

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

MUHAMMAD

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I The Arabian context of Muhammad's life

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Mecca, the city where Muhammad was born, lies in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula, an immense expanse of land abutting the territories of the most ancient civilizations. Larger than India or Europe, the Arabian Peninsula is almost 1.5 million square miles.¹ Mostly a desert, apart from the southwestern highlands of Yemen, and devoid of any rivers or easily accessible fresh water, Arabia was impenetrable and impossible for armies to march through. It was also an inhospitable and unprofitable land; with no agricultural base to tax, Arabia was spared the avarice of imperial authorities until the struggle between Byzantium and Sassanid Iran became global and drew Arabia into its orbit.² Arabia was thus peculiarly unique: in proximity to the most centralized empires ever to exist in the ancient world, yet never under the direct control of any.

By Muhammad's time, the Arabian Peninsula was nevertheless experiencing the pressure of the two major empires on its sides, the Byzantine Empire to the north, comfortably Christian if riven by Christological controversies, and the religiously diverse Sassanid Empire to the east, reviving its ambition to take control of the eastern parts of the Mediterranean from Byzantium. Caught in bitter, long, draining wars, the two empires were polarizing the Near East and pulling all of it into the fight. Any native political dynasties and kingdoms – in Yemen or on the borders with Syria and Iraq – were by then either abolished by the two empires or under the indirect control of either Constantinople or Iran. Each of the two empires experimented with bribery and vassal kingdoms to check the predatory raids of the nomads into the cultivated area of the

¹ For a detailed study of the topography and ancient history of Arabia, see Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001).

² For economic activities and the involvement of imperial powers, see Michael Lecker, "Muhammad at Medina: A Geographical Approach," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985): 29–62; G. W. Heck, "Gold Mining in Arabia and the Rise of the Islamic State," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41 (1999): 364–95. Exploiting Arabia was not governance, however.

Fertile Crescent, and each sought to use the nomads of Arabia as auxiliary troops to their own advantage, yet immediate direct governance was never fully carried out. Arabia was an anomaly in this sense, impossible to fully integrate in the political structures of the region and impossible to ignore. There was no indication that Arabia would ever play a major role in the ongoing imperial struggles of the region. Nothing in the long history of the Near East pointed to what was to come.³

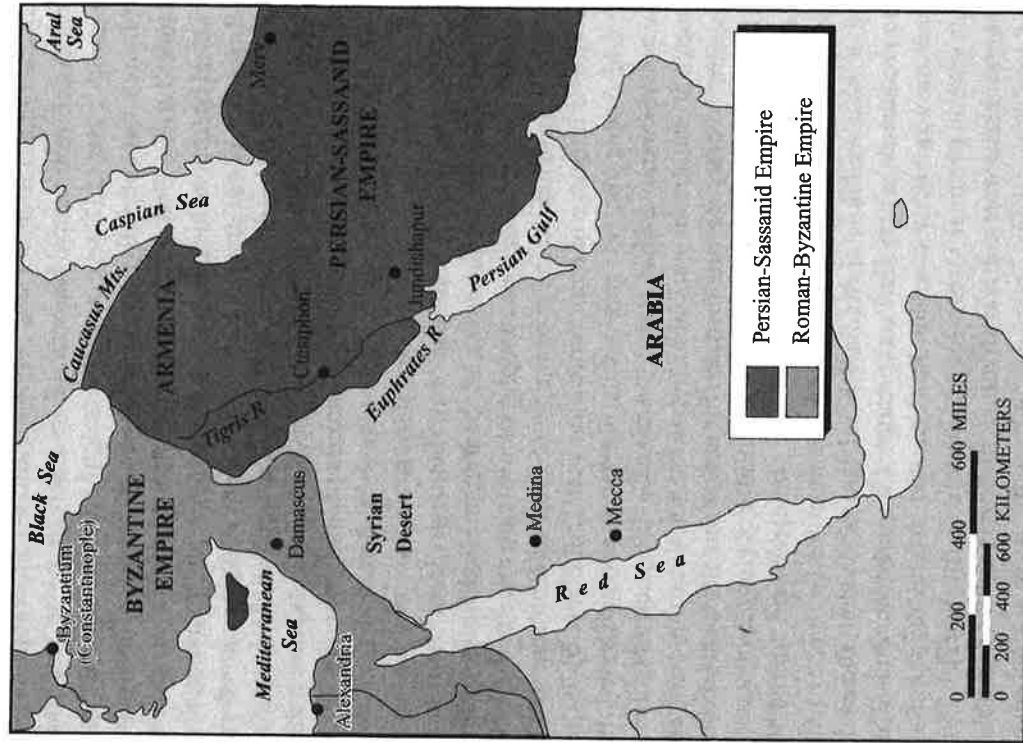
Muḥammad's achievements were thus accomplished despite the limitations of his environment. Not only was he born outside the two empires; he was born in the periphery of Arabia itself, in the Ḥijāz region, not in Yemen or on the eastern shores of the Persian Gulf or in the areas adjacent to Iraq and Syria, the usual sites of cultural activities. The Ḥijāz area was the most inaccessible part of Arabia to the empires, an area that seemed anarchic, with no discernible political structure when seen from Constantinople or Ctesiphon. Yet the usual picture of Arabia as untouched by its surroundings is misleading; Arabia was part of its late antique setting, part of the cultural landscape of the area; even its paganism, embattled as it was becoming, was still part of the lay of the land.⁴

The Arabs were not the ignorant lot that later Islamic tradition would like us to believe. They knew Rome, and they knew Ctesiphon. They were actually in the process of being fully absorbed into the high culture of the area; it was only a matter of time, one might have predicted, until they would convert to either Christianity or, less likely, to Judaism. Muḥammad, in a way, almost single-handedly reversed the historical trend, and he reshaped not only Arabia but also the ancient Near East in his own image. Muḥammad brought late antiquity to a surprising culmination.

