

*Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet provides an account of both the origins and some of the modalities of idol worship among the pagan Arabs of Mecca and its vicinity in the days before Islam.*

They say that the beginning of stone worship among the sons of Ishmael was when Mecca became too small for them and they wanted more room in the country. Everyone who left town took with him a stone from the sacred area to do honor to it. Wherever they settled they set it up and walked around it as they had around the Ka'ba. This led them to worship what stones they pleased and those which made an impression on them. Thus as generations passed they forgot their primitive faith and adopted another religion for that of Abraham and Ishmael. They worshiped idols and adopted the same errors as the people before them. Yet they retained and held fast practices going back to the time of Abraham, such as honoring the temple [that is, the Ka'ba] and going round it, the great and the little pilgrimage [that is, the *hajj* and the *'umra*], and the standing on Arafat and Muzdalifa, sacrificing the victims, and the pilgrim cry at the great and little pilgrimage, while introducing elements which had no place in the religion of Abraham. . . .

Every household had an idol in their house which they used to worship. When a man was about to set out on a journey he used to rub himself against it as he was about to ride off; indeed, that was the last thing he used to do before his journey; and when he returned from his journey the first thing he did was to rub himself against it before he went to his family. . . .

Now along with the Ka'ba the Arabs had adopted Tawaghit, which were temples which they venerated as they venerated the Ka'ba. They had their guardians and their overseers and they used to make offerings to them as they did to the Ka'ba and to circumambulate them and sacrifice at them. Yet they recognized the superiority of the Ka'ba because it was the temple and mosque of Abraham the friend of God. (Ibn Ishaq, *Life*) [IBN ISHAQ 1955: 35-38]

*The Prophet made no secret of his intentions regarding these idols of the Arabs. When he finally entered Mecca after his long emigration to Medina, he put his intentions into action, as described in a passage in Ibn Ishaq's Life.*

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touching the black stone with a stick which he had in his hand. This done, he summoned Uthman ibn Talha and took the keys of the Ka'ba from him, and when the door was opened for him, he went in. There he found a dove made of wood. He broke it in his hands and threw it away. . . . (According to another account) the Messenger entered Mecca on the day of the conquest and it contained 360 idols which Iblis [or Satan] had strengthened with lead. The Messenger was standing by them with a stick in his hand saying, "The truth has come and falsehood has passed away" (Quran 17:81). Then he pointed at them with his stick and they collapsed on their backs one after another.

When the Messenger had prayed the noon prayer on the day of the conquest (of Mecca) he ordered that all the idols which were around the Ka'ba should be collected and burned with fire and broken up. . . . The Quraysh had put pictures in the Ka'ba including two of Jesus son of Mary and Mary, on both of whom be peace. Ibn Shihab said: Asma the daughter of Shaqr said that a woman of the Banu Ghassan had joined in the pilgrimage of the Arabs and when she saw a picture of Mary in the Ka'ba she said: "My father and my mother be your ransom! (Mary), you are surely an Arab woman!" The Messenger ordered that the pictures be erased, except those of Jesus and Mary. (Ibn Ishaq, *Life*) [IBN ISHAQ 1955: 552]

*We know little of what to make of that last curious event. What we can say, on the basis of the Quran, is that, for all Muhammad's opposition to idolatry, there is no sign in that Book of any preoccupation, no open approval or disapproval even, of pictures or images. But conditions must soon have changed. The collections of Prophetic traditions are filled with condemnations of images and image making.*

Abu Talha reported the Prophet as saying, "The angels do not enter a house which contains dogs or pictures." Bukhari and Muslim transmit this tradition.

Aisha told that she had screened a storeroom of hers with a curtain on which there were figures and the Prophet tore it down; so she made two cushions out of it and had them in the house for sitting on. Bukhari and Muslim transmit this.

She also reported the Prophet as saying, "Those who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who imitate what God has created."

Sa'id ibn Abi Hasan said: "When I was with Ibn Abbas a man came to him and said, 'Ibn Abbas, I am a man whose livelihood comes only from the work of my hands, and I make these representations of things.' Ibn Abbas replied that he would tell him only what he had heard from

God's Messenger. He had heard him say, 'If anyone makes a representation of anything, God will punish him until he blows a spirit into it, and he will never be able to do that.' Then when the man gasped and became pale, he said to him, 'Out upon you! If you must do so, make representations of these trees or of anything which does not possess a soul.' " Bukhari transmitted this tradition.

Ibn Abbas reported God's Messenger as saying, "The one who receives the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be he who kills a prophet, or who is killed by a prophet, or kills one of his parents, or who makes representations of things, and a learned man who derives no benefit from his learning." (Baghawi, *Mishkat al-Masabih* 21.5.1-3)

*We do not know when those traditions were put into circulation. If they are authentic, we are faced with the same kind of dilemma that the figuratively decorated synagogues of Palestine posed to a supposedly aniconic Jewish tradition: Muslim coinage bore representations of the Caliph down to the reign of Abd al-Malik (685-705 C.E.), and even after that date Muslim sovereigns continued to build Syrian steppe palaces decorated in a style that was not merely figurative but even aggressively and suggestively secular. It is perhaps safer to conclude that Islam came to its iconophobia gradually and that the Prophetic traditions reflect a later and not a primary stage in that evolution. The later official Islamic sentiment on images is clear enough, however. This is how it is expressed in one of the standard Islamic law books, that written by the Syrian jurist al-Nawawi (d. 1377 C.E.). Now all fear of idolatry is gone, and the reasons for the prohibition are overtly theological.*

The learned authorities of our (Shafi'ite) school and others hold that painting a picture of any living thing is strictly forbidden, because it is threatened with grievous punishment as mentioned in the Prophetic traditions, whether it is intended for common domestic use or not. So the making of it is forbidden under every circumstance, because it implies a likeness to the creative activity of God. . . . On the other hand, the painting of a tree or of camel saddles and other things that have no life is not forbidden. Such is the decision on the actual making of a picture.

Similarly, it is forbidden to make use of any object on which a living thing is pictured, whether it is to be hung on a wall or worn as a dress or a turban or on any other object of common domestic use. But if it is on a carpet trampled underfoot, or on a pillow or cushion . . . then it is not forbidden. Whether such an object will prevent the angels of God from entering the house in which it is found is quite another matter.

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question, and the majority of the Companions of the Prophet and their immediate followers and the learned of succeeding generations accepted it. . . . Some later authorities make the prohibition refer only to objects that cast a shadow, and see no harm in objects that have no shadow. But this view is quite wrong, for the curtain to which the Prophet objected was certainly condemned, as everyone admits, yet the picture on it cast no shadow; and the other traditions make no distinction between one picture and another. Al-Zuhri holds that the prohibition refers to pictures in general, and similarly to the use of them and to entrance into a house in which they are found, whether it is a case of design on a dress or any other design, whether the picture hangs on a wall or is on a robe or a carpet, whether in common domestic use or not, as is the clear meaning of the Prophetic traditions. (Nawawi, *Guide to an Understanding of Muslim Law* 8.398) [Cited by ARNOLD 1928: 9-10]