It is unfortunate that the lack of interest in examining Islam's origins among Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike robs everyone of access to the truth.

To be sure, many fervent believers in Islam resist such historical investigation. Even raising the question of whether Muhammad existed challenges the very premise of their belief system. But while some Christians and Jews, including high religious authorities, have condemned historical inquiries into their religion as attempts to undermine their faith, other authorities have approved and welcomed such inquiries, and scholarly examinations have gone forward. Islam, however, has remained largely exempt from such inquiry. No authorities have encouraged it, and those who have pursued it often labor under threat of death.

For some fourteen hundred years Islam has profoundly shaped the history and culture not just of the Near East, but of the entire world. At one point, the Islamic empire stretched as far west as Spain and as far east as India, as far south as Sudan and as far north as the Caucasus. Over the centuries Islamic forces have repeatedly clashed with Western powers, whether it was in the initial wave of conquests that created the Islamic empire, the clashes with the Crusaders of the Byzantine Empire over Christian holy lands, or the Ottoman Empire's fierce efforts to control the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century. More recently, of course, the nature of the conflict has changed: no longer are traditional powers facing off on the battlefield, as much as Islamic jihadists terrorize unbelievers and seek in various ways, including non-violent subversion and the electoral process, to impose sharia law.

This long history of conflict demonstrates that there are pronounced differences between the Islamic tradition and the Judeo-Christian tradition of the West. And yet despite those differences, few have bothered to investigate how the Islamic tradition emerged and what those origins might tell us about the "clash of civilizations" that has been a defining feature of world history for well over a millennium.

Did Muhammad exist? The full truth of whether a prophet named Muhammad existed, and if he did, what sort of a man he was, may never be known. But it would be intellectually irresponsible not to ask the question or to consider the implications of the provocative evidence that pioneering scholars have assembled. Above all, it would be yet another manifestation of the pandemic cowardice that mars our age to refrain from such investigations for fear of violent reprisals from convinced believers.

Contrary to the common assumption, Islam and its supposed prophet did not emerge in the "full light of history." Now, however, more than ever before, historical investigators have the opportunity—in fact, the responsibility—to usher Islam's origins out of the shadows and into the light. Were they not to discharge that responsibility fully or properly, we would all be the poorer.

Acknowledgments

This issue is one of the most exciting and fast-moving areas of exploration in the entire field of Islamic studies today, and yet with academia having become a cesspool of far-left propaganda and Islamic apologetics, it generally gets short shrift in our colleges and universities, when it gets any attention at all. Thus I'm once again grateful to ace publisher David S. Bernstein of Bombardier Books for having the courage to publish this revised and expanded edition of *Did Muhammad Exist?*, which I hope will serve as a useful introduction to the key issues involved in the vexed question of the origins of Islam. Heather King and the whole Bombardier team have made the proceedings move along efficiently, as they always do, and that efficiency is something that writers always prize in publishers and treasure when they have found it.

A tip of the hat also to the great scholar Ibn Warraq, whose discussion with me on a street in The Hague many years ago led to my diving into exploration of this topic, and to the indefatigable researcher Jay Smith, who alerted me to important new developments that warranted careful attention in this book. Thanks also to al-Fadi for reviewing the manuscript and making sure I hadn't strayed too far from reality. The first edition of this book was made possible with a grant from the Middle East Forum, to whom I am enduringly grateful.

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Endnotes

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Chapter 1

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- 6 Ibn Warraq, *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, 16.
- 7 Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, xli–xlii (quoted in Ibn Warraq, *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, 44).
- 8 The word *hadith*'s Arabic plural is *ahadith*, and this is found in much English-language Muslim literature. But to avoid confusing English-speaking readers I have used the English plural form "*hadiths*." The word "*Hadith*," capitalized,

refers to the hadith collections in the aggregate. The same word in lower case refers to particular traditions.

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- 28 King, "The Petra Fallacy," 9.