Another important aspect of Arabia at that moment is that its inhabitants considered themselves ethnically related, a race connected somehow by blood and the Arabic language. Its peripheral position to its surroundings and the homogeneous ethnic composition of Arabia are perhaps the most determining aspects of the environment of Muḥammad. For this immense expanse of land to be disunited or ungoverned is not exceptional – steppes were usually impossible to subsume under imperial rule – yet for this expansive area to be linguistically and ethnically more or less homogeneous, even when religiously diverse, was

³ The most lucid and comprehensive account of Arabia in relationship to Rome and Iran is by Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (London: Blackwell, 2003). He heavily depends on Garth Fowden's pioneering work, see note 8 *infra*.

⁴ For a detailed assessment of what we know of the Ḥijāz area, see the detailed review of literature and the study by James E. Montgomery, "The Empty Ḥijāz," in *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy, from the Many to the One: Essays in Celebration of Richard M. Frank*, ed. James E. Montgomery (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 36–97.



Map 2. The Arabian Peninsula, showing important population centers.

remarkable. Muḥammad was born into a tribe in a tribal city in a sea of tribes, so to speak, but he belonged already to a relatively homogeneous landscape, which he would come to reshape.

The basic form of social organization in Arabia was the tribe, a putatively blood-related group that acted as a social, economic, and military unit. The cohesiveness of the tribe was essential for its survival. Loyalty to the tribe was a matter of utmost pride to its members; loyalty was not a coerced sentiment but rather the virtue that defined tribespeople. This was a unique political structure to belong to – it was not conducive to

stable political organization but was very dynamic. As a freeborn member of a tribe, one would have been reared in a fiercely proud tradition of fighting and defiance. Honor and reputation, courage and generosity, love of one's kin and fealty to the ancestors were the cornerstones of one's constitution. Defiance was thus a defining character. Such a member would be impossible to integrate into a tax-imposing imperially controlled system like the ones in the areas adjacent to Arabia. Freedom from subservience and loyalty to the tribe were such that any larger political structures were constructed through temporary alliances among the more or less equal tribes, alliances that were kept and broken by each tribe at will. Yet inner Arabia, the land where Muhammad grew up, never knew a complex political structure until he arrived on the scene.

In the impoverished environment of Arabia, apart from the riches of the Syrian Desert, the Iraqi border, or the Yemeni highlands, where wealth was easy to come by, poetry played a major role in the cultural landscape. Even before the appearance of the Qur'an, there was a highly developed language of communication that could be used in the whole land of Arabia and was universally cherished and cultivated. In fact, as James Montgomery has stated, "Arabic *qasida* poetry is a necessity though by no means sufficient condition for the miracle of an Arabic Qur'an."⁵ Poetry was the medium for expressing the ideals of the social structure, the register of deeds, and the bearer of glory. Eloquence, courage, generosity, and fierceness were the standards one strived to attain, and poetry chronicled these traits for each tribe.

Much of what we know of Arabia before Islam is based on the analysis of the pre-Islamic poetry that was preserved by early Muslims. The poetic medium was highly complex by then, and it reflected a heroic ethos that placed personal virtues at the center of the world.⁶ Two complementary traits were cultivated: *hilm* ("forbearance," "reasonableness") and *jahl* ("arrogance," "overbearing haughtiness of a tribal man, the spirit of stubborn resistance against all that shows the slightest sign of injuring their sense of honour or destroying the traditional way of life"). In the face of the tragic life, there was a heroic stance. One defied everything in defense of one's tribe and honor. The poetry portrays the tribal Arab as unbowed and unbent, fearful of nothing.

Garth Fowden had these various cultural overlays in mind when he assessed the significance of the rise of Islam: "The Islamic Empire

was implicit in late antiquity, but nothing quite like it had ever been seen before."⁸ The same could be said about the life of Muhammad as it came to be told by Muslims in the *Sira*, the literature written about Muhammad by his companions and followers. His life mirrored the expectations one would find in the biographies of holy men from late antiquity and fashioned them in a uniquely Arabic fashion. Foreshadowings, miraculous birth, protected childhood, visions, miraculous deeds, a band of followers, and an affinity with the cosmos were all woven together to present a life superior to any presented before and able to measure to that of Moses, Jesus, and Alexander the Great. Muhammad's life was presented in universal terms, reflecting the universalism of the late antique culture that Muslims came to inherit. His life was considered the culmination of history, understood by Muslims to be the history of Rome and Iran combined. Muhammad's life was the meaning of the human history that started with Adam and culminated in the coming of Islam. The ambitions of Rome pale before the heights early Muslims ascribed to Muhammad.

