

***Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* by F. E. Peters  
(Summarized by John Millam<sup>1</sup>)**

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# ***Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* by F. E. Peters**

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## **Primary Historical Sources:**

Nabih Faris, *Ibn al-Kalbi's Book of Idols*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952. Hisham ibn al-Kalbi (d. 819 AD) provides the earliest and best information about the religious practices in Arabia before Muhammad.

*The Life of Muhammad*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955. A translation of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*. Ibn Ishaq composed his work c. 767 AD (about 130 years after Muhammad's death) and relied on many sources that are no longer extant. This work is primarily known through Ibn Hisham (c. 833 AD) whose abridged version removed "extraneous materials" that did not focus on Muhammad or his environs.

*The History of al-Tabari*, Vol. VI, VII, and IX. Tabari composed his life of Muhammad in c. 923 AD. He had access to various sources, including Ibn Ishaq's original unabridged work.

Because so many names, places, and terms may be unfamiliar to most Western readers, definitions of key terms can be found at the end of this paper. For consistency in spelling Quran is replaced by Qur'an and *sura* with *surah*, even in quotes.

## **Chapter 1: The Founding Fathers**

To understand Islam, we must first understand the historical and cultural milieu in which it emerged. Muhammad, the prophet and founder of Islam, was born in the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia near the end of the sixth century AD. From the earliest histories to the time of Muhammad, his native Arabia was filled with idolatry, polytheism, and the widespread "cult of stones." Later Muslim writers would refer this pre-Islamic history as the "Era of Ignorance" or "The Barbarism." While Muhammad condemned the idolatry of his fellow Meccans, the worship at the Ka'ba shrine, the *Hajj* pilgrimage, and many other pre-Islamic practices that were common in Mecca were carried over into Islam. The continuation of these practices within Islam is explained in that God gave to Abraham a pure religion, which subsequently degenerated into idolatry and which Muhammad was called to restore to its original form (Surah 2:125-127, 22:26). Consequently, Muslim scholars have spent a lot of time trying to provide an "Abrahamic" explanation for the Mecca sanctuary (the Ka'ba), the pilgrimage (the *Hajj*), and the importance of the Muhammad's tribe (the Quraysh).

The Qur'an, unlike the Bible, does not begin its sacred history at creation, but instead focuses on certain individuals and occasions that frequently involve well-known Biblical characters, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and even Jesus. Neither does it provide a narrative framework for these stories, assuming instead that the reader has a degree of familiarity with the Biblical stories that it refers to. Of all the individuals mentioned in the Qur'an, Abraham is by far the most important and most frequently mentioned. According to the Qur'an, Islam is the "religion of Abraham" (Surah 2:130) and so the sacred history of Islam starts with

Abraham and his son, Ishmael. The Qur'an gives many details of Abraham's conversion to monotheism (e.g. Surah 2:74-76; 21:52-71) but contains no mention of Hagar and Sarah and little mention of Isaac and Ishmael. Muslim tradition, however, attempts to fill in this gap and contains a great deal of speculation about Abraham's family and how Abraham came to Mecca in the Hijaz (western Arabia).

Abraham and Ishmael were said to have built the Ka'ba (literally "the cube"), a shrine built of unmortared stone around which the city of Mecca developed. The Ka'ba was understood by Muhammad to be a temple or mosque of God and is referred to in the Qur'an as the "sacred house" (Surah 5:100) and the "ancient house" (Surah 22:129). It was a well-known religious shrine in Muhammad's time and is today considered by Muslims to be the holiest site in Islam. According to tradition, the site where the Ka'ba stands was an area hallowed by Adam, where he had built an earlier shrine that was later destroyed by Noah's flood. In other traditions, even Moses and Aaron came and worshipped briefly at the Ka'ba. The Ka'ba has a black stone (a meteorite) that is embedded in its southeast corner, which is revered by many Muslims. According to tradition, the Black Stone was placed there by Abraham, who had received it from the angel Gabriel.

Muhammad belonged to the Quraysh tribe who were believed to be descendents of Ishmael, the son of Abraham. This posed an historical problem since Ishmael and his descendents were believed to have settled near the Ka'ba, yet the Quraysh who were descended from Ishmael were relative newcomers to Mecca. For much of history, two other Arab tribes, the Jurhum and the Amaliqa (Amalekites), had long held the land. This issue is not addressed in the Qur'an but Islamic tradition contains a continuous (although sometimes divergent) history stretching from Ishmael to Muhammad. According to Islamic historians, Ishmael married a Jurhumite woman, Sayyida bint Mudad, and had twelve sons (the twelve princes of Gen. 17:20). The Ishmaelites intermixed with the Jurhum but when the Ishmaelites grew in number, the Jurhumites forced them to leave the area. It was during this time of dispersion, that the Ishmaelites degenerated into idolatry. Later around 400 AD, another group of Arabs called the Khuza'a took control of Mecca from the Jurhumites. Eventually, the Khuza'a allowed the Ishmaelites (namely the Quraysh tribe) to return to Mecca from their "scattered settlements." According to tradition, this event occurred about 700 years after their original expulsion. Sometime after the Khuza'a allowed the Quraysh to resettle near Mecca, one of the Quraysh named Qusayy led his brothers to overthrow the Khuza'a. After a battle, the Khuza'a were forced to give control of Mecca to the Quraysh, which continued up to Muhammad's time. Qusayy is a very important figure in the early history of Mecca and is revered as the "unifier" of the Quraysh. He also unified Mecca as a pilgrimage center, which was the primary source of income for the city. Various members of the Quraysh were given control of providing specific services for visiting pilgrims for a fee, which provided valuable and lucrative sources of income for the people of Mecca. For example, the *rifada* was the service of providing food and *siqaya* involved providing water for the pilgrims.

For most of its history, Mecca was simply a settlement that grew up around the Ka'ba shrine. There were no trade routes, seaports, or even prominent sources of water, so the area was occupied solely by nomadic Bedouins. It was barely habitable, with no waters or grass, wrapped in "suffocating heat, deadly wind, clouds of flies" [Peters, p. 24]. "Mecca had little save its own holiness [i.e. the Ka'ba shrine] to recommend it as a site for settlement" [Peters, p. 23]. Pilgrims would come from a distance to worship at the shrine and perform the *Hajj* (greater pilgrimage) or the *'umra* (lesser pilgrimage). Mecca consisted of little more than tents surrounding the Ka'ba until sometime after 400 AD, when Qusayy took control and established it as a permanent settlement. Mecca did not even have buildings made of baked brick until the time of Caliph Mu'awiya, some 40 years after the death of Muhammad (c. 670 AD). "By all accounts, Mecca must have been an extremely modest place in the sixth century A.D." [Peters, p. 24].

## Chapter 2: The Colonial Era in Arabia

To the north of the Arabian Peninsula is a large desert plain known as the Syrian steppe. Strategically, it is located midway between the two great competing powerhouses of the day—the Byzantine Empire (modern Asia Minor) to the west and the Sasanian (Persian) Empire (modern Iran/Iraq) to the east. Without roads, the Syrian steppe was impassable to the large armies of both empires and was only inhabitable by the Bedouins who lived there. During the early part of the first millennium AD, both powers began to take a greater interest in the region and formed alliances with various Bedouin tribes. To the west, the Ghassan tribe was allied with the Byzantine Empire and in the east, the Lakhmid tribe was allied with the Sasanian Empire. The two empires tried to maintain control, protect their interests, and fight each other through their allied Bedouin intermediates.

In addition to the growing political and military interest in region of Arabia, there was a growing missionary effort from the Christian Byzantine Empire. There is strong evidence for Christian influence in Abyssinia (350 AD) and Yemen (no later than the sixth century). Judaism also had a significant presence in Arabia and there was a distinct Jewish presence [Arab converts to Judaism] in the royal house of Yemen as early as the fifth century. There were also three major Jewish tribes and at least 10 smaller ones living in Medina where Muhammad spent the last 10 years of his life.

The early history of Arabia is exclusively polytheistic. Starting in the fourth or fifth century we see the first hints of monotheistic terminology. This new supreme, and perhaps unique, God was generally called al-Rahman (“The Merciful”) and identified as “lord of heaven” or “lord of heaven and earth.” Rahmanism was either (1) a homegrown monotheism or henotheism, (2) Jewish influence, or (3) Christian influence. More modern findings in Jewish Yemen indicate that (2) is the most likely explanation. In other words, Rahmanism appears to be an Arabized version of Judaism, with its emphasis on monotheism and moral reform. (The importance of Rahmanism to Muhammad’s theology is discussed in Chapter 6.)

## Chapter 3: The Arabian Oikoumene

In addition to the Christian influence in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Himyar (Yemen), there was another source located even closer to Mecca and Medina. The city of al-Hira (literally, “the Camp”) was located on the eastern edge of the Syrian steppe in what is modern Iraq. The city was ruled by the Lakhmid Arabs and were allies of the Sasanian (Persian) kingdom to the East. Until about 580 AD, the Lakhmid leaders were dominantly pagan, however, there may have been a Christian presence in the city from as early as 410 AD. In 580 AD, Nu’mān III became the ruler of al-Hira and converted to Christianity in c. 594 AD. The Christian presence in al-Hira included many churches, monasteries, and even a theological school. Christian poet Adi ibn Zayd (died c. 604 AD) was the crown of the lively literary tradition there. “There is still no firm evidence of an Arabic translation of the Gospels [in al-Hira] at this point, and it is almost certain evidence that the Arabs of al-Hira and elsewhere heard and recited their Scriptures and celebrated their liturgies in Syriac, just as most of the unmistakably Christian terms that occur in the Qur’an are loan words from this same Christian Aramaic dialect” [Peters, p. 67]. Examples of such Syriac loan words in the Qur’an include “prayer” (*salat*) and “recitation” (*qeryana*). The name Qur’an (*al-Quran*) means “recitation” and was in fact derived from this later Syriac word.

Nu’mān III reigned in al-Hira for about 20 years until he was killed in 602 AD by the Sasanian emperor Khusraw II. Khusraw II had him killed and replaced by Iyas ibn al-Qabisa to insure that al-Hira remained in the firm grip of the Sasanian Empire. A short time later in 610 AD, the tribes of the Syrian steppe revolted against their Sasanian ruler. Khusraw II sent Iyas along with Sasanian troops to put down the revolt but the Bedouin tribes defeated them in the famous Battle of Dhu Qar (a local watering hole). “Shortly after the Prophet began receiving his

revelations [610 AD], the final act of centuries of Byzantine-Sasanian hostilities began to unfold in Syria. In 614 the Sasanians overran the Byzantine East, capturing not only Jerusalem...but all of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. The destruction was considerable, far greater than during the Muslim conquest twenty years later..." [Peters, p. 71-72].

Until the time of Hashim ibn Abd Manaf (440-500 AD), Mecca was little more than a poor shrine-settlement. Mecca and its struggles were completely "invisible" to Greek and Roman sources of the time. Hashim established trade routes to Syria and Gaza to the north and Yemen and Abyssinia to the south. This was the first step for the Meccan community in broadening its horizons beyond the borders. Up until this time most of the stories concerning Mecca center on struggles for possession of the shrine and control of the pilgrimages.

While Qusayy had made Mecca into a pilgrimage center with the Quraysh as its wardens, Hashim added trade to this mix. Since trade was greatly hindered by predatory Bedouin tribes in the area, Hashim negotiated an agreement with them. The agreement instituted sacred months in which a "truce of God" prevailed. The sacred months allowed safe trading and open markets in and around Mecca. The Bedouin benefited by using the camels to take goods in return for a share of the profits. "The arrangement had, it seems clear, nothing to do with religion" [Peters, p. 69]. "Most Western scholars share that understanding [that Hashim introduced a measure of prosperity due to trade] and in fact derive from it a plausible explanation for both the appearance and success of Islam: the very prosperity of Mecca, with its undermining of traditional moral and social values and its division of the population into the rich and the poor, summoned forth a reformer of the likes of Muhammad" [Peters, p. 69].

#### **Chapter 4: The Family and City of Muhammad**

Hashim married a woman named Salma in Medina and settled with her there. They had a son named Shayba, who would be Muhammad's grandfather. Hashim died when Shayba was young and so his uncle, al-Muttalib (Hashim's younger brother) persuaded Salma to let him take the boy back to Mecca to be with his own Quraysh tribe. According to tradition, when al-Muttalib arrived in Mecca with the boy, the people of Mecca mistakenly cried, "It is al-Muttalib's slave whom he has bought" and thus Shayba became known as Abd al-Muttalib, which means literally, "slave of al-Muttalib." This story appears to have been invented to explain the name of Abd al-Muttalib.

Abd al-Muttalib, like his father Hashim, also played an important role in the development of Mecca. He is credited with rediscovery of the Zamzam well. Muslims identify the Zamzam well with the well that God used to provide water for Hagar and Ishmael after Abraham had sent them away (Genesis 21:19). Abd al-Muttalib uncovered it following God's leading after it had been covered up by the Jurhum when they were displaced by the Khuza'a (c. 400 AD). In some traditions, Abd al-Muttalib also discovered two golden gazelles when he uncovered the Zamzam well and melted them down to make gold doors for the Ka'ba. Abd al-Muttalib had charge of the lucrative practice of supplying food (*rifada*) and water (*siqaya*) for pilgrims, which he had inherited from his great-grandfather, Qusayy. However, it is at this time that the *siqaya* became associated with drawing water from the Zamzam (as opposed to providing water from any source).