Chapter 2

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- 4 Ibn al-Jawzi, *Wafa*, p. 32a; *idem*, *Talqih* (ms. Asir effendi, Constantinople), II, p. 3a; Anonymous, *Sira* (Berlin, no. 9602), p. 155a; al-Barizi (Berlin, no. 2569), p. 81b; Maqrizi, *Imta*, III; Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzi, *Mirat at az-zaman*, II (ms. Kuprulu, Constantinople), p. 149b (quoted in Ibn Warraq, ed., *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, 184).
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- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Doctrina Jacobi*, vol. 16, 209 (quoted in Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* [Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997], 57).
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- 10 Historian Robert G. Hoyland notes that the first editor of this text suggested that it had begun as a continuation of Eusebius's ecclesiastical history, and was then updated a century after it was first written: "A mid-seventh century Jacobite author had written a continuation of Eusebius and that this had been revised almost a century later when the lists of synods and caliphs and so on were added" (Hoyland, 119).
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- 28 Stefan Heidemann, “The Evolving Representation of the Early Islamic Empire and Its Religion on Coin Imagery,” in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, eds., *The Qur’an In Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’anic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 153.
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- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 9.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Sunan Abi Dawud, book 15, hadith 6, no. 2482, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/15/6>.
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- 37 Ibid.
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- 39 Patriarch John/Arab Emir, *Colloquy*, 248/257, Nau, Francois, ed./tr. “Un colloque de patriarche Jean avec l’emir des Agareens et fait divers des années 712 a 716,” *JA ser. xi*, 5 (1915), 225–279 (quoted in Hoyland, 459).
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- 42 Sebeos, *Histoire*, 94–96 (quoted in Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 6–7).
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- 48 Nevo and Koren, 234.
- 49 F. Nau, "Lettre de Jacques d'Edesse sur la généalogie de la Sainte Vierge," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* (1901), 518–523f (quoted in Nevo and Koren, 235).
- 50 John of Damascus, *De haeresibus C/CI*, 60–61 (*Patrologia Greca* 94, 764A–765A) (quoted in Hoyland, 486).
- 51 John of Damascus, *De haeresibus C/CI*, 63–64 (*Patrologia Greca* 94, 765C–769B) (quoted in Hoyland, 486–487).
- 52 John of Damascus, *De haeresibus C/CI*, 64–67 (*Patrologia Greca* 94, 769B–772D) (quoted in Hoyland, 487).
- 53 John of Damascus, *De haeresibus C/CI*, 61 (*Patrologia Greca* 94, 765A–B) (quoted in Hoyland, 488–489).
- 54 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 50–51.

Chapter 3

- 1 X represents the Arabic letter خ, a guttural *kh* sound.
- 2 Quoted in Nevo and Koren, 409.
- 3 Quoted in Nevo and Koren, 421.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 411.
- 5 Nevo and Koren, 250.
- 6 Clive Foss, *Arab-Byzantine Coins: An Introduction, with a Catalogue of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2008), 34.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, surely the son of Maryam (Mary) Iesa (Jesus) will shortly descend amongst you people (Muslims) and will judge mankind justly by the Law of the Qur'an (as a just ruler) and will break the cross and kill the pig and abolish the Jizya (a tax taken from the non-Muslims, who are in the protection, of the Muslim government). This Jizya tax will not be accepted by Iesa (Jesus). Then there will be abundance of money and nobody will accept charitable gifts." (Bukhari, vol. 3, book 34, no. 2222.)
- 9 Heidemann, "The Evolving Representation," in Neuwirth, Sinai and Marx, *The Qur'an In Context*, 159.

- 10 Ahmed ibn Naqib al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller* ('Umdat as-Salik): A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law, trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 1999), 011.5(6).
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- 12 Popp, 113.
- 13 Ibid., 55, 56.
- 14 Ibid., 55.
- 15 Nevo and Koren, 265–266. The translation of the Qur'anic texts here is that of Nevo and Koren.
- 16 Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 104; Ibn Warraq, *Virgins? What Virgins? And Other Essays* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2010), 50.
- 17 Alfred Guillaume, "The Version of the Gospels Used in Medina Circa 700 a.d.," *Al-Andalus* 15 (1950), 289–296 (quoted in Ibn Warraq, *Virgins*, 50).
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Foss, 34.
- 20 Foss, 47.
- 21 See Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 114.
- 22 Popp, 34–36.
- 23 Foss, 118.
- 24 Quoted in Nevo and Koren, 377.
- 25 Nevo and Koren, 383.
- 26 Yazid was famous as a falconer, and the ruler on this coin is depicted with a bird on his wrist. Foss, 48.
- 27 See Christoph Luxenberg, "A New Interpretation of the Arabic Inscription in Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock," in Ohlig and Puin, *The Hidden Origins of Islam*.
- 28 Estelle Whelan, "Forgotten Witness: Evidence for the Early Codification of the Qur'an," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 118 (1998), 1–14. Reprinted at http://www.islamic-awareness.org/History/Islam/Dome_Of_The_Rock/Estwitness.html. The bracketed material is in the translation of the inscription as Whelan published it, and has not been added by the present author. For more on the Dome of the Rock inscription, see Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), and Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 233–235. The Qur'an quotations are as in Whelan's translation.
- 29 Whelan, "Forgotten Witness," http://www.islamic-awareness.org/History/Islam/Dome_Of_The_Rock/Estwitness.html.
- 30 Luxenberg, "A New Interpretation," 130.
- 31 Luxenberg, "A New Interpretation," 128–129.
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- 33 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 200.

- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Quoted in Nevo and Koren, 411.
- 36 Foss, 59.
- 37 Ibid., 110.
- 38 Hoyland, 553.
- 39 Foss, 60.
- 40 Hoyland, 551.
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- 42 Nevo and Koren, 251–252.
- 43 Heidemann, "The Evolving Representation," in Neuwirth, Sinai and Marx, *The Qur'an In Context*, 168.
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- 45 Heidemann, "The Evolving Representation," in Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx, *The Qur'an In Context*, 169.
- 46 Foss, 63, 65.
- 47 A Seminar at the University of Michigan. "Early Islamic Mint Output: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Methodology and Application of the 'Coin-die Count' Method," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 9, no. 3 (1966), 220.
- 48 Heidemann, "The Evolving Representation," in Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx, *The Qur'an In Context*, 184.
- 49 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 203.
- 50 Mingana, "The Transmission of the Koran," 102–103.
- 51 Fred M. Donner, "The Qur'an in Recent Scholarship," in Gabriel Said Reynolds, ed., *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 35–36.
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- 53 Ibn Hajar, *Tahdhib*, II: 185n388 (quoted in Prémare, 199).
- 54 Quoted in Nevo and Koren, 387, 389.
- 55 Quoted in Nevo and Koren, 397.

Chapter 4

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- 3 Al-Wahidi, on Qur'an 5:67.

- 4 Abu Dawud, II, 31 (quoted in Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern [New York: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971], vol. II, 130).
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- 6 Al-Qastellani, X, 342 (quoted in Goldziher, 34).
- 7 An-Nasa'i, I, 143 (quoted in Goldziher, 34–35).
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- 11 Schoeler, 22.
- 12 Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 62.
- 13 Al-Ya'qubi, II, 264 (quoted in Goldziher, 38).
- 14 Safwat, *Rasa'il*, vol. II, 177 (quoted in Crone and Hinds, 62).
- 15 Crone and Hinds, 64.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Abu Dawud, book 14, no. 2744; cf. Goldziher, 42.
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- 19 Al-Khatib, *Taqyid*, 107 (quoted in Goldziher, 47).
- 20 As-Suyuti, *Ta'rikh*, 106, 22; 109, 17 (quoted in Goldziher, 106).
- 21 Ibn Ishaq, 452; al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. Michael Fishbein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), vol. VIII, 11.
- 22 Ibn Ishaq, 452.
- 23 Al-Tabari, vol. VIII, 12.
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- 28 Ibn Hajar, I, 59 (quoted in Goldziher, 110).
- 29 Quoted in Goldziher, 113.
- 30 Ad-Damiri, II, 400 (quoted in Goldziher, 114).

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- 32 Bukhari, vol. 5, book 62, no. 3675.
- 33 Ibid., no. 3677.
- 34 Agh., VII, 13 (quoted in Goldziher, 118).
- 35 Bukhari, vol. 5, book 62, no. 3699.
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- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
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- 41 Ibid.
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- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
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- 46 Agh., XIX, 54; Yaqut, IV, 93 (quoted in Goldziher, 53–54).
- 47 Fragm. hist. arab., 198 (quoted in Goldziher, 107).
- 48 Goldziher, 108.
- 49 Bukhari, vol. 1, book 4, no. 157.
- 50 Ibid., no. 158.
- 51 Bukhari, vol. 1, book 4, no. 159.
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- 53 Muslim, book 23, no. 5023.
- 54 Muslim, book 19, no. 4320.
- 55 Ibid., no. 4321.
- 56 Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, fol. 25b, ed. Hyderabad, 84 (quoted in Goldziher, 55).
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- 58 Abu Dawud, v.
- 59 Emad Blake, "Who was Imam Al-Bukhari, the most famous Muslim to document Islamic hadiths?," *Al Arabiya*, May 27, 2017.
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- 61 Goldziher, 126–127.
- 62 Al-Jahiz, Bayan, fol. 114b (quoted in Goldziher, 56).
- 63 Quoted in Goldziher, 127.
- 64 Al-Jahiz, Bayan, fol. 114b (quoted in Goldziher, 56).
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- 67 Abu Abdullah Muhammad b. Yazid Ibn-i-Maja al-Qazwini, *Sunan ibn-i-Majah*, trans. Muhammad Tufail Ansari (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1996), vol. v, no. 4067.
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- 79 Goldziher, 62.
- 80 Ibn Ishaq, 547.