For the past 150 years historians have been trying to unearth the historical Muhammad, and in many respects, this endeavor is continuing.⁹ It is clear, however, that the political career of Muhammad as presented by the *Sira* is historically far more reliable than the *Sira*'s presentation of his birth, early childhood, and life before he became a public figure. Yet these mythical parts of his biography, the early phase when he was not yet a prophet, came eventually to symbolize the meaning of his life and career, in this sense, myth was far more able to capture the significance of Muhammad's career than were the mere concrete historical triumphs.¹⁰ It is interesting that, to medieval Muslims, Muhammad's life was mainly seen through its cosmic, symbol-laden events, which invariably were mythically constructed, and not through its more mundane historical parts. His quasi-miraculous birth would loom larger than any event; his trip to heaven (*mi'raja*), his communion with the cosmos, and his supernatural qualities came to play a far more significant role when his story was retold. The ethical realm of his character was also emphasized: Muhammad was the prophet of mercy. The celebration of

⁸ Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 138.

⁹ For a review of the literature, see F. E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Harald Motzki, ed., *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

¹⁰ One of the most engaging studies of the role of myth in the biography and life of Muhammad is Jaroslav Stekelyevich's *Muhammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶ The most accessible introduction to pre-Islamic poetry is Michael A. Sells, *Desert Tracings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989).

⁷ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2002), 27.

Muḥammad's life eventually took place on his birth date, and the *mawlid* was a hymnal celebration of what the universe experienced when he was born.¹¹

THE BIOGRAPHY OF MUḤAMMAD

The biography of Muḥammad is told not in the Qur'ān but rather in a biography written by Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) a hundred years or more after Muḥammad's death.¹² It is a rather sprawling narrative. The English translation of Ibn Ishāq's original text occupies eight hundred pages. Already there is a definite structure apparent in the telling, a structure that cuts through much of early Islamic narratives: the before and the after of the *hijra*. The life of Muḥammad and, more important, the meaning of the Qur'ān were mapped onto this decisive moment: his migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. Such was the significance of this event that history began with it, to the extent that his immediate followers would look back and reckon an Islamic calendar that started with this event. The life of Muḥammad was not only fashioned by how the early generation of his followers understood its significance, however. Already we can see the pull on Muḥammad's life by paradigms established in the cultures that surrounded Arabia: he has to measure up to the narratives of Moses and Jesus, even though it is his political career in Medina that was deemed the most important. As such, the biography saw to it that Muḥammad's birth and childhood and death were elevated to be consistent with events in the last ten years of his life. There were thus tensions in the *Sīra of Muḥammad* that reflected the different demands of competing paradigms.

The work of Ibn Ishāq grew out of an already active literary tradition that was attempting to record the life of Muḥammad. The heroic Muḥammad was the first to be celebrated, and all evidence points to the fact that early Muslims kept the memory of his deeds as a military leader and as the head of the community in Medina. His exploits were recorded in what we call *maghāzī* literature.¹³ Soon, this truncated

¹¹ For an early miracle, see Chapter 2 in this volume. For celebration of the Prophet's birthday, see Chapter 7 in this volume; see also N. J. G. Kaptein, *Muḥammad's Birthday Festival: Early History in the Central Muslim Lands and Development in the Muslim West until the 10th/16th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Marion Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹² Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955).

¹³ See J. M. B. Jones, "The Chronology of the Maghāzī – A Textual Survey," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 19 (1957): 245–80.