There is a famous story regarding Abdullah (Muhammad's father), al-Muttalib's youngest son. When Abd al-Muttalib uncovered the Zamzam, he encountered opposition from the rest of the Quraysh who wanted him to share control of the well. According to the story, Abd al-Muttalib prayed for 10 sons to grow up and protect him and in return promised that he would sacrifice one of the sons to God at the Ka'ba when they were grown. After he had 10 grown sons, he went to the statue of Hubal (an Arab god) located at the center of the Ka'ba shrine in Mecca and there determined that Abdullah was son to be sacrificed using arrows of divination

(under Hubal's guidance). (See Chapter 5 for a discussion of Hubal.) Instead of sacrificing him, Abd al-Muttalib went to a female seer in Medina, who suggested substituting camels for the life of Abdullah. In the end, Abdullah's life was ransomed for 100 camels. The camels were then sacrificed and the meat given to the poor. Most likely this story is apocryphal and distantly echoes Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19).

"The pre-Islamic Arabs had no fixed annual dating system of their own, and so the Muslim authorities were uncertain in precisely what year the Prophet was born" [Peters, p. 84]. Before the time of Muhammad, a lunar calendar was followed but periodically extra time would be inserted into the calendar to keep up with the solar calendar. Muhammad later condemned this practice of "intercalation" or "postponement" so that the Muslim calendar no longer kept up with the solar calendar. (See Chapter 11 for more details). Even today, the Muslim celebration of Ramadan is observed based on a lunar calendar and so it occurs 11 days earlier each year.

Because of these and other difficulties, we cannot be entirely certain what year Muhammad was born. His birth is often tied to the "year of the elephant," which was an event that nearly shook Mecca. Abraha, the former Abyssinian viceroy, had become established as the independent and aggressive ruler of Himyar (Yemen) in about 544 AD. (Abyssinia had previously invaded and subjugated Yemen in 518 AD.) He built a church in Sa'na (in Yemen) and hoped that the church would attract pilgrims to the city. This put the church in direct competition with Ka'ba shrine for pilgrims (and their money!) and so put Mecca and Abyssinia on a collision course. In about 570 AD, an Arab defiled the church and returned to Mecca. According to the story, Abraha was so outraged that he decided to march on Mecca for the sole purpose of destroying the Ka'ba. Abd al-Muttalib recognized that the Mecca had no defenses or army and so could not defend the shrine against Abraha's forces, so he went to Abraha and declared, "the shrine has its own owner [i.e. Allah] who will defend it." Abraha and his forces entered Mecca and sent their war elephant to knock down the Ka'ba. Instead, however, the elephant bowed before the Ka'ba (like a faithful Muslim) even when prodded or beaten. After they withdrew from Mecca, birds dropped stones on Abraha's army causing blood and sores. Much of this story was probably just an attempt to explain Surah 105. At the end of Ibn Ishaq's description of the event, he "offers, almost as an aside, what may have actually befallen the expedition: 'Ya'qub ibn Utba told me that he was informed that that year was the first time that measles and smallpox had been seen in Arabia...'" [Peters, p. 87].

There is strong evidence to suggest that Surah 105 and 106 were originally a single *surah*. Surah 106 is "intelligible in English, but the Arabic of the *surah* has posed serious linguistic and syntactical problems that have bothered commentators from the beginning. The *surah* begins (1) abruptly—early *surahs* commonly open with some type of adjuration—(2) with an subordinate clause, and (3) with a term, *ilaf*, that was apparently so difficult to construe that a number of secondary readings were quickly put forward. A secondary tradition in both texts and commentaries suggests, on the other hand, that Surahs 105 and 106 were once a single unit, a juncture that would solve most of the linguistic and interpretive difficulties that surround the latter..." [Peters, p. 89]. Separately, Surah 105 was taken to describe the defeat of Abraha's army and Surah 106 had led later Muslim commentators to project Mecca as an international trade center instead of the small local trade center of history. Combining the two *surahs* together removes these linguistic and historical difficulties.

One notable pre-Islamic religious association was known as the *Hums*. They were a subset of the Quraysh who were "strict fundamentalists in their religion" [Peters, p. 94]. The *Hums* claimed, "We are the sons of Abraham, the people of the holy territory, the guardians of the shrine and the citizens of Mecca" [Peters, p. 95]. The *Hums* had newly embraced "what was later called *the religion of Abraham*, Muhammad's own later phrase to describe Islam, and which the members strongly identified with the cult of the Ka'ba in Mecca, even to the exclusion of the other pilgrimage rituals, chiefly the *Hajj*, which focused on other places, like Mina and Arafat.

In this view, and we have no reason to doubt it, the original *Hajj* had nothing to do with the ‘religion of Abraham,’ and the Quraysh as *Hums* did not recognize the *Hajj* because some of its rituals took place outside the Haram [area surrounding the Ka’ba]...” [Peters, p. 95]. It is Muhammad, who later Islamicized the *Hajj* and joined it to the rituals of the Ka’ba (see Chapter 11). The *Hums* also included dietary and domestic taboos and a great emphasis upon the clothes connected with the ritual.

The *Hums* seemed to be henotheistic, rather than monotheistic, that is, Allah was viewed as the supreme God among lesser gods. In a *Hums* liturgy, Allah is referred to not only as “Lord of the Ka’ba,” but also as “Lord of Manat, al-Lat, and al-Uzza,” and even as “Lord of Sirius.” Manat, al-Lat, and al-Uzza were three female goddesses and were known together as the “daughters of Allah.” Early in Muhammad’s life and even into the early stages of his mission, he identifies himself with the *Hums* and even accepts Manat, al-Lat, and al-Uzza. (See Chapter 6 for more details.) Later, however, Muhammad rejected this view in favor of absolute monotheism. In the Qur’an, associating Allah with other gods (i.e. henotheism and polytheism) was strictly forbidden (Surah 7:191-194).

There is a great deal of uncertainty over just what year Muhammad was born. “Muhammad, like most others of his contemporaries ... had little or no idea when he was born and thus the exact age at his death. Most of the authorities make him anywhere between 60- and 65-years-old when he died, a quite advanced age in that culture and quite at odds with the impression given by the sources of his vitality and of the unexpectedness of his death when it did occur” [Peters, p. 102]. Similarly, “As for the prior period, that at Mecca, it remains wrapped in impenetrable darkness... It is worth noting that well into the second century A.H. [eighth century AD] scholarly opinion on the birth date of the Prophet displayed a range of variance of eighty-five years. On the assumption that chronology is crucial to the stabilization of any tradition of historical narrative ... one can see in this state of affairs a clear indication that (biographies of the Prophet) in the second century were still in a state of flux” [Peters, p. 283-284, footnote #52]. “Later Muslim authorities seem to give tacit recognition to the uncertainty of any of the chronological indications passed on about the Prophet’s life at Mecca. They, like us, must have felt that the historical ground grew firm only at Muhammad’s migration to Medina; it was that date, in any event, that they chose to begin the Muslim calendrical era” [Peters, p. 103]. The Muslim calendar, 1 AH (*al-hijra*) corresponds to 622 AD.

Muslim traditions also contain “what has been called the *Infancy Gospel of Islam*, filled as it appears, with the same miracles and presentiments of the future as are found in the opening pages of Matthew and Luke” [Peters, p. 103]. For example, according to Ibn Ishaq, Jews in Medina proclaimed the rising of a star indicating Muhammad’s birth and Abyssinian Christians proclaimed that Muhammad was the fulfillment of prophecy. There are also stories of a Christian monk in Syria identifying young Muhammad as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. One of the more interesting stories is that of the splitting of Muhammad’s breast. According to the story, two men dressed in white (i.e. angels) seized Muhammad, cut him open, and extracted his heart. From his heart, they removed a black drop. They then washed his heart in a golden bowl full of snow until it was cleansed, and placed it back in his body. Thus Muhammad was made ready for his task of being a prophet. Much of this story seems to be derived from Surah 94:1, which reads, “Have We not expanded your breast and removed from you your burden which weighed down your back and exalted your fame?”

## **Chapter 5: The Gods and the Shrine**

The time before the revelation of Islam was referred to as the “Era of Ignorance” or simply “The Barbarism.” It is into this culture, that Muhammad was born and lived 40 years prior to receiving his first revelation. Reconstructing the beliefs of pre-Islamic Mecca will supply us with the very context in which Islam arose and against which it argued. The task of

reconstruction is a daunting one because early Muslim scholars had little interest in preserving information about this time period, but instead “they laid upon it their own version of a ‘sacred history’ that is merely hinted at in the Qur’an, and thus the older religious traditions of Mecca were to a large extent rewritten, or misrepresented, or simply forgotten in the light of a new revelation that had annulled the beliefs and practices of an earlier age” [Peters, p. 105]. Daunting as it may be, we can gain a fairly complete picture of this era can be gleaned from various sources. Ibn al-Kalbi’s *Book of Idols* remains one of the best and earliest sources for understanding pre-Islamic religious beliefs.

The pre-Islamic Meccans worshipped principally stones, trees, and heavenly bodies, or rather, the gods thought to live in them. The ever-mobile Bedouins carried their gods with them while urbanized Arabs had fixed shrines in towns and oases. “The Bedouin came into towns to worship at the fixed shrines (*masajid*)—the same word the Muslims will use for their places of prayer—of the gods there” [Peters, p. 106]. One major incentive for these fixed shrines was fairs that were associated with them. These fairs generated income for the town from the influx of worshippers. The only way to maintain these fairs was to guarantee the safety of the pilgrims, which was neatly solved by a “Truce of God,” sacred months when hands and weapons were restrained by divine intervention. (See “Truce of God” in Chapter 3.)

Throughout much of northern Arabia and southern Syria, there was a belief in a “high god,” that ruled over all other gods and goddesses in the region. This “high god” was termed Allah and was chief and head over the pantheon of local tribal deities. Allah is a contraction of the Arabic *al-ilah*, which literally means “the god.” This pre-Islamic Allah, it would seem was a henotheistic god—a chief god with many “associates” (lesser gods and goddesses). Of all the gods at Mecca, only Allah was not represented by an idol, which suggests that the move from polytheism toward henotheism was a result of growing Jewish or Christian influence in Arabia.

Of the many idols that were represented in Mecca, the most significant was that of Hubal, a well-known Arab god. Amr ibn Lahayy placed the statue of Hubal inside the Ka’ba back when the Khuza’a controlled Mecca (fifth century AD). Apparently, Hubal was depicted as “Abraham the ancient” with arrows of divination. So for the price of an animal sacrifice, these arrows would be cast to divine answers for the recipient. As noted in Chapter 4, Muhammad’s grandfather Abd al-Muttalib had offered sacrifices to Hubal.

In addition to Hubal, there were three goddesses—Manat, al-Lat, and al-Uzza—who were known as the “daughters of Allah.” Each goddess was worshiped by a different tribe and allowing the presence of these idols helped maintain strong ties between the different tribes. Of the three, al-Uzza was favored primarily by the Quraysh and even Muhammad is believed to have sacrificed to her prior to receiving his first revelation.

The Qur’an also had a fully developed “angelology,” which mirrors Jewish and Christian belief. Two Biblical angels, Michael and Gabriel, are even mentioned in the Qur’an (Surah 2:97-98). There was also a widespread belief in native spirits known as *jinn* (or “Genies”). The *jinn* “are fully integrated into Qur’anic theology—on one occasion ([Surah] 72:1-19; 46: 29-32) they overheard the Qur’an being revealed” [Peters, p. 112]. Muhammad makes it clear, however, that the *jinn* are merely creatures.

Animal sacrifices as well as other offerings played an important role in Mecca and throughout Arabia. Surah 22:32-36 gives Qur’anic teaching on such sacrifices. With the advent of Islam, animal sacrifices disappeared in Arabia except for the sacrifice performed as part of the *Hajj*. In Surah 108:2, we read, “So pray to the Lord and sacrifice,” which posed problems for later Muslim commentators, “chiefly on the grounds of its occurrence in a Meccan *surah* and thus commands the Prophet to participate in a pagan ritual...” [Peters, p. 113]. In reference to this *surah*, Birkeland, a historian, comments, “So it is a notorious fact that the Qur’an contains at least one *surah* from a time *before* Muhammad had abandoned the performance of religious rites customary in Mecca” [Peters, p. 285, footnote #15].



“The best known of the pre-Islamic rituals taken over into Islam is that of the *Hajj* or pilgrimage. The pre-Islamic pilgrimage was not a single act but a complex of rituals joined in a manner, and for reasons, we cannot easily discern. The later Muslim tradition ‘harmonized’ the Islamic version of the complex by identifying each of its elements with some incident in the Abraham legend... Their association [of the *Hajj* rituals] with Abraham appears to have come into circulation well after the acceptance of the *Hajj* as a legitimate and meritorious way for a Muslim to worship God (Surah 2:197; 3:97). Absent the Abrahamic motif, the *Hajj* of Muhammad’s Mecca disintegrates into an obscure series of acts centering not on Mecca but on the mount called Arafat eleven miles east of the city. ... Therefore the Meccan ritual was at some point joined to the Arafat complex, probably by Muhammad himself...” [Peters, p. 116-117].