Chapter 5

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- 7 Ibid., 22.
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- 11 Ibid.
- 12 A. Fischer, *Biographien von Gewährsmännern des Ibn Ishaq, hauptsächlich aus ad-Dahabi* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 68–69, quoted in Schoeler, 24.
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- 20 Ibn Sa'd, vol. I, 225.
- 21 Ibn Ishaq, 106.

- 22 Ibn Ishaq, 105.
- 23 Kassaf II, 474, quoted in Tor Andrae, "The Legend of Muhammad's Call to Prophethood," in Ibn Warraq, ed., *Koranic Allusions: The Biblical, Qumranian, and Pre-Islamic Background to the Koran* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013), 409.
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- 25 Ibn Kathir, Abu Su'ud, Siddiq, etc., in Tor Andrae, 410.
- 26 Mawahib I, 257, in Tor Andrae, 410.
- 27 Mawahib I, 257, in Tor Andrae, 410.
- 28 Kitab ijaz (Itqan, Cairo, 1888) II, 479, in Tor Andrae, 410.
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- 32 Alfred Guillaume, "Ibn Hisham's Notes," in Ibn Ishaq, 691.
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- 37 Ibn Ishaq, xxxv.
- 38 Ahmad ibn Abd al-Gabbar al-Utaridi, *Kitab as-siyar wa-l-magazi*, S. Zakkar, ed. (Beirut, 1978), 23, quoted in Schoeler, 28.
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- 40 Ibn Ishaq, xxxv.
- 41 Abu Ahmad Abdallah Ibn Adi, *al-Kamil fi du afa ar-rigal, I–VIII*, S. Zakkar, ed. (Beirut, 1988), 112, quoted in Schoeler, 29.
- 42 Arthur Jeffery, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad," in Ibn Warraq, *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, 340.
- 43 Ibn Ishaq, 515.
- 44 Ehteshaam Gulam, "The Problems with Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasoul Allah* (Arabic for The Life of Messenger of Allah) and Other Early Sources of Islam and Prophet Muhammad (2009)," *Answering Christian Claims*, <http://www.answering-christian-claims.com/The-Problems-With-Ibn-Ishaq.html>. The Arabic for "mercy for all the worlds" is more properly transliterated as *Rahmatan lil Alamin*.
- 45 Jeffery, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad," 340.
- 46 Johannes J. G. Jansen, "The Gospel According to Ibn Ishaq (d. 773)" (Conference paper, Skepticism and Scripture Conference, Center for Inquiry, Davis, California, January 2007).
- 47 Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 223.
- 48 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 224.

- 49 For a related phenomenon, see Daniel Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 205–214. Note how the origins of military slavery, a secular event that took place two hundred years after Muhammad's supposed life, is variously handled in forty-four different Arabic and Persian sources. In this case, new information kept turning up many centuries after the events took place—about a political event in the early ninth century. How much more easily, then, could such a process unfold regarding religious events in the seventh century that were far more central to the lives of the believers?
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- 53 Ibid., 81.
- 54 Johannes J. G. Jansen, "The Historicity of Muhammad, Aisha and Who Knows Who Else," *Tidsskriftet Sappho*, May 16, 2011, <https://www.trykkefrihed.dk/blog/335/the-historicity-of-muhammad-aisha-and-who-knows-who-else.htm>.
- 55 Ibn Ishaq, 106.
- 56 Jansen, "The Gospel According to Ibn Ishaq (d. 767)."
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Donner, 51.
- 61 Ibn Ishaq, 69.
- 62 Ibid., 281.
- 63 Ibn Sa'd, II, 340.
- 64 Ibn Sa'd I, 110, 271; II, 340.
- 65 Ibn Ishaq, 111, 292, 545; Ibn Sa'd I, 224; II, 10, 165.
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- 74 W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 35–36.
- 75 Jansen, "The Gospel According to Ibn Ishaq."