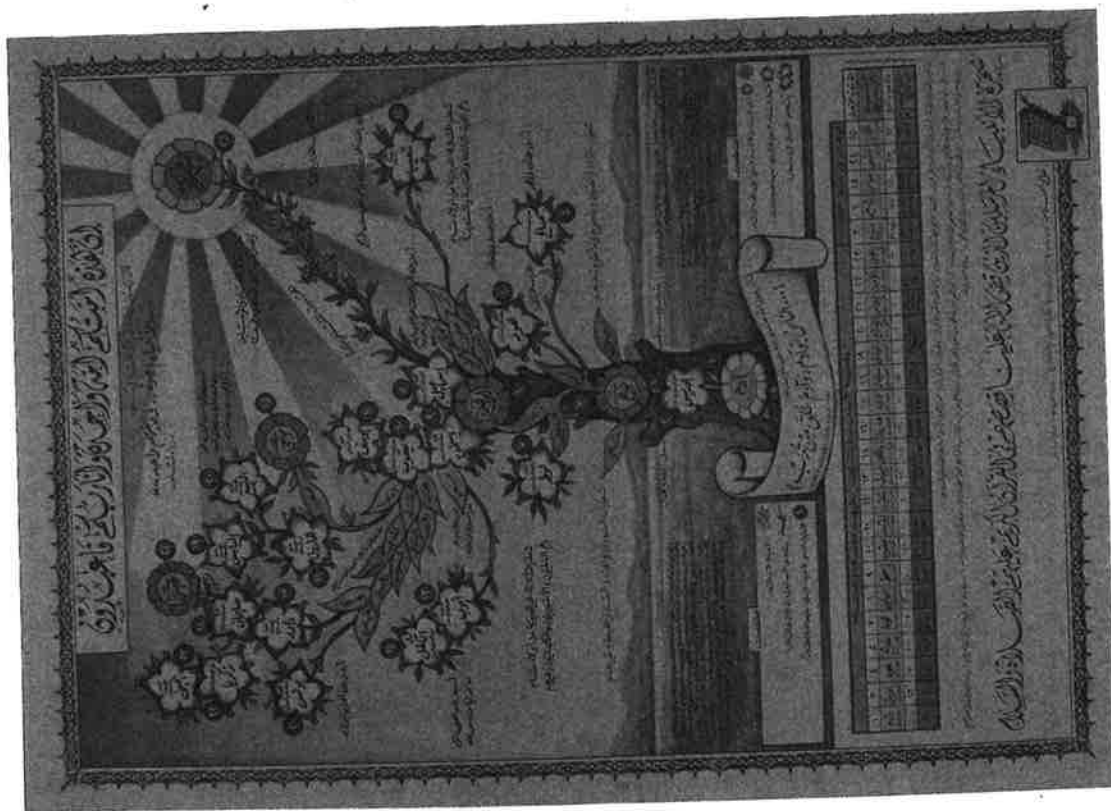


Figure 2. A modern poster showing Muḥammad (upper right) and his connection to previous prophets, with Adam at the root of the tree. From Richard Johan Natvig's Muslim poster collection, University of Bergen.

telling of Muhammad's life was unsatisfactory. A more linear and complete life was presented, and this chapter is dedicated to the early part of his life as portrayed in the *Sīra* and historical literature written by Muslims.

NARRATIVES OF THE BIRTH OF MUHAMMAD AND HIS EARLY CHILDHOOD

We know that Muhammad was an orphan, and the Qur'ān, in a rare reference to Muhammad's early life, mentions this fact as well as his poverty (Q 93:6-11). He was born in Mecca to the tribe of Quraysh, to a branch of the family called the Banū Hāshim. They were a noble lineage, like all of the Quraysh tribe, but they were not the wealthiest of the tribe. The *Sīra* presents Muhammad's father as possessing a light on his forehead, a light apparent to many, especially to other women, that disappears after he sleeps with Āmina, his wife. Like many motifs in the *Sīra*, the light can function on many symbolic levels, from its mere contrast with darkness to the Gnostic notions. It is this adroit use of symbols that made the *Sīra* a potent medium. Eventually, Muhammad's essence was tied to a preexistent light, the first entity to be created by God, and to his stature as the perfect human being.¹⁴ The light was also connected to visions that Muhammad's mother saw while pregnant. A light would shine from her belly that lit up Syria – rather far away from Mecca. A voice ordered her to dedicate the newly born child to the One God and to name him Muhammad.¹⁵

Another important aspect of Muhammad's birth is that Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and pagan Arabs predicted his coming. Each was represented in the *Sīra* by an episode that had a rabbi, a priest, a son of a Magi priest, or a soothsayer predicting the birth of an important individual. In this sense, every denomination (from the Near East) was bearing witness to his coming. Bearing witness to Muhammad's greatness and prophetic future is a constant theme in the *Sīra*. As a child, he was inspected, and the signs of his prophetic career were verified by experts, who were invariably Christians. The most famous episode is the encounter of the boy Muhammad with a Christian monk who inspected him for the sign of prophecy, a seal between the blades of the

shoulders.¹⁶ These were also ominous encounters, for the *Sīra* represents the boy Muhammad as always in danger of losing his life, and only the protection of his God would see to it that he be saved and safe. Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism were in danger of losing their preeminence, and their representatives in the *Sīra* were evidently not happy with the coming of this new prophet.

Much of the casting of the story of the early life of Muhammad has the purpose of elevating it to the realm of the mysterious. It was also tied to a universal plan for the salvation of humanity. It was not an ordinary life, and the people around him were made aware of his larger-than-life character. His wet nurse, his servant, his employer (and future wife), and his uncles all at different times were made witnesses to Muhammad's extraordinary powers. Chief among the strategies used to elevate his life was the portrayal of its affinity with the cosmos: the inanimate world was made to respond to Muhammad as if it were animate. Thus, a cloud would follow him in his travel to shade him. The rocks would moan for him, and the world responded to his commands.

Perhaps the most enigmatic of the episodes that the *Sīra* recounts is the episode of the opening of Muhammad's chest. Two mysterious angelic figures, and there are also reports that they were two birds, abducted the child Muhammad (Ibn Ishāq repeats this story at a later point, when Muhammad was an adult), opened his chest, and performed a ritual of cleansing of his heart. Muhammad, we are made to understand, was rendered pure or, theologically worded, infallible. The story has been studied extensively, and its shamanistic resonance has been noticed by scholars.¹⁷ It plays a central role in the presentation of Muhammad in the *Sīra*; fully human yet substantially different, this is not deification but a transformation of essence all the same. Moreover, this episode connects the Muhammad of the *Sīra* to the Muhammad of the Qur'ān, as it is usually recounted in interpretations of Q 94:1.

In contrast to these miracle stories from Ibn Ishāq, the Qur'ān is emphatic about what I would call the mundane character of the human Muhammad. He is a messenger, a warner, a guide, a deliverer of a message, but he is emphatically a *bashar*, a human being. The Christological background for this humbleness is deafening, a humbleness that soon early Muslims would shed. He is certainly not a miracle worker in the Qur'ān, and many of the arguments in the Qur'ān attempt to redefine miracles and resist the temptation of performing miracles as

¹⁶ Ibid., 79–82.