Abraham and Ishmael play a central role in Muhammad’s teaching; however, this emphasis appears only in the later Medinan *surahs* (e.g. Surah 2). In his early Meccan *surahs*, Muhammad uses Abraham and Moses and later even Jesus as a basis of authority and teaching (Surah 87:18-19; 53:36; 42:13). Muhammad’s view of Abraham appears to be still forming during this early part of his teaching. For example, in Surah 14:35-40 Abraham appears to be settling down next to an existing shrine (the Ka’ba), whereas in a later Medinan *surah*, Abraham and Ishmael are said to have made the Ka’ba (Surah 2:127). In another Meccan revelation, Muhammad appears to declare that both Isaac and Jacob are sons of Abraham (Surah 19:50), instead of Jacob being the grandson of Abraham. Similarly in these early *surahs*, Isaac and Jacob are closely connected with Abraham, and Ishmael is listed separately with no apparent distinction (Surah 19:54). By the time of Surah 14:39, Muhammad corrects himself and puts Ishmael and Isaac as Abraham’s son, and still later in Median, the focus shifts to emphasizing Ishmael (Surah 2:125,127).

Where did Muhammad develop his understanding about Abraham and his relationship to the Ka’ba in Mecca? We do find a number of indicators that this Abrahamic conception predates Muhammad and developed from a growing Jewish influence in Arabia. For example, the first century historian Josephus records as being well known that the Arabs of that time circumcised their children at age 13, since they were descendents of Ishmael who was 13 years old when Abraham received the command to circumcise his children (Gen. 17:25). According to fifth century ecclesiastical historian, Sozomen of Gaza, the Arabs claimed the name “Saracens” claiming to be descendants of the Biblical Sarah, “She who was barren.” He goes on to recognize that the Arabs were Ishmaelites who over the passage of time had abandoned their godly heritage, intermarrying with the local people and adopting their practices. Sozomen wrote, “Afterwards some of them became acquainted with the Jews and learned whence they had come. They reverted back to their ancestry and took up the Hebrew customs and law. From that time many among them still live in the Jewish fashion” [Peters, p. 121]. So, just a century and a half before Muhammad, the Arabs of Palestine were following an Arabized form of Judaism that likely resembled both Rahmanism (see Chapter 2) and *Hanifism* (below); both of which likely were central to Muhammad’s early thinking.

Central to Muhammad’s teaching is the concept of the *Hanif* (e.g. Surah 6:79; 10:105). Essentially, a *Hanif* was a follower of the religion of Abraham, which is distinct from both Judaism and Christianity (Surah 2:135; 3:67, 95; 4:125). *Hanifism* was a form of “natural” monotheism following the example of Abraham, the original *Hanif*, and later became synonymous with Islam. Even before Muhammad, there were many who rejected the paganism of their surroundings and became *Hanifs*. Two prominent *Hanifs* during the time of Muhammad are Abu Amir and Abu Qays. Neither of these men accepted Islam, so they serve as a contrast between the pre-Islamic concept of Hanifism and Islam. These two *Hanifs* seem highly influenced by Jews and Christians yet are distinct from them. There is evidence that these *Hanif* performed their particular practices at the Ka’ba in Mecca. The primary distinction between Muhammad and these two *Hanifs* was that they accepted the Quraysh as the untouchable

guardians of the Ka'ba, whereas Muhammad strongly rejected them. Another notable *Hanif* was Zayd ibn Amr, who resisted Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Zayd taught that the *qibla* (prayer direction) should be toward the Ka'ba, which he believed was the practice of Abraham and Ishmael. This and other teachings bear a remarkable similarity to Muhammad's later teachings. In one tradition recorded by Ibn Ishaq, Zayd was the original monotheist who confronted Muhammad, who was still practicing the pagan practices of the Quraysh. This is supported by other traditions that have early Muhammad following these practices.

Muhammad's first revelation was received during a month-long time of prayer and fasting where he withdrew to a cave on Mount Hira. Muslim chroniclers, such as Ibn al-Kalbi, referred to this practice as *tahannuth*. The precise meaning of this term is uncertain but commentators suggest that it means, "leading a solitary life" or "acts of devotion" and may have derived from the Hebrew *tehinnoth*, which means "prayers" or "voluntary devotions." The *tahannuth* was practiced by the pre-Islamic Quraysh and according to one tradition it started with Muhammad's grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib. For Muhammad and later Muslims, this time of prayer included fasting, abstinence from sex, and giving to the poor. Muhammad practiced his *tahannuth* during the month of Ramadan (9<sup>th</sup> month of the Arab lunar calendar) and so when this practice was incorporated into Islam it became known as Ramadan, one of the five pillars (essential duties) of Islam. According to tradition, Muhammad received his first revelation on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of Ramadan, which is known by Muslims as the "Night of Destiny." (See Chapter 8 for more details.)

Later Muslim commentators, starting about a century after Muhammad's death, held to the doctrine of Muhammad's "impeccability." This impeccability was believed to extend before as well as after his prophetic calling. This affected their interpretations of history as they tried to minimize or eliminate any pre-revelation pagan practices of Muhammad. As noted previously, early sources do reveal details of Muhammad's life that do not fit this doctrine. For example, Muhammad sacrificed a ewe to the goddess al-Uzza and it was the *Hanif*, Zayd ibn Amr, who admonished Muhammad to become a monotheist. A further challenge to Muhammad's "impeccability" comes from the Qur'an itself. We read in Surah 93:6-8:

Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter?  
Did He not find you erring and give you the Guidance?  
Did He not find you in need and make you rich?

"Verse 7 is the closest to our purposes here, and the Arabic words for 'erring' (*dalla*) and 'guiding' (*hada*) leave little doubt that the 'error' is not simply confusion but that Muhammad was immersed in the same cult practices in which the Quraysh persisted even after God had sent the 'Guidance' to them as well" [Peters, p. 131].

## Chapter 6: A Prophet at Mecca

Muhammad's early life was marked by family tragedy. His father, Abdullah, died before he was born and his mother, Amina, died when he was 6 years old. After the death of his mother, he went to live with his grandfather, al-Muttalib. At age 8, his grandfather also died and so he went to live with his uncle Abu Talib. Abu Talib led caravans and often included young Muhammad on these trips.

One of the stories preserved about Muhammad's youth describes his participation in the so-called "Sinful Wars." These battles received their name because they occurred during the four month-long "truce of God," during which violence and warfare was prohibited (see Chapter 3). A personal quarrel between two men of different tribes escalated into full scale fighting between the tribes. The Quraysh attempted to bring peace between the tribes, but ended up being drawn into the fighting as well. The Quraysh participated in four different battles and

Muhammad participated in at least one of these. Muhammad's participation posed serious problems for later Muslim commentators because it questioned his "impeccability."

According to the traditional chronology, when Muhammad was age 25 (about 595 AD), he married a wealthy 40-year-old widow named Khadija. She had seen his trustworthiness and honesty, so she hired him to handle her trading operations and eventually proposed marriage to him, which he accepted. After they were married, she bore him one son, al-Qasim, who died very young, and four daughters, Zaynab, Ruqayya, Umm Kulthum, and Fatima. They remained faithfully married to each other until she died in 619 AD. Prior to marriage, Muhammad had been very poor, but now he experienced a measure of prosperity (Surah 93:8).

About 10 years later, the people of Mecca realized that they needed to repair the Ka'ba because of damage from a storm and to add a roof to prevent people from stealing its contents. A nearby shipwreck provided wood for a roof as well as a carpenter (a survivor from the shipwreck). To begin, they had to first tear down portions of the Ka'ba but they were afraid to begin lest God should strike them down. Eventually they did rebuild the Ka'ba and put a roof on it but a fight nearly broke out over whom should get the honor of placing the Black Stone in the corner of the Ka'ba. Men from all four tribes wanted this honor and would have fought each other except that Muhammad negotiated an agreement according to tradition. Muhammad had them place the Black Stone on a cloak with each corner held by a member of each of the four tribes, thus the fight was avoided because they all shared the honor of placing the Black Stone equally.

About a century after Muhammad's death, a tradition arose that Muhammad was illiterate. This tradition appears to derive from Surah 7:157-158, which describes Muhammad an "illiterate (*ummi*) prophet." The meaning of *ummi* is uncertain, but may have been interpreted this way for apologetic purposes because if he was illiterate, then he could not be accused of borrowing from the Holy Books of the Jews and Christians, since he would not be able to read them. However, since Muhammad was involved in commerce, he presumably had to be at least partially literate. Based on other examples of the use of *ummi*, a more likely interpretation is that Muhammad was an "unscriptured prophet" or "gentile prophet" that is, Muhammad was not raised as a Jew or Christian nor had he studied their Scriptures.

According to the traditional time line, Muhammad received his first revelation when he was age 40 (610 AD). One question that must be asked at this point is—who is the agent of revelation? Later in Medina, Muhammad clearly asserted that he received his revelations from the angel Gabriel (Surah 2:91) and subsequent interpreters have followed that understanding. Two very early *surahs* (Surah 53 and 81:19-27) describe two of his early visions. Neither of the *surahs* clearly identify who brought Muhammad his revelations but give the impression that it was God directly, not the angel Gabriel. Several *surahs* have the Quraysh criticizing Muhammad and refusing to believe because angels had not been sent down as proof (Surah 41:14; 15:6-8; 16:43). These arguments, however, are not conclusive.

Of the early revelations, one known as the "night journey" (Surah 17) is the most famous and important. In Surah 17:1, we read that Muhammad was taken at night from "the sacred shrine" (i.e. the Ka'ba of Mecca) to "the distant shrine." There is disagreement about the identity of "the distant shrine," but there is strong evidence that it referred to heaven. Many later interpreters held that "the distant shrine" was the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (where the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque<sup>2</sup> are currently located). These two interpretations are commonly harmonized by claiming that Muhammad was first carried to Jerusalem on a mythical beast called Buraq and then was taken to heaven. Another issue of contention about the "Night Journey" is whether Muhammad was physically transported or if it was some kind of vision. Aisha, one of Muhammad's later wives, maintained that "the Apostle's [Muhammad's] body

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<sup>2</sup> The name al-Aqsa Mosque is literally "the distant shrine" and was named based on this surah.

remained where it was but God removed his spirit by night” and Ibn Ishaq similarly supported the argument such visions and revelations occurred while Muhammad was sleeping.

Muhammad’s “Night Journey” is described in detail in the Hadiths (traditions). Muhammad was first taken up through the seven heavens and in each one he encountered a different prophet. In the first and lowest heaven, Muhammad encountered Adam, in the second heaven John the Baptist and Jesus, in the third Joseph, in the fourth Prophet Idris (Surah 19:56; 21:58), in the fifth Aaron, in the sixth Moses, and in the seventh Abraham. Finally, he is allowed to enter Paradise where God prescribes that Muslims are to pray 50 times a day! Upon descending through the seven heavens, Moses advises him to ask God to reduce the number of prayers. This happens five times until the number of required prayers is reduced to the prescribed five prayers.

During the 12-year period that Muhammad spent preaching in Mecca (before he moved to Medina), approximately two-thirds of the Qur’an was revealed. These Meccan *surahs* can be divided into three distinct time periods each with its own theological emphasis. By dividing things this way, we can begin to see the evolution of Muhammad’s theology. It should be noted that the *surahs* of the Qur’an are not arranged in chronological order, so there is some uncertainty in assigning the *surahs* to distinct time periods. There is general agreement, however, on the basic order and time frame for the *surahs*. (See Appendix for more details.)

The first Meccan period was marked by the theme of God’s providential guidance and man’s grateful response. The three years following Muhammad’s first revelation were spent primarily sharing his revelations with family and friends. His first converts include Khadija (his wife), Ali (his cousin and later his son-in-law), Zayd (his freedman), and Abu Bakr (his uncle). During this time, the majority of the Quraysh were skeptical of Muhammad’s message, but remained friendly.

It is in the second Meccan period that Muhammad we see a distinct shift in thinking toward theological and eschatological concerns. His primary role shifts to being the “warner,” where he extols the Quraysh to “ask pardon of God, for God is forgiving, merciful” (Surah 2:195). “It is belief the Qur’an enjoins, belief that God is one—the God Muhammad refers to as his ‘Lord’—belief in the unlimited power of the One God and now is the fact that that power will be manifested in God’s reckoning of humankind on the Last Day. Change your thinking and your life, the Qur’an warns, because a sure Hell awaits the sinner and a bounteous reward the just” [Peters, p. 155].