Chapter 6

- 1 The Sunni-Shi'ite conflict has in many instances evolved into a conflict between Arabs and non-Arabs: Sunni Arabs vs. Shi'ite Persians (although there are, to be sure many Shi'ite Arabs). This came to a head in modern times in the violence

- between Shi'ite Iranian pilgrims and Sunni Saudi security forces in Mecca during the Hajj in 1987.
- 2 Quoted in Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 7.
 - 3 Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (abridged) (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000), vol. 9, 153–154.
 - 4 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 134.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, 26.
 - 6 Crone disputes the identification by pointing out that the two words actually have quite different roots, and that the location that Ptolemy gives for Macoraba does not correspond to the site of Mecca. (See Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 135–136.)
 - 7 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 136.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, 137.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, 134.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, 137.
 - 11 The Byzantine-Arab Chronicle of 741, 39. (Quoted in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 625).
 - 12 *Ibid.*, 34 (Quoted in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 622).
 - 13 Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 105 (quoted in Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 6).
 - 14 Dan Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography: A Survey and Evaluation of the Geographical References in the Qur'an with Suggested Solutions for Various Problems and Issues* (Saskatoon: Independent Scholars Press, 2011), 224.
 - 15 Mikhail D. Bukharin, "Mecca on the Caravan Routes in Pre-Islamic Antiquity," in Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx, *The Qur'an in Context*, 131.
 - 16 Crone notes that according to the medieval Islamic historian al-Azraqi (d. 1072), trade was conducted in pre-Islamic Arabic at "pilgrim stations" including Mina, Arafah, Ukaz, Majanna, and Dhul-Majaz. "That Mecca itself is supposed to have been a pilgrim station," Crone observes, "is here totally forgotten," (Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 175).
 - 17 Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 174.
 - 18 See Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 172–176. She notes that Mecca was "added by way of afterthought only" in the account of the medieval historian al-Azraqi about pilgrimages in pre-Islamic Arabia, and declares that "it is thus reasonable to conclude with Wellhausen that Mecca was not an object of pilgrimage in pre-Islamic times."
 - 19 Throughout this section I am indebted to the pioneering works of Dan Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography* and *Early Islamic Qiblas*, for the arguments that are set forth.
 - 20 Muhammad ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. VI, "Muhammad at Mecca," trans. W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 131.
 - 21 Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. VI, 132.
 - 22 Muhammad ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. VII, "The Foundation of the Community," trans. M. V. McDonald (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 25.

- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography*, 244.
- 25 Bukhari, vol. 6, book 65, no. 4493.
- 26 Jacob of Edessa, quoted in Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 173.
- 27 Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 175.
- 28 Barbara Finster, "Zu Der Neuauflage Von K.A.C. Creswells 'Early Muslim Architecture,'" *Kunst Des Orients* 9, no. 1/2 (1973), 94. Author's translation.
- 29 Finster, 95.
- 30 Ahmad b. Ali al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-mawa'iz wa'l-i'tibar*, Cairo I 326, vol. iv, p. 6 (cited in Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 173).
- 31 Griffithes Wheeler Thatcher, "Maqrizi," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, eleventh edition (New York: Encyclopedia Britannica Company, 1911), 665.
- 32 Dan Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas: A Survey of Mosques Built between 1AH/622 C.E. and 263 AH/876 C.E.* (Vancouver: Independent Scholars Press, 2017), 30. Gibson states that the mosque's qibla was rebuilt facing Mecca in 211 AH, which would be AD 826–827, when the governor of Egypt was first Ubaydallah ibn al-Sari and then Abdallah ibn Tahir al-Khurasani. If, on the other hand, it was changed during the governorship of Qurra ibn Sharik, it would have been between 91 and 97 AH. Either way, the key point is not so much when the qibla was changed, but that it had to be changed at all.
- 33 Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas*, 7.
- 34 Ibid., 25.
- 35 Ibid., 6.
- 36 Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas*, 8.
- 37 Bukhari, vol. 9, book 90, no. 337.
- 38 Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography*, 233.
- 39 Ibn Ishaq, 46.
- 40 Jami at-Tirmidhi, vol. 1, book 46, no. 3626, <https://sunnah.com/urn/634930>.
- 41 Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography*, 233.
- 42 Bukhari, vol. 2, book 26, no. 645.
- 43 Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography*, 231.
- 44 Bukhari, vol. 2, book 26, no. 647.
- 45 Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography*, 232.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Muhammad ibn Jarar al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. XX, "The Collapse of Sufyanid Authority and the Coming of the Marwanids," trans. G. R. Hawting (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1.
- 48 Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. XX, 2.
- 49 Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography*, 296.
- 50 Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. XX, 122.
- 51 Ibid., 122–123.
- 52 Ibid., 123.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Ibid., 156.
- 55 Ibid., 123.