¹⁷ Harris Birkeland, *The Legend of the Opening of Muhammad's Breast* (Oslo: Avhandlinger utgitt av det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, 1955).

¹⁴ For the symbolism of light and its use by Muslims in relation to Muhammad, see Chapter 6 in this volume; see also Uri Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of Nūr Muhammad," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 62–119.

¹⁵ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 69.

vindication of prophecy. Yet the *Sīra* is replete with a miraculous and miracle-working Muḥammad. The *Sīra*, as expected, coming as it does after the Qur'ān, gets the upper hand. The Muḥammad we have is fashioned by the *Sīra*, and a remapping of the Qur'ān is carried out on the miraculous presentation of the *Sīra*. Thus, for example, the physical seal of prophecy, a birthmark that Muḥammad is supposed to have had on his body, which the Christian monk inspected, is connected to the Qur'ānic concept of the seal of prophets, a title given to Muḥammad in Q 33:40. The *Sīra* thus is emphatic about the role of mythology in presenting the significance of Muḥammad, and if the Qur'ān was not so obliging in this regard, it was made to be; key words in enigmatic Qur'ānic verses were tied to major mythical narratives, and as such, the *Sīra* stood buttressed by the Qur'ān.

The shadow of the historical Muḥammad is, however, not far from the picture presented by Ibn Ishāq. A decent youth with a good reputation, Muḥammad comes across as a respectable member of his community, if not part of the elite. He is willing to settle down and marry a widow, who clearly made the first move. In a sense, the sensible Muḥammad is quite on display. It is against this background that the swelling tide of transformation that Muḥammad experienced is presented. He was as surprised with his prophetic experience as his people were at first bemused. It is not so much its shocking effect on his tribe that mattered but its effect on him. Both the *Sīra* and the Qur'ān agree that Muḥammad was initially pained by his role as a messenger, as a public figure with a call.¹⁸ This is, of course, a familiar trope, the prophet who is unwilling to carry out his mission, but in the case of Muḥammad, there was the added layer of a prophet who came to a people who did not abide by the paradigm he was presenting himself in, a prophecy with a divine message. The Arabs were not expecting a prophet, and they were not in the habit of listening to them, or according them authority, moral or political.

But if the Qur'ān is slight on the details of Muḥammad's life during this period, it is quite explicit about the reaction of the Arabs to his preaching. In numerous passages, the Qur'ān reports their words verbatim before responding; it did not help that what animated Muḥammad was incomprehensible to the Arabs. Muḥammad was already speaking a discourse that was alien to them, not that they did not know the fables of the old (*asāṭir al-awwālīn*), as they called the stories of Jews and

Christians, but to be affronted by the claims of a prophetic mission sent to them was too much to bear (Q 38:4). Why did he not minister to them in a foreign language, they quipped, as his entire message seemed alien to their pagan world (Q 41:44)? A prophet is good for Jews and Christians (Q 6:156). Why did not his God send an angel instead? He would have been more reliable (Q 6:8–9). Why was Muḥammad chosen in the first place? Certainly a more renowned or noble Meccan individual was possible (Q 43:31). Is Muḥammad not surely confused (Q 43:31)? Perhaps he is a poet, like many a poet before him (Q 21:5). A priest, one of us, who is having visions (Q 52:29). Perhaps possessed, by the many *jinn*s roaming the desert. But why a prophecy when such things were not for the Arabs? In this sense, his opponents were as cruel as they were accommodating: trying to see him as having an Arabic experience, one that they could accept. What they were not willing to concede is authority to his voice, even though Muḥammad was genuinely unaware – at first – of the connection between prophetic claims and political authority (Q 52:40; 88:22; 38:86). Prophecy entailed power, and the Meccans were not going to be pushed around, despite the reassurances of Muḥammad that he was not after power.

MUḤAMMAD'S PROPHETIC EXPERIENCE

The *Sīra* presents Mecca at the time of the coming of Muḥammad as clearly aware of the shortcomings of paganism. Sensible individuals span out in the world in search of truth. The *Sīra* tells the story of four such inquisitive individuals¹⁹, each is trying to find the true religion, and most end up converting to Christianity. However, we are also introduced to the concept of a monotheistic original religion, an ur-religion, the faith of Abraham, the *ḥanafiya*.²⁰ The proud Meccan Arabs ended up rediscovering this faith, the faith that their ancestors used to profess – after all, the *Sīra* presents the Arabs as descendants of Abraham through Ishmael. There are several ways in which the notion of an original religion of the Arabs functions; the most significant is, it seems, its attempt to mitigate the severity of the break with the past. Muḥammad does come across in the Qur'ān as a mere bringer of old tides, nothing the Jews and the Christians did not have. Apparently, it was what the Arabs at one time also had, but no more, the *Sīra* claims. The Arabs were once

¹⁹ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muḥammad*, 98–103.

²⁰ For a detailed study of the *ḥanafiya*, see Uri Rubin, "Hanafiyya and Ka'ab – An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of Dīn Ibrāhīm," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990): 85–112.