Early in the Qur’an, God remains unnamed and is simply addressed as “Lord.” During the second Meccan period, we see a growing identification of God as al-Rahman (“The Merciful One”). This name appears 50 times in the *surahs* of this time period as well as an absence of the name Allah. As described in Chapter 2, al-Rahman appears to reflect a monotheistic view of God originating from Jewish influences in Yemen. This view of God as al-Rahman was also present much closer to Mecca in al-Yamama in central Arabia (near modern Riyadh, Saudi Arabia). Muhammad’s use of al-Rahman may have confused some Quraysh because they weren’t certain if al-Rahman was the same as the Allah of Mecca (Surah 21:36; 23:60; 13:30). Subsequent to this, we see Muhammad teaching that Allah (of the Quraysh) and al-Rahman (of Arabized Judaism) are in fact the same. After this point, God is almost exclusively referred to as Allah in the Qur’an and the name al-Rahman disappears except for its use in a creedal statement that stands at the head of almost every Surah in the Qur’an: “In the name of Allah, the Merciful (al-Rahman), the Compassionate (al-Rahim).”

In the first two Meccan periods, we see Muhammad shift in calling God “Lord,” then “al-Rahman,” and finally “Allah.” This blending of the Meccan Allah with the Jewish-influenced al-Rahman did not completely satisfy the Quraysh and so in the third Meccan period, the tension between these two views of God brings about a major theological crisis. As recorded by al-Tabari:

“When the Messenger of God [Muhammad] saw how his tribe turned their backs on him and was grieved to see them shunning the message he had brought to them from God, he longed in his soul that something would come to him from God that would reconcile him with his tribe. With his love for his tribe and his eagerness for their welfare, it would have delighted him if some of the difficulties which they made for him could have been smoothed, and he debated with himself and fervently desired such an outcome. Then God revealed (Surah 53) ... and when he came to the words ‘Have you thought al-Lat and al-Uzza and Manat, the third, the other?’ (vv. 19-20), Satan cast on his tongue, because of his inner debates and what he desired to bring to his people, the words: “These are high-flying cranes; verily their intercession is to be hoped for.”

The opposition and rejection of Muhammad’s message by his own Quraysh tribe grieved him so much that he added the intercession of these three goddess would be acceptable, thus accepting them as lesser deities. This immediately appeased the Quraysh and they were overjoyed, since they could accept Muhammad’s religion without having to give up a major aspect of their pagan beliefs. These added verses were later known as the “Satanic Verses” because Satan was said to have planted them in Muhammad’s heart. Shortly after this incident, a “corrected” verse is received, which instead reads, “These are only names which you and your fathers have invented. No authority was sent down by God for them. They only follow conjecture and wish-fulfillment, even though guidance had come to them already from the Lord” (Surah 53:23). Thus Surah 53 was amended to read as it does today. Muhammad had been wavering between the henotheistic Allah of his own Quraysh tribe and the more monotheistic al-Rahman and he finally made the critical break with the Quraysh and fully embraced monotheism. While he did retain Allah, the *Hajj*, and many other aspects of his Meccan heritage, he finally rejected all the lesser gods and goddesses of Mecca.

“Prayer, a certain kind of prayer, is, in fact, one of the most persistently urged elements of Muhammad’s message and prayer precisely as understood by the contemporary Jews and Christians. The word that is used is *salat*, a word taken over into Arabic from the Aramaic lingua franca of those two communities, where it refers precisely to *liturgical* prayer, a public worship of God in the form of audibly uttered words...” [Peters, p. 164]. We know little of Muhammad’s prayer practice in Mecca and pressure from the Quraysh would have made public prayer very difficult. One tradition has Muhammad praying three times a day (rather than five) and not requiring it of other Muslims. Only later in Medina, where the Muslims were free of persecution and where Muhammad came into direct contact with Jews, does the Islamic notion of prayer develop fully. (See Chapter 8 for more details.) Today, prayer is considered one of the five pillars (essential duties) of all Muslims.

## **Chapter 7: The Migration to Medina**

Growing persecution of the new religious movement characterizes the tail end of Muhammad’s time in Mecca. Most likely, it was the leaders and principle men among the Quraysh who were his strongest opponents since it was their institutions and way of life that Muhammad was challenging. (Their economic livelihood was at stake since much of their income came from pilgrims and worshippers.) However, Muhammad was under the protection of his influential uncle, Abu Talib, which kept the Quraysh from directly acting on their threats. Twice, the Quraysh went to Abu Talib complaining that Muhammad had “cursed our gods, insulted our religion, mocked our way of life, and accused our forefathers of error,” but Abu Talib did nothing to restrain Muhammad. Unable to strike directly at him, they instead persecuted his followers. This persecution included physical attacks, imprisonment, starvation, and exposure in the desert. Some gave way under pressure, but most remained steadfast. In the

wake of persecution, Muhammad sent some of his followers (about 80) to Christian Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia), where they would be out of reach of the Quraysh. About 33 of the Muslims soon returned to Mecca upon hearing a rumor that the Quraysh had accepted Islam and it was safe to return. When they found the rumor was false, they stayed in Mecca, but kept a very low profile.

Shortly after the migration to Abyssinia, two very prominent Quraysh (Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib and Umar ibn al-Khattab) converted to Islam, which help strengthen and encourage Muhammad. This success provoked a fierce backlash from the Quraysh in the form of an economic boycott. Muhammad's chief Quraysh enemy, Abu Jahl, organized the Quraysh to write up an agreement that they would not marry, buy, or sell with any of the Muslims and posted this agreement in the Ka'ba. This intended to isolate the Muslims and apply intense social pressure to force them to give up their beliefs. In 619 AD, after about 3 years, the boycott collapsed and was rescinded.

In the same year that the boycott was repealed, Muhammad was hit by a devastating loss; his wife Khadija died. Khadija had been a pillar of strength for Muhammad and had encouraged Muhammad to follow the revelations he had received. Shortly after her death, Muhammad married Sawda, the wife of one of the Muslims who had gone to Abyssinia and died there. Muhammad also married Aisha, the 7-year-old daughter of Abu Bakr (although the marriage was not actually consummated until she was 9). Aisha would later be known as Muhammad's favorite wife. Later in Medina, Muhammad married Hafsa (Umar's daughter), Hind, Zaynab, Umm Salama, Juwayriyya, Ramla or Umm Habiba, Safiyya, and Maymuna. (Although Muslim commentators spent considerable attention to Muhammad's wives, there is a high degree of uncertainty about the names and number of his wives.) Muhammad had no children by these wives, but did have a son, Ibrahim, by a Coptic concubine named Mary. Ibrahim, however, died in infancy. The marriages provoked a number of controversies, but the marriage to Zaynab was the most controversial. Zaynab was Muhammad's cousin, but was also recently divorced from his freedman and adopted son, Zayd. Muhammad received a special revelation from God (Surah 33:37) allowing the marriage.<sup>3</sup>

The loss of Khadija was followed that same year by another devastating blow, Muhammad's uncle and protector, Abu Talib, died. This tragedy meant that Muhammad was now very vulnerable to attacks of the Quraysh. Muhammad sought the protection of the Thaqif Arabs (a neighboring Arab tribe who were rivals of the Quraysh) but was unsuccessful. At the local fairs that existed around Mecca, Muhammad continued to implore people to follow God and to ask for their protection. His supplications were finally answered by a small group of men from Yathrib, a city that would later be renamed Medina. Medina was a small cluster of agricultural settlements located about 275 miles north of Mecca.

Several of these Medinese representatives are said to have become Muslims and so at the fair the following year, 12 Medinese came to meet with Muhammad. This meeting became known as the "first (pledge of) Aqaba," since they met at al-Aqaba, a place near Mecca. Muhammad sent Mus'ab ibn Umayr to return with them to Medina and teach them Islam. We see at this point, the Qur'an (still only about two-thirds complete) being regarded as both scripture and a liturgical text. In Medina, without the hindrance of Quraysh persecution, Mus'ab introduces a new element of Islam—the Friday prayer service—that would become a central practice in Islam. The service was held Friday evening at sunset, which corresponded to the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath. (The Jewish reckoning of days begins at sunset of the prior day; hence Friday evening was part of the Saturday Sabbath.) Others suggest that Friday was chosen as the "day of assembly" because it was the chief market day in Medina and so the choice

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<sup>3</sup> While many of us today find polygamy, child brides, etc. very disturbing to us today, these were accepted practices at that time.

was linked to commerce rather than religion. Commerce, in the form of fairs and markets, had been linked with religious activity since Qusayy and is affirmed in the Qur'an (Surah 62:9-11). This was the first prescriptive prayer service in Islam, but was done in the manner of the Jews. The practice of having a "sermon" during the Friday service appears to have been added later once Muhammad arrived in Medina, and even then was a general address rather than a sermon.

According to Ibn Ishaq's chronology, it is sometime after the "First Aqaba" meeting that Muhammad receives a new command from Allah that would have lasting consequences for Islam and the world. It was to be "A formal rejection of passive resistance to the persecution of the Muslims and a turn to the use of force" [Peters, p. 183]. Surah 22:39-41 declares, "Permission is given to those who fight because they have been wronged..." (See Chapter 9 for more details on this verse.) Thus violence was permitted because Quraysh were persecuting them, preventing access to the Ka'ba, and "seducing" some of them to turn from Islam. "This is Ibn Ishaq's positioning of the context of Qur'an 22:39-41, and a highly unlikely guess on the face of it. During his last years at Mecca, Muhammad had few followers and even fewer resources to fight the Quraysh, even if he had wished to do so. Force became an option for Muslims only after their arrival in Medina, and even then not immediately" [Peters, p. 184]. This shift toward the active use of force really occurred later once Muhammad had consolidated his followers in Medina. (See Chapter 9 for more details.)

One year later, 75 Medinese returned to Mecca to pledge their support to Muhammad. This meeting became known as the "second (pledge of) Aqaba." The representatives desired that Muhammad would come up to Medina to help them solve their internal problems—the city had been torn by violence between the Arab and Jewish populations that made up the village. For the Medinese, Muhammad was a holy man but their interest in him was primarily political, not religious. In return for Muhammad's help, Medina became a refuge for Muhammad and his followers from the growing threat posed by the hostile Quraysh.

Muhammad then began to send his followers to Medina in small groups so as to not arouse suspicions of the Quraysh until only Muhammad, Ali, and Abu Bakr remained in Mecca. When the Quraysh realized that most of the Muslims were gone, they realized that they had to act fast before Muhammad also escaped. Abu Jahl once again tried to stop Muhammad, but this time permanently by getting the Quraysh to assassinate him. To spread out the blame for his murder, Abu Jahl proposed that each clan contribute one warrior to the cause, so that all the clans would share the guilt equally. These warriors surrounded the house that Muhammad, Ali, and Abu Bakr were staying in and decided to wait till dark to strike. Ali pretended to be Muhammad by wearing his cloak and sleeping in his bed while Muhammad and Abu Bakr slipped out a window. By the time the assassins discovered that they had been duped, Muhammad and Abu Baker had escaped and hid in a cave on Mount Thawr. They stayed there for three days until it was finally safe, then they continued to Medina, where Ali joined them a few days latter.

This emigration of the Muslims from Mecca to Medina would later be known as the Hijra ("the migration"). So important was this event that Muslim's begin their calendar at this point, in much the same way that the Christian calendar begins with the birth of Christ. The beginning of the Muslim year 1 AH [*al-hijra*] corresponds to July 16, 622 AD. It has been suggested that the Hijra, rather than Muhammad's birth, was chosen as the beginning of the Muslim calendar because of the grave difficulties in precisely dating the events prior to this date.

## **Chapter 8: The City of the Prophet**

After fleeing from the persecution of the Quraysh, the Muslims settled in the city of Yathrib. This city was later renamed *The City (Madina) of the Prophet*, or simply Medina, as it is known today. Medina, in Muhammad's time, was a conglomeration of agricultural villages. The city had suffered a lengthy sporadic internal conflict between its various tribes. There were

two main Arab Bedouin tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj. There were also at least 3 main “Jewish” tribes—the Nadir, Qurayza, and the Qaynuqa’—along with 10 or more smaller “Jewish” tribes, which together numbered approximately 36,000 to 42,000 individuals. While Arab tradition maintains that these were genuine Israelites who had fled Israel after the Babylonian invasion, many Western scholars hold that they were actually Arabs who had adopted Jewish belief and practice from Jewish missionaries. Either way, these tribes will subsequently be referred to simply as Jews. While these Jewish tribes were not the original inhabitants of the city, they settled the area prior to the two Arab tribes and as such, they occupied the fertile areas, known as the “Heights,” leaving the Arabs the remaining barely fertile land. The Jews of Medina had a higher degree of culture than the Arab tribes, were very literate, spoke a form of Aramaic, and were made up of craftsmen, merchants, and skilled agriculturalists.

Much of the violence that occurred between the various tribes was over land, rather than race or religion. Since the Jewish tribes had settled there first, they held the best land and the Arab tribes had the left over land, which was poor pasturage for their sheep and camels. The Jews owned numerous large date palms, which produced the primary agricultural export for the city, and hired the Medinese Arabs to take it to the markets on their camels. Because of this imbalance, there were violent conflicts for at least a century before Muhammad and there were numerous fortifications for safety during these times of violence. While the Jews owned the good land, they had lost political supremacy in the city to the two Arab tribes about 50 to 100 years before and so were now dependent upon the two Arab tribes for their protection. The Arab Aws and Khazraj tribes fell into fighting amongst themselves attempting to court the assistance of the Jewish tribes.