- 56 Ibid., 176.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Muhammad ibn Jarar al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. XXI, “The Victory of the Marwanids,” trans. Michael Fishbein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 107.
- 59 H. al-Sandubi, ed., *Rasa’il al-Jahiz*, Cairo 1933, p. 296 (cited in Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 173, and Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas*, 44).
- 60 Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas*, 33.
- 61 Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 199.
- 62 Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas*, 36–37.
- 63 Muhammad ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. XXIII, “The Zenith of the Marwanid House,” trans. Martin Hinds (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 141.
- 64 David A. King, “From Petra back to Makka—From ‘Pibla’ back to Qibla,” *Muslim Heritage*, August 22, 2017, <https://muslimheritage.com/pibla-back-to-qibla/>.
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- 66 King, “From Petra back to Makka.”
- 67 Ibid.
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- 69 Durie, 90.

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- 1 Bukhari, vol. 6, book 65, no. 4480.
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- 4 Bukhari, vol. 6, book 60, no. 311.
- 5 Bukhari, vol. 7, book 67, no. 5134.
- 6 Bukhari, vol. 5, book 63, no. 3894.
- 7 Bukhari, vol. 4, book 56, no. 2977.
- 8 Bukhari, vol. 7, book 76, no. 5727; cf. online edition, vol. 8, book 82, no. 794–797.
- 9 Ibn Sa’d, *Kitab Al-Tabaqat Al-Kabir*, trans. S. Moinul Haq and H. K. Ghazanfar (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, n.d.), vol. I, 439.
- 10 Bukhari vol. 1, book 4, no. 229. Bracketed material was added by the translator, not by the present author.
- 11 Bukhari, vol. 4, book 59, no. 3295.
- 12 Ibid., no. 3292.
- 13 Ibid., no. 3289.

- 14 Ibid., no. 3303.
- 15 Ibid., no. 3320.
- 16 Muslim, book 23, no. 5113.
- 17 David S. Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 9, 25.
- 18 Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 72.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 73.
- 21 Ibid., 91.
- 22 Bukhari, vol. 5, book 64, no. 4468.
- 23 Muhammad ibn Jarar al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. X, "The Conquest of Arabia," trans. Fred M. Donner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 16–17.
- 24 *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, a.d. 284–813*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 466–467 (quoted in Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men*, 82–83).
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- 41 As-Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, 524, in Gilchrist.
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Chapter 13

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- 2 See Philip K. Hitti, *The Arabs: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943; revised edition Washington: Regnery, 1970), 57–58. Hitti reflects commonly held views that the Byzantines and Persians had exhausted themselves fighting each other, and that the people in the Byzantine domains that the Arabs conquered welcomed the invaders, as the tribute they charged was lower. See also Nevo and Koren, 93–94.
- 3 It appears the Arabs did encounter considerable resistance from the captive peoples. The pioneering historian Bat Ye’or notes a hadith in which the caliph

Umar asked one of his subordinates, "Do you think that these vast countries, Syria, Mesopotamia, Kufa, Basra, Misr [Egypt] do not have to be covered with troops who must be well paid?" This statement could be a surviving testimony to an occupation that was not as placid as it is often made out to have been. See Abu Yusuf Ya'qub, *Le livre de l'impôt foncier (Kitâb el-Kharâdj)*, trans. Edmond Fagnan (Paris: Paul Guethner, 1921) (quoted in Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* [Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996], 274). See also the testimony of the Patriarch Sophronius to the brutality of the conquerors and the misery of the conquered, recounted in chapter two of this book.

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