¹⁸ See Uri Rubin, "The Shrouded Messenger: On the Interpretation of al-muzzammil and al-muddaththir," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 16 (1993): 96–230.

the followers of the religion of Abraham, and Muḥammad is bringing that religion back.

Clearly, the *Sīra* is taking its cue from the Qur'ān when it argues that the stumbling block for the Pagans was the break with the past. There was a profound sense of scandal about what Muḥammad wanted: the Meccans to do: forsake their fathers – which, in the scale of things, was far more disturbing than wanting them to forsake their gods. By connecting Muḥammad to the *ḥanafiya*, this pristine, pure monotheistic religion, the *Sīra* presents Muḥammad as accommodating the Meccans, allowing them to feel that they were still honoring their fathers and, at the same time, escaping the religions of their feared neighbors: Muḥammad was asking them to become neither Christians or Jews but something very similar.

Muḥammad, the *Sīra* insists, was himself dissatisfied with the situation of his city. He took to contemplation and would scale the mountains around Mecca to be alone and reflect on the state of his town. He had turned forty by the time that things escalated. He started having dreams that always came true. He also started to be greeted by rocks and trees – or at least to hear greetings, then to turn only to find trees and rocks. In a sense, the inanimate world was already aware of his rank as a prophet. His first prophetic experience took place in a cave. The *Sīra* informs us, while recounting the events of his first prophetic experience, that Muḥammad's mission was universal, meant for all humankind. The outcast of Mecca was sent to humanity, and at no time does the *Sīra* forget to emphasize that. As we can see, all these details raise suspicion: forty is the age of perfection, and the cave is a reminder of Plato's cave, and it was too early in his mission to make a claim to universalism. The *Sīra* is presenting the significance of the events concomitant with their telling.

As mentioned previously, the first angelic vision happened when Muḥammad was asleep in a cave on a mountain. The angel Gabriel brought with him a book and ordered Muḥammad to read. Having ordered Muḥammad to read three times, Muḥammad finally responded, "*Mā anā bi-qārī?*" ("What should I read?"). Gabriel then recites what is considered the first section to be revealed of the Qur'ān (Q 96:1–5).²¹ Another understanding of the event is to take Muḥammad's response to mean that he was not able to read. Hence, what he was telling Gabriel was "I can't read" instead of asking "What should I read?" The Arabic

phrase is ambivalent enough to mean both. At first, this seems rather inconsequential. Is the *Sīra* claiming that Muḥammad is overwhelmed by the experience, or is it claiming that he is illiterate? Soon it would become apparent that the notion of an illiterate Muḥammad was fundamental in the presentation of the prophetic character of Muḥammad. The Arabs were not Gentiles (*ummiyyūn*) as the Qur'ān insisted (Q 62:2); they were illiterate (*ummiyyūn*) as the *Sīra* now understands the word; the same word means something different from its Qur'ānic usage. The purest illiterate of the Arabs was, of course, Muḥammad. Unable to write, he could not have forged the Qur'ān.²²

The narratives of the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq are usually homogeneous, and we are not offered alternative parallel stories to the version presented. But the broader tradition has preserved a rich amount of material that offers alternative variations of almost every event from Muḥammad's early life. The study of the variant versions of an episode has added immensely to our understanding of how different groups of Muslims saw and understood the career of Muḥammad.²³

The Qur'ān, in this instance, has recorded what appears to be a reference to the same event, Muḥammad's first vision. Sūra 53, the only instance of a vision mentioned in the Qur'ān, clearly indicates that what Muḥammad saw was God himself and not Gabriel. In either case, the vision was overwhelming and so profound that its main effect was to convince Muḥammad of his mission. The figure filled the horizon. What Muḥammad experienced was also a revelation, a *waḥī*. In this sense, the most important aspect of Muḥammad's experience was the receiving of a coherent verbal revelation that he felt compelled to proclaim. Whatever was the nature of the experience, its verbal echo was the most important result, and Muḥammad was soon keenly aware of a message being delivered to him.

The *Sīra* and the tradition on the whole, including the Qur'ān, do not record any other vision of the divine as such, apart from a vision of God in the ascension story (*mi'raj*), a vision that is attested only outside the Qur'ān. The narratives mostly present Muḥammad's experience as auditory, a trance that usually resulted in a new revelation that was

²² On the term *ummi*, "gentile" or "illiterate," see Isaiah Goldfeld, "The Illiterate Prophet (nabi ummi): An Inquiry into the Development of a Dogma in Islamic Tradition," *Der Islam* 57 (1980): 58–67.

²³ Perhaps the most important studies carried out on these episodes are by Harris Birke-land, Rudi Paret, M. J. Kister, and Uri Rubin. See especially Uri Rubin's *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995).

²¹ On this Sūra, see Uri Rubin, "Iqra' bi-smi Rabbika . . . ! Some Notes on the Interpretation of Sūrat al-'Alaq (VS. 1–5)," *Israel Oriental Studies* 13 (1993): 213–30.

proclaimed to his followers. What is interesting about this revelation, which was called Qur'an, is its self-referential nature, its constant cross-referencing of motifs and themes. As such, the compositional coherency of Muhammad's revelation is quite striking.