When Muhammad arrived, he settled down in a modest house with a courtyard. His house was the place of meeting for the Muslims during their prayers and other times. After Muhammad’s death (632 AD), he was buried beneath his home and it soon became venerated. It was slowly expanded by Caliphs Uthman and Umar, but then in 707 AD, Caliph al-Walid and his deputy Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz transformed it into the grand structure known today as the Mosque of the Prophets. Today, this mosque is considered to be the second holiest site in all of Islam. (The Ka’ba of Mecca is the first holiest site in Islam.)

Muhammad had been called to Medina to unify the various tribes and bring peace, which Muhammad quickly set about to do. Using his stature as a holy man (*nabi*), Muhammad had drawn up the Medina compact, which consisted of a number of documents defining the rules of the new community and how they were to treat each other. The articles of this agreement still exist today, however, some of the articles may have been added subsequent to the initial charter. (See Peters, p. 200-201 for a partial listing of articles of the Medina compact.) This initial agreement represented a secular state, where the Jewish tribes were allowed to keep their religion as distinct and separate from Islam. Muhammad served as the leader of the whole community and also acted as judge to arbitrate disputes between the various factions.

Under the Medina agreement, all the people of Medina were bound together as a single community (*umma*). We see that this *umma* was political in nature, whereas in the Qur’an, *umma* described a religious community united by its belief in Islam (Surah 10:47; 23:44; 3:110). The disparate groups in Medina agreed to recognize Muhammad’s authority as community leader and abide by his political decisions. This commitment was to defend the common good of the whole community, without having to accept Islam. The Medina agreement “was, transparently, the result of some very hard bargaining” [Peters, p. 199].

In the Meccan period, we saw a distinct evolution in Muhammad’s theology and understanding of his own mission. Here in Medina we see a further development in his theology as he comes into direct contact with the Jews. Previously, Judaism received little attention but now that Muhammad is in direct contact with Jews, we see a positive and accepting view toward Judaism. Muhammad had taught what he held to be the “religion of Abraham” recognizing



Adam, Abraham, and Moses as prophets of God and accepting the Torah. As such, it is likely that Muhammad expected to be warmly accepted by the Jews. The Jews, however, did not embrace Islam and strongly resisted Muhammad's message. This quickly led to a split with the Jews, which would soon turn violent. This split led Muhammad to reformulate Islam as an alternative to Judaism and to shift away from any Jewish influences within Islam.

One of the most definite examples of this shift toward and then away from Judaism is found in the changing of the *qibla* (prayer direction). There is evidence that Muhammad had originally prayed toward the Ka'ba in Mecca, but sometime during his time in Mecca, this shifted to praying "toward Syria." Muslim commentators understood "toward Syria" as meaning Jerusalem. Praying toward Jerusalem represented an unmistakable Jewish influence and was based on 1 Kings 8:44, where the Jews were commanded to face toward Jerusalem when praying. (Later commentators tried to harmonize these two prayer directions by suggesting that Muhammad positioned himself such that he prayed toward Jerusalem and the Ka'ba simultaneously.) About 17 months after entering Medina, the *qibla* was returned to facing the Ka'ba in Mecca. Afterwards, Muhammad received a revelation justifying this change (Surah 2:142-145).

Another example of changes in Muhammad's theology reflecting his exposure to Judaism and his later split with them is revealed by his changing attitude toward the fasting on "The Tenth" (*Ashura*). "The Tenth" referred to the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the first month of the Jewish calendar (as opposed to the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the first month of the Arab calendar) and so coincided with the Jewish Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur. In one tradition, Muhammad prescribes the practice shortly after entering Medina after learning about it from the Jews there; however, in another tradition the fast of *Ashura* was a Quraysh practice that Muhammad had previously practiced. Initially, Muhammad commanded the fast of *Ashura* but later after he instituted Ramadan (a truly Muslim celebration), he made it optional. This represented a shift away from any Jewish connections. Later after the ban on intercalation (hence making the Muslim calendar lunar rather than solar), *Ashura* lost its seasonal meaning and its connection to Yom Kippur. (See Chapter 11 for the ban on intercalation.)

Yet another innovation in Muhammad's theology due to his exposure to Judaism was the idea that the Qur'an was "sent down." The Jewish *Ashura* (Yom Kippur) commemorated the sending down of the Torah on Mount Sinai and now Muhammad transfers this idea to the Qur'an. Early in Muhammad's career, his challengers argued that his revelation should come down all at once, like the Torah, but Muhammad was resolute that the Qur'an was revealed piecemeal (Surah 25:32). But now, we find for the first time the idea that the Qur'an was sent as a single revelation on the "Night of Destiny" (Surah 97:1-5) or simply the "blessed night" (Surah 44:1-6). This "Night of Destiny" was originally associated with *Ashura* to parallel Jewish revelation but after shifting away from Judaism, it was said to have occurred on the old Arabian New Years. Later the "Night of Destiny" was attached to the fast of Ramadan, where it was celebrated on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the month-long fast.

Some additional innovations occur at this same time as the Qur'anic revelation is made to fit the Jewish Torah model for revelation. We see the powerful new notion of Islam being the "religion of Abraham" (Surah 2:124-135) being clearly delineated here in Medina. Muhammad viewed his revelation as a continuation of previous (i.e. Jewish and Christian) revelations (Surah 2:135; 22:78; 42:13). The notion that the Angel Gabriel revealed the Qur'an to Muhammad also finds its roots at this time. In addition, we see the Qur'an being formulated as a Book (like the Torah) rather than simply "recitation." (The word "Qur'an" is an Aramaic-Syriac loan word, which literally means "recitation.") Like the Torah, the Qur'an was now viewed as a copy of a perfect heavenly Book containing all of Allah's decrees. By this early Medinan period, we see fully developed the idea that Muhammad conceived of the Qur'an "as a genuine scriptural Book on the Torah model" [Peters, p. 207].

## Chapter 9: Fighting in God's Cause

As the Muslims settled into Medina, tensions quickly began to develop. A serious conflict between Muhammad and the Jewish tribes quickly developed because they would not accept his message. In addition, there was a growing tension between the “Migrants” (the Muslims from Mecca) and the “Helpers” (the Arabs of Medina). Likely, this was because the Medinese had invited Muhammad only and may not have anticipated hosting the “Migrants” as well. Medina was centered upon agriculture but the Meccan Muslims were primarily traders, not farmers. Without farming skills or enough venture capital to begin trading, the “Migrants” would have had little way to support themselves.

Shortly after coming to Medina, we see a new development in Muhammad's mission. A series of small raiding parties ranging from 20 to 80 men, sometimes led by Muhammad himself, were sent to intercept Meccan trade caravans. No particular reason is given in the Qur'an or the Hadiths to justify the new initiative. Perhaps, Muhammad was motivated by getting revenge on the Meccans for their persecution of the Muslims and their attempt on his life. It seems likely the primary purpose of these skirmishes was to raid Meccan caravans to generate revenue to help support the “Migrants” and generate venture capital for future trading enterprises. The raiding of caravans was a common practice among the Bedouin tribes when they needed to quickly generate income. This move toward increasingly aggressive political violence, however, was directly commanded in the Qur'an.

“Permission is given to those who fight because they suffered wrong—truly God is most powerful in their aid—and those who have been expelled from their homes in defiance of right, only because they have said ‘Our Lord is God’” (Surah 22:39-40).

A little later, we read, “Fight in the cause of God, and know that God hears and knows all things” (Surah 2:244).

In December of 623 AD, a party of 8 was sent out to spy out<sup>4</sup> caravans that would be heading to Mecca. The group encountered a small Quraysh caravan carrying raisins and leather. Since this encounter occurred during the “sacred months” (see Chapter 3), when all violence was forbidden by God, the Quraysh felt safe and assumed that the Muslims must have been going to Mecca as pilgrims. After a short debate the eight Muslims attacked the caravan despite of the ban on violence during the “sacred months,” killing several Quraysh, taking two prisoners, and taking goods. They returned to Medina with prisoners and booty, with a fifth of the proceeds reserved for Muhammad as their leader. Muhammad's initial response was to rebuke them for attacking the caravan during the “sacred months.” Note: he did not rebuke them for attacking the caravan or for killing several Quraysh, but only for doing it during the “sacred months.” Quickly, a new revelation permitting fighting during the “sacred months.”

“They ask you concerning fighting in the prohibited month. Say: ‘Fighting therein is a grave offense; but graver it is in the sight of God to prevent access to the path of God, to deny Him, to prevent access to the sacred shrine and drive out its members. Tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter’...” (Surah 2:217).

Afterwards, Muhammad welcomed them and received his portion of the booty. This practice of receiving a fifth of the booty would become customary practice in future operations.

The next year (March 624 AD), Muhammad got news of a major caravan from Palestine going to Mecca and sent a fighting force to capture it. He commanded them, “This is the Quraysh caravan containing their property. Go and attack it; perhaps God will give it as prey.”

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<sup>4</sup> There is some debate about what was Muhammad's original command to the group. One historian “has argued that this statement of intent [that they were to only spy] was a later revision of the account to free Muhammad of any responsibility for what eventually happened” [Peters, p. 303, footnote #3].

Some were eager to join, but others were surprised that Muhammad had given the call to war. As the Muslims moved to intercept the caravan, Abu Sufyan, the caravan leader, got wind of the plot and called for reinforcements.<sup>5</sup> The two forces met near the wells of Badr, so the battle that ensued became known as the Battle of Badr. Initially, the Muslims were losing but Muhammad rallied them by declaring paradise for those who fight and die in the battle. Ibn Ishaq records his words, “By God in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, no man will be slain this day fighting against them (the Quraysh) with steadfast courage, advancing not retreating, but God will cause him to enter Paradise.” This spurred the Muslims to fight harder and eventually defeated the Meccans. This battle was considered a major victory and a turning point for the Muslims.

The incredible victory of the Battle of Badr receives prominent mention in the Qur’an. Interestingly, the victory seems to be tied to Allah sending angels to aid the Muslims. We read, “There has already been a sign for you in the clash of two forces, one fighting in the way of God and the other disbelieving. And they [that is, the latter] saw twice the force before their eyes...” (Surah 3:13). Apparently, “saw twice the force” meant that Allah had sent angels that were visible to the Quraysh (but not to the Muslims) that would appear to swell the ranks of the Muslims and put fear in the Quraysh. Later in the same *surah*, we read,

“God had helped you at Badr, when you were a contemptible little band... ‘Is it not enough that your Lord helped you with 3,000 angels sent down? Yes, and if you remain firm and aright, even if the enemy should come against you here in hot haste, your Lord would help you with 5,000 angels on the attack.’” (Surah 3:123-125).

Thus we see the teaching that Allah sent angels to assist the Muslims at Badr. The belief in angels was not new with Islam, but was a recognized pre-Islamic Meccan belief. In Surah 15:6-7, the Meccans demanded that Muhammad bring down angels as proof of his revelations. Muhammad refused to do so, saying that angels are only sent down in the case of “just cause.” “No longer do the angels appear to people in human form, however; ... their presence is unseen and humans are no longer aware of their operations, a shift signaling not only a new sense of the role of angels but of the relationship between God, angels, and men” [Peters, p. 214-215].

It is after the Battle of Badr that we see the revealing of the Qur’an being connected with Ramadan rather than *Ashura*. (Previously in Chapter 8, we saw that Muhammad began to teach that the Qur’an was “sent down,” which was no doubt inspired by the Jewish celebration of *Ashura*, which commemorated the “sending down” of the Torah.) Surah 2:185 reads, “Ramadan is the month in which was sent down the Qur’an as a guide for the people, clear signs of that Guidance and of the Deliverance. So whoever of you is present that month, let him fast it...” (Surah 2:185). The “Deliverance” (*al-Furqan*) is an Aramaic-Syriac loan word in Arabic, which caused considerable confusion for Muslim commentators. Believing that the Qur’an was revealed in “clear Arabic,” led them to the Arabic word, *faraqa*, which means “criterion” rather than the Judeo-Christian *purqana*, which means “salvation,” “redemption,” and “deliverance.” In Surah 8, we see that the sending down of *Furqan* associated with the Battle of Badr (Surah 8:29, 41) but it is also associated with the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt (Surah 2:53; 21:48). Thus *Furqan* represented the sending down of “deliverance,” which signaled the conformation of a message, not the revelation of the message itself. Since the Battle of Badr occurred during the month of Ramadan, the victory was viewed as a “deliverance” (*furqan*) that confirmed Qur’an, however, confusion over the meaning of *al-Furqan* led later Muslims to

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<sup>5</sup> F. E. Peters doesn’t give details here, but that information can be found elsewhere. The Quraysh caravan was expected to only have 50 or 100 men guarding it. Muhammad sent 300 men to intercept the caravan and so expected to have a 3-to-1 or even a 6-to-1 advantage over their enemies. Once the Quraysh reinforcements arrived, the Quraysh numbered approximately 900 strong. Thus, the table was turned and the Muslims were outnumbered by about 3-to-1.

believe that the Qur'an itself was revealed during the month of Ramadan. Today, Muslims still celebrate the "Night of Destiny" in which the Qur'an was revealed on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the fast of Ramadan.