THE AUDACITY OF PROPHECY

Much later in the career of Muhammad, in Medina, during the famous Battle of the Trench (5/627), Muhammad is supposed to have uttered some words that demonstrate the quality of the man. This was the nadir of his military career, Medina was besieged, and the situation was critical. There was every indication that the end of the saga of Muhammad was at hand. Mecca amassed a large army in an attempt finally to eliminate Muhammad. Eventually, the trenches dug by the Muslims successfully defended the city, and the army of Mecca, made up mostly of nomadic tribes, could not sustain the siege for more than a month. Thwarted in their effort, they could not conquer the city, but neither were they defeated, having hardly any casualties. Yet Muhammad saw a shift in the balance of power: seeing the armies of his enemies retreat, he said, "Now we will raid them and they will not raid us."²⁴ A prediction that proved all too true. Mecca lost its nerve and soon Muhammad proved invincible. A historian is, of course, justified in raising doubts about the historicity of this statement, although the strategic nature of the utterance points to a cold, measured military analysis of the situation and not a prophecy. But whether true or fictitious, it sums up Muhammad's command of his environment. Even at his weakest, he seemed to see through the fog to formulate his next step. The Meccans did not lack in resolve; they simply were no match for him. Even when he misjudged them, Muhammad was willing to radically alter his strategy. The Meccans proved themselves adaptable to change and willing to learn, but they were slower; there is no doubt about who was the revolutionary visionary in this story.

Muhammad started his prophetic career in Mecca, which he had to leave after almost a decade of preaching, and the accounts of his departure make clear that only a handful of Quraysh members followed him to Medina. The pagans were not deserting their gods for a prophet (Q 38:6). As such, there is no escaping the conclusion that Muhammad's mission in Mecca was a failure. His arguments, style, and preaching all

proved in vain. Why did his stint in Mecca fail? Was there a way that it could have succeeded? These questions are raised to understand fully the rhetorical nature of the Qur'anic revelation – because the Qur'an is all that is left for us of his preaching to his Meccan fellow tribespeople. In what way did the Qur'an understand the environment it was preaching to, and in what way did it refuse to accommodate it? The answer, of course, will always remain truncated, for paganism did not survive to write its point of view.

The *Sūra* presents Muhammad as desperately hoping for an accommodation with his tribe. The event that depicts such willingness to accommodate is the episode of the Satanic Verses. The episode is famous, and here I give the minimum outline of the story. Muhammad is supposed to have praised the three goddesses of the Meccans in his Qur'an, only to have the verses removed the next day, claiming that the verses were whispered by the devil himself. Instead, a scathing ridicule was offered of these false gods.²⁵ Apart from this one-day lapse, which was excised from the text, the Qur'an is simply unrelenting, unaccommodating, and outright despising of paganism. Rudi Paret, in his study of one of the shortest of *sūras* in the Qur'an (Q 109), brilliantly captures the resolve of Muhammad to demarcate himself from his tribespeople.²⁶ The gulf between the two was insurmountable. The two systems were mutually exclusive. As one verse states: "They wished you would relent, they would then have relented" (Q 68:9). But of course neither did, and the belligerence escalated.

The voice preaching in the Qur'an is thus uncompromising. It brooks no dissent with its fundamental message: one God, a destruction of the world, a resurrection of the dead, and a judgment of deeds. Humans were to humble themselves before the Lord, act fearfully, and observe a code of behavior dictated by God and not by the honor of the tribe. The pagans kept complaining that Muhammad was ridiculing their reason, insulting their ancestors, and pitting kin against kin. In every respect, Muhammad was contravening the very foundations of the moral world of his city. He even had the audacity to proclaim a new history, a before-and-after

²⁵ For the literature on this episode, see Shahab Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," *Studia Islamica* 87 (1998): 67–124.

²⁶ Rudi Paret, "Sure 109," *Der Islam* 39 (1964): 197–200, where he states that the *sūra* sounds like a call for a war ("Sie klingt wie ein Kampfruf," 200). All the scholarship of Paret is in German, and its diffusion in Qur'anic studies in the English-speaking world has been minimal. This is unfortunate because he is one of the giants of the German school of Qur'anic studies. I am in the process of translating his magisterial *Mohammed und der Koran*, the most lucid analysis of Muhammad's career through the data in the Qur'an.

²⁴ From the *Sahih* of al-Bukhārī, chapter on the *maghāzī* as quoted in my *In Defense of the Bible* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2008), 181.

him – a *jāhiliyya*, the time of the tribal ethos that he came to put an end to. He compared them to cattle, made fun of their respect for their ancestors. He declared blood ties useless. A solidification of Muḥammad's message was accompanied by a realization of the futility of conversion, and soon the Qur'ān is resigned to the new reality: those who saw the light converted; those who did not will live to see the damnation of God. It is almost a relief, because now the discursive nature of his preaching is far more pronounced. The Qur'ān has more time to elaborate on the points of contention, both aware of the futility of any arguments and insistent on arguing its own point of view.

In this regard, Muḥammad was preaching above the heads of the Meccans; it is not clear when he came to the conclusion that his mission to his city was a failure, but he must have done so or else he would not have prepared a way out. The radical uncompromising voice of the Qur'ān must, then, reflect this realization: because all is lost, only the full articulation of the truth is to really matter. The Qur'ān was not anymore interested in converting the pagans so much as reading a judgment against them. It also wanted to make sure that the small band of believers could sustain the misery of their isolation (Q 6:51–2). There were moments when the Qur'ān did not even care to explain itself to Muḥammad – we have to remember that rhetorically the Qur'ān addresses Muḥammad, and the Qur'ān is a persona in the dialogue. The Qur'ān, quoting Muḥammad regretting the complicated situation he is in, reproaches him: "If you do not like the gulf separating you from them, why not fly into the heavens, or bore a tunnel into earth" (Q 6:35). A miracle is not worth his enemies' weight, even if miracles were what God had granted before.

A MECCAN MANIFESTO

Sūra 6 in the Qur'ān is, in many respects, a summation of most of the arguments of the Meccan Qur'ān. It is, in my opinion, the last manifesto of Muḥammad in Mecca, radically uncompromising and yet careful to reargue each point of the whole mission. Rhetorically, it fashions a unity by making Muḥammad utter the same prayer, more or less, at the beginning and at the end of the Sūra. Muḥammad is ordered to recite it at the beginning of the Sūra (Q 6:14) and once again at the very end of the Sūra, this time making sure that Abraham is mentioned as the ancestor of this faith (Q 6:161–4). This is, moreover, the same prayer of Abraham that is narrated in the middle of the Sūra (Q 6:78–9). The prayer is the essence of Muḥammad's message: a radical monotheism and surrender to the One God. Remarkably the story of the conversion of Abraham

is the only narrative in this long chapter, a rather stark departure from the practice of the Qur'ān, which usually narrates biographies from the lives of other prophets. The Qur'ān here has resigned itself and simply lists the prophets' names instead of their stories. In essence, there is one message, and it is what Abraham believed in, and all the prophets after him preached the same message (Q 6:83–90).

The bone of contention in the Sūra is the demand for a miracle to vouchsafe the veracity of Muḥammad's mission. In this regard, the arguments of the pagans are unimpeachable: Muḥammad had made it a point to connect himself to Moses and Jesus, had praised their miracle working as a sign of God; it is only natural that the Meccans should ask for the same. It is this demand for a miracle that becomes the backbone of Sūra 6 (and, as a matter of fact, of much of the anxiety of the rhetorical arguments in the Qur'ān); at each interval a specific demand is mentioned, only for the challenge to be rejected. What would prevent the Meccans from claiming that the miracle is not sorcery (Q 6:7)? A materialization of a miracle is, the Qur'ān declares, tantamount to carrying out God's chastisement. To force God's hand is to incur His wrath simultaneously (Q 6:8). They are simply incapable of seeing or hearing or understanding; they deny every sign and argue instead with Muḥammad, mockingly calling the Qur'ān the fables of the old (Q 6:25).

The Qur'ān then invokes God as a witness for its own veracity, calling itself by its own name, the Qur'ān, a revelation sent to warn the Meccans that there is only one God and that worshipping other gods beside him will only cause damnation (Q 6:19). Earthly life is declared a frivolous game, a nothing compared to the life to come (Q 6:32), in the face of Meccan insistence that the only real life is this one (Q 6:29). God is certainly capable of producing a miracle for Muḥammad, but they are ignorant not to know that (Q 6:37); God is already manifest in the world, and His chastisement will come to prove His will. Once more the nature of prophecy is adumbrated: prophets are messengers with good tidings and warnings; they are not empowered beyond that, they have no riches or treasures, and they are not kings; they follow what is revealed to them (Q 6:48–52). It is God who is the master of the world; He Will judge – indeed, if judgment was at Muḥammad's will, he would have brought it –, but God is not willing to let a human judge other humans, a clear sign of God's mercy (Q 6:54, 58). Nonetheless, God's chastisement will come all the same, and an unrelenting horror awaits those who refuse to abide by God's message.

After a long foray into what is licit and what is not, the Sūra then sums up the moral commands of the Meccan Qur'ān (Q 6:151–2); the Qur'ān is declared a book like the book of Moses, despite the Meccans'

protestation that only the two sects (meaning Jews and Christians) were known to have such books (Q 6:156). But God will come with His angels, and then nothing will benefit those who were unwilling to believe (Q 6:158). It is clear that Sūra 6 is not envisioning a polity or a community of believers as such, or if it did, not for the Muslims. The call is for a personal conversion and personal responsibility. Muḥammad had realized the limits of his mission in Mecca.

CONCLUSION: MUḤAMMAD THE PROPHET IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Muḥammad was not only a product of his environment; like a classic revolutionary character, he was also capable of transcending his limitations. In a tribal pagan environment, he dared to preach a salvific religion, a high imperial cult – and monotheism was then the cult of an empire – and he wanted to end the barbarism of the Arabs. The Arabs were to be made similar to the peoples of the empire, the *Rūm*, the Romans up north, with a book, and part of the legacy of Abraham. It is not insignificant that Muḥammad was rooting for the Romans in their wars with Sassanid Iran (Q 30:1–5). It is also worth noting that Alexander the Great became part of the salvific history of the Qurʾān: empire building and monotheism are one (Q 18). Muḥammad wanted to bring Rome to Arabia and, having been too successful, ended up taking Arabia to Rome.

Further reading

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