Shortly after the Battle of Badr, the conflict between the Jews and the Muslims reached a breaking point. The Qaynuqa' (one of the three major Jewish tribes in Medina) were accused of breaking a pact with Muhammad and so the Muslims besieged their fortified positions and defeated them. The Jews were exiled and their property and lands became the property of the Muslims. According to one historian, Donner, "'The reasons for the expulsion of the Banu Qaynuqa' are never really clarified in the sources.' Donner's own inclination is toward the Qaynuqa's connection with artisanry and trade, which 'put them in close contact with the Meccan merchants against whose commerce Muhammad was beginning to take hostile measures'" [Peters, p. 305, footnote #16].

In 625 AD, we have the Battle of Uhud, where the Muslim forces once again clashed with the Quraysh. The Quraysh, led by Abu Sufyan, had 3,000-foot soldiers and 200 cavalry and successfully defeated the Muslim army. At one point in the battle, Muhammad was hit by a stone and knocked off his horse. He suffered a gash to the face and lips and lost some teeth. Muhammad and the remains of his army managed to make it back to Medina but the Quraysh mutilated many of the bodies of the dead Muslims. Muslim historian, Ibn Ishaq, would later describe the defeat as a trial and viewed the dead as being honored by martyrdom. The Quraysh, on the other hand, considered this their revenge for their losses of the Battle of Badr. Surah 3:122-123 may be a reference to this battle.

After the Battle of Uhud, the Muslims besieged the second major Jewish tribe, the Nadir, and expelled them. The provocation apparently was either a threat to Muhammad's life or that the Jews may have supported the Quraysh at the Battle of Uhud. Like the Qaynuqa', the Nadir Jews were forced into exile although they were allowed to keep some of their possessions. The spoils were divided among the "Migrants" (Meccan Muslims) but not among the "Helpers" (Medinese Arabs).

Only one incident is recorded in the 8 months following the Battle of Uhud and the expulsion of the Nadir Jews, a military excursion to Dumat al-Jandal. In 626 AD, Muhammad marched to the fortified oasis with 1,000 men, remained for about a month, and then returned without incidence. It is uncertain what the intended target was since the army was much too small to actually siege the fortress there. Perhaps it was reconnaissance in force or an opportunistic foray looking for caravans that simply didn't find any.

In March 627 AD, there was one last major attempt by the Meccans to rid themselves of Muhammad. One of the Nadir Jews, who had recently been expelled from Medina by the Muslims went to the Quraysh at Mecca and persuaded them to attack Medina. The Quraysh organized an army of 10,000 soldiers to fight the estimated 3,000 Muslims. Muhammad got wind of the plot and so organized the construction of a moat and other defenses around Medina. The defenses managed to keep the Quraysh at bay for long enough that the enemies finally gave up and went home. This critical event became known as the Battle of the Trench after the moat that was built around the settlement.

Subsequent to the battle, the Muslims turned to the last of the three major Jewish tribes in Medina – the Qurayza. The Muslim army besieged the Jewish fortifications for 25 days until they could no longer hold out. The Jews appealed for help from the Arab Aws tribe, who were their patrons. The Aws went to Muhammad and asked for leniency and so Muhammad proposed that Sa'd ibn Mu'adh, one of the Aws, would mediate and determine the punishment for the Jews. The Jews finally surrendered and Sa'd pronounced the judgment: the men would be executed, the women and children taken as captives, and the property taken as spoils and divided among them. There were about 600-700 (or perhaps 800-900) men who brought out in small batches and executed. Later Muslim writers argued that the Qurayza had broken the Medina

agreement by aiding Muhammad's enemies in the Battle of the Trench. Thus their actions would have been viewed as treason and a declaration of war and so worthy of such an extreme response. Later Muslims may have found justification for this action in Surah 8:55-58.

After things had settled down, Muhammad went to Mecca with many other Muslims to perform the *'umra* (lesser pilgrimage). Because of the previous hostilities, the Meccans refused to let Muhammad enter Mecca. The Khuza'a Arabs acted as a mediator between the two parties, but were unable to secure a deal. Muhammad then sent Uthman to assure the Meccans that their intentions were peaceful. A rumor soon came back that Uthman had been murdered by the Meccans and so the Muslims prepared to attack until they heard that the rumor had been false. Uthman had been successful and the Meccans agreed to send a representative to Muhammad to negotiate an agreement. The treaty between the Muslims and the Meccans became known as the treaty of Hudaibiyya (628 AD). The agreement stipulated that there could be no war between the Muslims and the Meccans for 10 years and in return the Muslims would be free to make pilgrimage to Mecca. The one stipulation was that they would have to wait till the next year before performing the *'umra* pilgrimage, to avoid the charge that the Muslims had entered Mecca by force or threat.

The signing of the treaty provoked a strong initial reaction from Muhammad's companions. Both Umar and Abu Bakr felt demeaned by making a treaty with pagans and so Umar protested, "Is he not God's Messenger and are we not Muslims, and are not they polytheists?" Muhammad prevailed upon them that he was obeying God's commands and could not disobey.<sup>6</sup> When Muhammad proposed that the treaty read, "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful," the Meccans rejected it saying that they didn't recognize this and proposed instead, "In thy name, O God." Interestingly, Muhammad accepted their alteration. Again, Muhammad proposed a statement containing "Muhammad, Messenger of God," which the Quraysh objected to, since they did not recognize him as a prophet. Again, Muhammad acquiesced and allowed it to be changed to "Muhammad ibn Abdullah." "It was an odd business, this coming to terms with the 'unbelievers,' and on transparently unfavorable terms" [Peters, p. 227]. Nonetheless, Ibn Ishaq would later describe the treaty as a great victory—"No previous victory in Islam was greater than this." The Qur'an also declared it to be a victory (Surah 48:1-2).

With the treaty of Hudaibiyya, Muhammad was now free to turn his attention elsewhere without fear of interference or reprisal. His first target was a Jewish settlement at Khaybar about 100 miles north of Medina. The army besieged their forts until the Jews could hold out no longer. They negotiated a surrender, where they gave up their land and property to the Muslims, but could remain on the farms as tenant farmers. A second settlement at Fadak heard of what happened at Khaybar and so surrendered without a fight in order to receive the same terms. Unlike at Khaybar, Muhammad received all of the property of the Fadak because no army was needed.

A number of miscellaneous events occurred during this brief time of peace. Muhammad stayed in Medina, but continued to send out more raids and expeditions. Also about 16 men plus their wives and children who had gone to Abyssinia during the time of persecution in Mecca returned and rejoined the community of Muslims. Muhammad also married an additional wife, Maymuna.

One year after the treaty of Hudaibiyya (Feb. 629 AD), Muhammad and several others returned to Mecca to perform the *'umra* (lesser pilgrimage) which they had previously been turned away from doing. Arriving in Mecca, Muhammad circled the Ka'ba and kissed the Black Stone. These actions posed a number of problems for later Muslim commentators. Much of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibn Ishaq records, "Umar used to say (afterwards), 'I have not ceased giving alms and fasting and praying and freeing slaves because of what I did that day and for fear of what I had said, when I hoped that (my plan) would be better'" [Peters, p. 227]. Umar's statement reflects a lack of real forgiveness in Islam.

Islam is based on the “customary practice” (*sunna*) of Muhammad, so whatever things Muhammad did became the established practice for later Muslims. (The *Sunna* is a later work compiling the various things that Muhammad said or did and is the base of practice for most Muslims.) Muhammad’s practice of kissing the Black Stone caused problems for later Muslims as to whether or not this practice was applied to all Muslims or whether Muhammad just practiced it with his Quraysh tribe. There is also strong evidence that Muhammad offered the customary animal sacrifices during the ‘*umra*, while it was still a pre-Islamic pagan practice. “In fact, some reports state that the Muslims performed the *tawaf* between Safa and Marwa during this ‘*umra*, while the pre-Islamic idols were still situated upon these hills: the pre-Islamic idols were not demolished until conquest of Mecca in 630 A.D.” [Peters, p. 306, footnote #29].

After about six months of peace, Muhammad organized a daring raid deep into Byzantine held territory. Three thousand men were sent expecting little resistance, but near the city of Mu’ta (in modern Jordan) they encountered a large Byzantine army and were soundly defeated. Zayd, Muhammad’s freedman and close personal friend, perished in the battle. This battle appears to represent “the first event in the history of Muhammad and his community to be reported in an outside source, in this case, the Byzantine historian Theophanes (d. 818)” [Peters, p. 231]. The Byzantine army had been sent to the area to restore order. After the costly reconquest of Syria from the Persians (Sasanians) (see Chapter 3), the Byzantines were barely able to pay their own soldiers and so stopped paying their Bedouin allies a small allowance for maintaining security in the area. As such, the Bedouins rose up and attacked the very area they had previously been paid to protect and the Byzantine army was sent to stop them. The Byzantine’s were rapidly losing control of the region of Syria, which Muslim armies would soon fully exploit.

## **Chapter 10: “The Truth Has Come and Falsehood Has Passed Away”**

The Muslims and Meccans had signed the treaty of Hudaibiyya, a 10-year armistice; however, it did not last even 2 years. It was not either of the principles, but their Bedouin allies, who actually broke the treaty by fighting each other. “The violation might have been settled in other ways—the Quraysh appeared willing to negotiate—but in January 630 A.D. Muhammad judged the occasion fit and the time appropriate for settling accounts with the polytheists at Mecca once and for all” [Peters, p. 235]. Muhammad ordered the Muslims to march on Mecca. On the way, they had a stroke of good fortune—they surprised and captured Abu Sufyan, a Quraysh leader who had led the Meccan forces at the Battle of Badr and Uhud. Abu Sufyan quickly was “persuaded, despite continuing doubts, to save himself and embrace Islam” [Peters, p. 235].

The city of Mecca had no walls or defenses and the Meccan will to resist was at an all time low, so the city was captured without a fight. Many expected dreadful revenge from the Muslims whom they had formerly persecuted but instead Muhammad ordered a general amnesty for all non-combatants, except for a few specific individuals who were to be executed. With the city in his hands, Muhammad celebrated by circling the Ka’ba seven times on his camel and touching the Black Stone (in the corner of the Ka’ba) with a stick. Finally, it was now time to rid the city of its polytheism. There were some 360 idols in the city, which Muhammad had destroyed saying, “The truth has come and falsehood has passed away” (Surah 17:81). Inside the Ka’ba, there were a number of religious paintings and other artifacts, which Muhammad had destroyed except for two paintings of Jesus and Mary.

One remaining element of polytheism was the shrines to the “daughters of Allah” in the regions near Mecca. The shrines of al-Lat, Manat, and al-Uzza were all destroyed at the command of Muhammad, but the destruction of shrine of al-Lat reveals a lot about the forced transition from polytheism to monotheism. The shrine of al-Lat belonged to the Tha’if Arabs at

Ta'if. The Thaqif Arabs had agreed to submit and to accept Islam in return for a written agreement guaranteeing that they could keep their land and property. They were now officially under the domain of Islam but asked Muhammad to delay destroying their al-Lat shrine for three years and not require them to make the prayers, which they found demeaning. The delay in destroying the shrine was needed, they said, in order to give people time to embrace Islam. Muhammad was adamant and sent Abu Sufyan and Mughira to destroy the shrine immediately. Both men traveled to Ta'if but only Mughira actually took part in destroying it and confiscating the shrine treasures. Abu Sufyan refused to actually take part because even though he had recently accepted Islam (to save his life), he had not yet completely given up his past beliefs.

The victory over Mecca was intoxicating but scarcely a month later (February 630 AD), a confederacy of Bedouin tribes rose up to try to overthrow Muhammad. The Muslim army met the confederacy near Hunayn and defeated them by sheer numerical superiority. This victory left the Muslims as the undisputed power over all of Arabia and was commemorated in the Qur'an (Surah 9:25-26). No longer could other tribes afford to resist Muhammad or remain neutral.

The Muslim year 8 AH (630 AD) is called the "Year of the Delegations" by Muslim historians. With the capture of Mecca and the victory over the Bedouin confederacy at Hunayn, there was a widespread recognition that the political winds had changed and that they needed to come to terms with this new reality. The various Arab tribes who had remained non-committal quickly realized that the benefits of joining and had witnessed the dangers of not joining. As Ibn Ishaq relates, "It was the Quraysh who had declared war on the Messenger [Muhammad] and opposed him; and when Mecca was occupied and the Quraysh became subject to him and he subdued them to Islam, and the Arabs knew they could not fight the Messenger [Muhammad] or display enmity towards him, they entered into God's religion 'in batches' as God said, coming from all directions..." [Peters, p. 242].

Muhammad continued to send raiding parties and began preparing a major incursion northward to Tabuk in Byzantine territory. The official reason for the mission was that they believed that the Byzantines were amassing an army to invade Arabia. This is highly unlikely and a more plausible explanation is given by Ibn Asakir, "the Muslim community at Medina had become dependent on (or perhaps simply accustomed to) the booty from the Prophet's raids, and that this, like the forays against Dumat al-Jandal and Mu'ta, was simply a predatory 'fishing' expedition" [Peters, p. 240]. Ibn Ishaq records that during the preparation for the attack, there were some who did not want to participate. These people were referred to as the "malingerers" and divine condemnation is given to them in the Qur'an (Surah 9:81-83, 86-87, 120).

The next major event after Tabuk, there was a raid to Ayla (modern Aqaba). Since the third century, Ayla had been under Byzantine control and had Roman legions stationed there. When Muhammad and his forces arrived, the city was defenseless and they immediately surrendered and agreed to the "poll-tax." The "poll-tax" (*jizya*) was the required payment from *dhimmi* (non-Muslims who were made subject to Islam). The foray revealed to Muhammad, the enormous military vulnerability of the region. The Byzantine-Persian war had left both sides militarily weak and economically crippled. After Muhammad's death, Muslim armies would quickly exploit this weakness and overwhelm both powers.

After returning from Tabuk, Muhammad stayed in Medina while he sent Abu Bakr to lead Muslims on the *Hajj* that year (March 631 AD). It is at this time that Muhammad made a drastic move, one that would forever reshape relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. We read:

A declaration of immunity from God and His Apostle is given to the pagans with whom you have contracted alliances. Go about safely in the land for four months and know that you cannot frustrate God, and that God is about to humiliate unbelievers. And a proclamation from God and His Apostle on the Day of the

Great Pilgrimage<sup>7</sup>—that God and His Apostle dissolve treaty obligations with the pagans... Except those pagans with whom you have made treaties and who have not afterward failed you in any regard and have not supported anyone against you. As for them, respect their treaty till the end of their term. God loves those who obey. And when the sacred months are passed, kill the pagans wherever you find them, and take them and surround them and lie in wait for them in every spot. But if they repent, and observe the ritual prayers and pay the alms-tithe, then leave them alone. God is forgiving, compassionate (Surah 9:1-5).

Prior to this point, “He [Muhammad] had concluded treaties with non-Muslims and they had even taken part in his raids and shared the booty that came from them. No longer. The pagans were granted a respite of four months [the 4 sacred months in which violence was prohibited]; thereafter they would be killed wherever the Muslims encountered them. There was, of course, another option: they might convert and become part of the new, entirely Muslim, political order” [Peters, p. 244]. This also meant that non-Muslims would be forbidden to participate in the *Hajj* or ‘*umra* pilgrimages or other activities at Mecca, a ban which is still enforced today in Saudi Arabia.

In Medina, Muhammad had established a largely secular political community (*umma*), where the Jews and pagans could maintain their religious identity. This had changed over the intervening 8 years, the three major Jewish tribes had been excised and the forced removal of all polytheistic idols. The Arab tribes, who were now joining the *umma*, were joining a purely religious one and to join first and foremost meant accepting Islam. Entering the exclusively Muslim *umma* also mean paying a tax to the community. This tax was known as the *zakat* (or *sadaqa*) and is today one of the five pillars (essential duties) of all Muslims. At this early time, the *zakat* was compulsory and agents were dispatched to collect it.

## Chapter 11: The Pilgrimage of Farewell

The *Hajj* pilgrimage is one of the five pillars (essential duties) of Islam and is specifically commanded in the Qur’an (Surah 2:196-197). The pilgrimage was to be made during the month of Dhu al-Hijja (approximately March) of the Arab calendar and was to be made by everyone who was physically and financially able to do so (Surah 3:97). The straightforward appearance of these commands belies the confusion about the precise meaning and practice of the *Hajj*.

“Once removed to Medina, however, he [Muhammad] was obviously in no position to participate in any of the cultic observances in Mecca and its vicinity, not, at any rate until the month of Dhu al-Qa’da (February) 629, when, as we have seen he was permitted to perform the ‘*umra* as part of a general political settlement concluded at Hudaibiyya. Mecca fell in January 630 AD, and though Muhammad performed the ‘*umra* in March of that year, he did not participate in the *Hajj*. In March 631 the *Hajj* was led by Abu Bakr, and Muhammad was once again absent. Thus it was not until Dhu al-Hijja (March) in 632 A.D., the year of his death, that Muhammad went on what was to be his first and final *Hajj* as a Muslim” [Peters, p. 248].

The *Hajj* itself had a long pre-Islamic history but was co-opted to serve Islam. “The Prophet [Muhammad] took what he found, discarded some elements of the cult, reshaped others, and integrated whatever was suitable into a new, specifically Muslim *Hajj*” [Peters, p. 248]. The *Hums* (see Chapter 4), were fundamentalist Quraysh who rejected the *Hajj* because it centered its rituals on nearby hills—Arafat and Mina—which were outside of Mecca and hence outside of Quraysh control. The Quraysh had their own pilgrimage, the ‘*umra*, which centered upon worshipping at the Ka’ba. Muhammad merged elements of both previously independent pilgrimages—the *Hajj* and ‘*umra*—to give us the *Hajj* that is practiced by Muslims today.

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<sup>7</sup> The *Hajj* pilgrimage of that year.



Ibn Ishaq reports, “The Apostle [Muhammad] completed the *Hajj* and showed men the rites and taught them what God had prescribed as to their *Hajj*, the ‘standing,’ the throwing of stones, the circumambulation of the temple [Ka’ba] and what He had permitted and forbidden. It was the pilgrimage of completion and the pilgrimage of farewell because the Apostle did not go on pilgrimage after that” [Peters, p. 249].

It is at this time that Muhammad ordered the abolishing of the practice of “intercalation” (or “postponement”). The Arab calendar had been based on having 12 lunar months of 30 days each (360 days), which is slightly shorter than a solar year (365 1/4<sup>th</sup> days) causing the months to drift with respect to the seasons. The ancient Arabs rectified this by periodically inserting an extra month into the calendar to realign the lunar calendar with the solar calendar. The decree against intercalation is given in Surah 9:36-37. The argument against intercalation was based on God having decreed that there were 12 months in a year when he created the heavens and the earth and that God had decreed 4 “sacred months” during which the “truce of God” prevailed and violence was prohibited. By choosing when to insert the extra month, one could control when the “sacred months” were and hence influence the trade and shrine attendance that occurred during those months. Thus Muhammad banned the practice on the pretext of preventing possible unscrupulous manipulating of the calendar for personal benefit.

A possible second reason for the ban on intercalation was that the *Hajj* that year coincided with both the Christian Easter and the Jewish Passover. Since the Christians used a solar calendar and the Jews used a solar-lunar calendar, this coincidence between the *Hajj*, Passover, and Easter might occur frequently. By banning intercalation, the Islamic calendar would retrogress 11 days per year against the solar calendar, thus avoiding overlap between the holy days. Following the lunar calendar, the *Hajj* and *‘umra* lost their seasonal connection.

The final act of calendar reform came five years later under Caliph Umar, when the Islamic calendar was created based on the Hijra as its starting point. The Hijra occurred in September of 622 AD but the actual start date for the calendar was set as July 22, 622 AD. This date was apparently chosen because it was the first day of the Arabic calendar. This change was apparently intended to simplify life by keeping the Islamic calendar aligned with the Arab calendar, however, this did have the “unanticipated side-effect was to introduce a degree of anarchy into the Muslim’s recollection of the date of events during the intercalation era at Medina, with the result, as one modern Muslim author has remarked, that ‘there is more calendrical confusion connected with these ten years of Muhammad’s mission in Medina than with any other decade of human history either before or after this period’” [Peters, p. 253].

## **Chapter 12: Illness and Death**

Muhammad’s death came suddenly and unexpectedly. He fell ill and died on June 8, 632 AD. After his death, Umar went to the people and declared that Muhammad was not dead but like Moses had been taken by God and would soon return. Abu Bakr stopped Umar and declared, “O men, if anyone worships Muhammad, Muhammad is dead; if anyone worships God, God is alive, immortal.” He then quoted, “Muhammad is nothing but an Apostle. Apostles have passed away before him. Can it be that if he were to die or be killed you would turn back on your heels? He who turns back does no harm to God and God will reward the grateful” (Surah 3:144).<sup>8</sup> It was at this time that it sank into everyone’s heart that Muhammad was indeed dead. Muhammad was buried beneath his home in Medina, which was later transformed into the Mosque of the Prophet.

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<sup>8</sup> The context of this verse is when Muhammad was injured during the battle of Uhud and thought dead. The Muslims were not to stop fighting or turn from God just because they thought Muhammad was dead.

## Appendix: The Quest of the Historical Muhammad

Just who was Muhammad? Answering this question is the central goal in the quest for the historical Muhammad. This quest may seem easy given the amount of materials preserved by Muslim chroniclers, but in fact it is loaded with problems and quandaries. There are four sources of material to consider in studying the life of Muhammad: the Qur'an, Muslim biographies (*siras*) of Muhammad, Muslim Hadith (written traditions), and non-Muslim sources. Each of these will be considered in turn in terms of their value in shedding light on the historical Muhammad.

"The history of Muhammad and the origins of Islam begins—and some would say, ends—with the Qur'an... What commends it so powerfully to the historian is its authenticity, not as the Word of God, of course, ... but rather as a document attesting to what Muhammad said at that time and place, early seventh century Mecca." [Peters, p. 257]. The Qur'an is a collection of inspired utterances that issued from Muhammad during the last 22 years of his life. It is not, however, a transcript of Muhammad's words. When Muhammad spoke, his followers would memorize his words and sometimes wrote them down on "pieces of paper, stones, palm-leaves, shoulder blades, ribs, and bits of leather." The various *surahs* of Qur'an began to be collected together as a book during the reign of Caliph Umar (634-644 AD) about a decade after Muhammad's death. As the Muslim armies spread both east and west in a wave of conquest, conflicts began to arise because different groups had different readings in their Qur'ans. To avoid division, Caliph Uthman (644-655 AD) ordered all of the collections of the Qur'an to be sent to him. From these, Uthman compiled a single standardized version, made copies of it, and distributed the copies around the Islamic empire. After having made his copy, all the original copies of the Qur'an were burned to prevent further questions and debate! Uthman's authorized version of the Qur'an has been well preserved and is the version available today.<sup>9</sup>

If Uthman's text of the Qur'an is to be used, how closely does it match the authentic original? Could genuine portions have been deleted or other materials added? Historians have uncovered various pre-Uthmanic fragments of the Qur'an, however, none have yielded differences of great significance to historians.<sup>10</sup> There are also a few early claims of alleged alternations to the Qur'an, such as the Shiite Muslims claim that Ali was named as Muhammad's designated successor but that it was suppressed by Uthman. "But the argument is so patently tendentious and the evidence adduced for the fact so exiguous that few have failed to be convinced that what is in our copy of the Qur'an is in fact what Muhammad taught, and is expressed in his own words" [Peters, p. 257].

Another problem with the Qur'an as a historical source is the lack of internal ordering. "The Qur'an gives somewhat the same impression of scattered pearls, though these have been reassembled in quite a different, and puzzling, manner. The Qur'an as we now possess it is arranged in 114 units called *surahs* connected in no obvious fashion, each bearing a name and other introductory formulae, of greatly varying length and, more appropriately to our present purpose, with little internal unity. There is no narrative framework, of course, and within the unconnected *surahs* there are dislocations, interpolations, abrupt changes of rhyme and parallel versions, a condition that has led by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike to conclude that 'it is not unlikely that some of the present *surahs* or parts of them were once joined to others...' By whom? We do not know, nor can we explain the purpose" [Peters, p. 258].

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<sup>9</sup> F. E. Peters supplies only a few details regarding the original collection of the Qur'an. The additional details supplied here come from *Answering Islam*, Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, Baker Books, 2002 and *The Qur'an and the Bible in the Light of History and Science*, Dr. William Campbell.

<sup>10</sup> While no critical variants have been found, that does not mean that there are no differences at all. Contrary to popular Muslim assertions, the Qur'an does contain a significant number of textual variants. A detailed description of these findings can be found in "What is the Koran?" *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1999, Volume 283, No. 1, pp. 43-56.

Since the *surahs* are not chronologically ordered and contain little historical context, can we still approximately order the *surahs* chronologically? Early Muslim scholars divided the *surahs* into Meccan and Medinan periods and gave an approximate chronological ordering for all the *surahs*. This system relied on the Islamic written tradition (the Hadiths) as a basis for their chronology. Skeptical of this approach, Western scholars have developed their own dating system by trying to connect specific *surahs* to historical events or based on stylistic criteria. This system of dating was developed by Theodore Nöldeke in 1860 and was revised in 1909 by Friedrich Schwally and is still in use today. The Nöldeke-Schwally system divides the *surahs* into four time categories: “early,” “middle,” and “late Meccan” and “Medinan.” Being able to firmly assign time sequence and context to the *surahs* “is of critical importance to the historian because it provides the ground for following the evolution of Muhammad’s thought and at the same time for connecting passages in the Qur’an with events that the ancient Muslim authorities asserted had occurred in Muhammad’s lifetime” [Peters, p. 259].

“Even if we were far more certain of the size and sequence of the original revelations recorded in it, the Qur’an would still not be terribly *useful* for reconstructing the Mecca milieu nor the life of the man who uttered its words: it is a text without context. For Muhammad, unlike Jesus, there is no Josephus to provide the contemporary political context, no literary apocrypha for a spiritual context and no Qumran Scrolls to illuminate a Palestinian ‘sectarian milieu.’ ... The Qur’an therefore stands isolated like an immense composite rock jutting forth from a desolate sea, a stony eminence with few marks upon it to suggest how or why it appeared in this watery desert” [Peters, p. 259]. Do we have “material in the Qur’an for a biography of Muhammad? It seems not because the form of the book is that of disjointed discourse, a pastiche of divine monologues that can be assembled into a homily or perhaps a catechism but that reveals little or nothing about the life of Muhammad and his contemporaries” [Peters, p. 261].

The second source of information on Muhammad is the *siras* (traditional biographies of the Prophet). These works give a chronological framework for Muhammad’s life fleshed out with other materials. The earliest *sira* is the *Life of the Apostle of God* by Ibn Ishaq (d. 768 AD), which was composed from earlier materials. Unfortunately, Ibn Ishaq’s original is not longer extant but was largely preserved by Ibn Hisham (d. 833 AD). Ibn Hisham, however, removed extraneous details that were not immediately relevant to Muhammad’s life. Some of “extraneous details” ignored by Ibn Hisham can be found in writing of al-Tabari (d. 923 AD), who had access to Ibn Ishaq’s original work. “Though the biographical material in the *Life* is not generally used to mask any special doctrinal pleading on behalf of Islam, there are, in its frequent lists, genealogies, and honorifics, abundant reflections of the family and clan factionalism that troubled the first and second century Islamic community, a sure sign that redactional concerns were shaping the material. And finally, there are chronological questions. The earliest ‘biographers’ of the Prophet, whose work is preserved by Ibn Ishaq and others, were little more than collections of the ‘raids’ conducted by or under Muhammad; and they took the watershed battle of Badr as their starting point and anchor and dated all major events in Muhammad’s life from it. But for the years from Badr (624) back to the Migration to Medina (622) there is great uncertainty and, for the entire span of the Prophet’s life at Mecca, hardly any chronological data at all. Despite these obvious and serious disabilities, Ibn Ishaq’s *Life* is on the face of it a coherent and convincing account...” [Peters, p. 263-264].

The Islamic Hadiths (written traditions) represent the third major source of information on Muhammad and his surroundings. The Hadiths are collections of stories about or sayings of Muhammad and play a pivotal role in Islam because anything that Muhammad said or did was considered revelation. The most famous Hadith collections are those of al-Bukhari (d. 870 AD) and Muslim (d. 875 AD). Each individual Hadith is accompanied by a chain of sources (*isnad*) who transmitted the information. This is a potentially rich source of information on Muhammad, however, “Western scholars looked more carefully at the accounts themselves and came to the

generally accepted conclusion that a great many of the 'prophetic traditions' (*hadith*) are forgeries fabricated to settle political scores or to underpin a legal or doctrinal ruling. This conclusion was drawn, however, from the analysis of material in reports chiefly legal in character... But so great has been the doubt cast on the bona fides of the alleged eyewitnesses and their transmitters in legal matters that there now prevails an almost universal Western skepticism on the reliability of *all* reports advertising themselves ... as going back to Muhammad's day, or that of his immediate successors" [Peters, p. 264].

In terms of non-Muslim sources, our fourth source of information on Muhammad, we have precious little. "Between the contemporary Greek, Roman, and Sasanian sources about Syria and Arabia and the later Islamic tradition about the same places there is a 'total lack of continuity.' The result is that, despite a great deal of information supplied by later Muslim literary sources, we know pitifully little for sure about the political or economic history of Muhammad's native city of Mecca or of the religious culture from which he came. And to the extent that we are ignorant of that history and culture, to that same extent we do not understand the man or the enormously effective religious movement that followed in his wake" [Peters, p. 260]. There are very few historical sources coming from the pre-Islamic Arabs, whose history lay entirely in local oral tradition. Muslim sources did preserve some of this history although much was lost and other parts reconstituted to fit Muslim purposes. Some of this original Arabian history can be gleaned from Ibn Ishaq's *Life* as preserved by al-Tabari. (Ibn Hisham's version excludes such details from his version of Ibn Ishaq's original work.) The other main source of information about pre-Islamic Arabia comes from the *Book of Idols* by Hisham ibn al-Kalbi (d. 819 AD).

"At every turn, then, the historian of Muhammad and early Islam appears betrayed by the sheer unreliability of the sources. One confronts a community whose interest in preserving revelation was deep and careful, but who came to history, even to the history of the recipient of that revelation, too long after the memory of the events had faded to dim recollections over many generations, had been embroidered rather than remembered, and was invoked only for what is for the historian the unholy purpose of polemic. Islam, unhappily for the modern historian, had no immediate need of a gospel and so chose carefully to preserve what it understood were the words of God rather than the deeds of the man who was His Messenger or the history of the place in which he lived" [Peters, p. 265-266].

Nonetheless, there are ways in which historians may proceed in attempting to identify the historical Muhammad. Surely, there is genuine history that can be rescued "no matter how deeply it might now be overcast with myth and special pleading" [Peters, p. 266]. The chief question is how to separate history from later invention. Several approaches have been attempted in this regard. (1) Arranging the Hadith into chronological order to identify the growth of tradition. (2) Deduce the evolution of matter at Mecca from a comparison with parallels in other religious cultures. (3) Reconstruction of the religious history of pre-Islamic Mecca and the Hijaz by what may be called the comparative method.

# Important Islamic Terms and Names

## Five Pillars of Islam

- (1) **Shahada (or kalima)** - pronouncing the confession of faith.
- (2) **Salat** - performing the five daily prayers.
- (3) **Ramadan** - fasting during the month of Ramadan.
- (4) **Zakat** - paying the alms tax.
- (5) **Hajj** - the major pilgrimage to Mecca.

## Theological Terminology

**Allah** – Contraction of *al-ilah*, which means “the god.”

**Hanifism** – *Hanifism* was a form of Arabian monotheism, with Abraham as the first *Hanif*. It was taught to be the “religion of Abraham” and embraced many of the pagan practices at Mecca as being corrupted forms of what Abraham had originally taught. As monotheists, *Hanifs* rejected the Quraysh henotheistic notion of Allah as supreme god among lesser gods and forbade associating other “gods” with Allah. While similar to Judaism and Christianity, *Hanifism* was distinct from both of them.

**Henotheism** – A religious doctrine attributing supreme power to one of several divinities in turn or a belief in one god, without denying the existence of others.

**Hubal** – A well-known Arabic god and was depicted as “Abraham the Ancient.” A statue of Hubal had been erected in the Ka’ba at Mecca and remained there until Muhammad had it destroyed.

**Jinn** – More commonly known in the West as “genies,” these were traditional evil spirits of Arabia.

**Manat, al-Lat, and al-Uzza - “The Daughters of Allah”** – These three names represent three popular goddesses worshipped in Arabia.

**Rahmanism** – A belief in a supreme God referred to as al-Rahman (literally “The Merciful”). Rahmanism was monotheistic (or perhaps henotheistic) religion appearing around fourth and fifth century AD in Arabia and appears to be result of Jewish influence.

## Kingdoms and Regions

**Abyssinia** (also known as **Axum**) – A kingdom located in the region of modern Ethiopia.

**Byzantine Empire** – The Byzantine Empire represented the eastern half of the Holy Roman Empire. It was located primarily in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and was the major political power to the west of Arabia.

**Hijaz** – The region of western Arabia, including Mecca and Medina.

**Himyar** (originally known as **Sabeans**) – A country occupying the region of modern Yemen. King Solomon was visited by the Queen of Sheba (Saba) who came from this area (1 Kings 10).

**Persian Empire** – Same as Sasanian Empire.

**Sasanian Empire** – The Sasanian (Persian) Empire (modern Iran/Iraq) represented the major world power to the east of Arabia. The Sasanians were ethnically Persians rather than Arabs.

**Syrian steppe** – A steppe is a great plain having few or no trees. The Syrian steppe refers to vast desert expanse between the fertile lands of Iraq on the east and Syria-Palestine to the west. This region covers the northern portion of Arabia.

**Yemen** – Same as Himyar.

## Important Cities

**Al-Hira** – Literally “the Camp.” Al-Hira was the primary city of the Lakhmid Arabs and was located on the eastern edge of the Syrian steppe in what is modern Iraq.

**Mecca** – A shrine city in western Arabia containing the Ka’ba and was the birthplace of Muhammad.

**Medina** (originally known as **Yathrib**) – A small agricultural community that was located about 275 miles north of Mecca.

**Sa’na** – An important city in Yemen.

**Al-Aqaba** – Literally “the Defile.” It was an area near the city of Mecca.

## Tribes of Arabia

**Amaliqa** – An Arab tribe that lived near Mecca during the time of Ishmael. The Amaliqa appear to be a transparent reference to the Biblical Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-16; 1 Samuel 15), however, the Biblical Amalekites lived much farther north in the Negev desert (south of Israel). More likely the Amaliqa are Nabatean Arabs.

**Aws and Khazraj** – The two primary Arab tribes in Medina.

**Ghassan** – An Arab tribe located near modern Syria and they were the Bedouin allies of the Byzantine Empire.

**Jurhum** – An Arab tribe living near Mecca. They had exerted control over Mecca and the surrounding area until the Khuza’a displaced them.

**Lakhmid** – An Arab tribe living near modern Iraq and were the Bedouin allies of the Persian Empire.

**Khuza’a** – An Arab tribe living near Mecca. The Khuza’a briefly took control of Mecca from the Jurhum Arabs then lost it to the Quraysh.

**Nadir, Qurayza, and Qaynuqa’** – The three primary Jewish tribes living in Medina.

**Saracens** – Greco-Roman appellation for the nomadic tribes of Syria and Arabia, known today as Arabs. Apparently “Saracens” came from the belief that they were descendants of “Sarah,” the wife of Abraham.

**Thaqif** – An Arab tribe that lived primarily at Ta’if and were economic and political competitors of the Quraysh in Mecca.

**Quraysh** – The Arab tribe to which Muhammad belonged. They are believed to be descendants of Ishmael and were the dominant tribe in Mecca at the time of Muhammad. The origin of the name Quraysh is uncertain.

## Religious Practices at Mecca

**Arafat** – A plain near Mecca that were involved in the practice of the *Hajj*. The ritual was known as the “standing” on Arafat.

**Black Stone** – A meteorite that is embedded in the southeast corner of the Ka’ba. Islamic tradition holds that God gave the stone to Abraham (or possibly Adam) to be incorporated into the Ka’ba.

**Circumambulation** – The practice of moving in a circular motion around the Ka’ba. This was a central practice in pagan and later Muslim worship at the Ka’ba.

**Haram** – Literally “the sanctuary.” The area surrounding the Ka’ba shrine in Mecca.

**Hajj** – Greater pilgrimage. The *Hajj* is a series of rituals centered at Mecca and is one of the five obligatory duties of all Muslims. The pilgrimage consists of several parts. (1) Circumambulation clockwise about the Ka’ba seven times. (2) Running between two small hills—Safa and Marwa—to commemorate Hagar searching for water. (3) Standing on the plain of Arafat. (4) Staying at Muzdalifa. (4) Animal sacrifice at Mina (to commemorate Abraham’s near sacrifices of his son). (5) The stoning (throwing pebbles at) three pillars at Mina that are said to represent Satan.

**Mina** – A mountain near Mecca that was involved in the practice of the *Hajj*. Pilgrims offered an animal sacrifice on Mina. There are also three pillars that represent Satan at which pilgrims are to throw small stones indicating their rejection of Satan.

**Muzdalifa** – A location near Mecca where Hajj pilgrims stop after having traveled to the plain of Arafat.

**‘Umra** – Lesser pilgrimage. The ‘umra was an exclusively Meccan pilgrimage centered upon worship at the Ka’ba.

**Safa and Marwa** – Two small hills near Mecca. During the *Hajj*, pilgrims are to run seven times between the hills to commemorate Hagar’s desperate search for water for herself and baby Ishmael.

## **Social, Political, and Cultural Practices of Arabia**

**Ashura** – Literally “the Tenth.” The name “Tenth” refers to the tenth day of the first month of the Jewish calendar, which coincides with the Jewish Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur. Originally Ashura was an Arabic celebration that occurred on the same day as the Jewish holy day and so represents a borrowing from Jewish culture.

**Caliph** – “Successor” or vice-regent. After the death of Muhammad, political and religious authority fell to a series of leaders called Caliphs. The first four Caliphs were Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali.

**Dhimma (pl. dhimmi)** – Non-Muslims who were subjects under Islamic rule. *Dhimmi* were allowed to keep their religion but were second-class citizens, had to pay a special tax (*jizya*) that Muslims did not have to pay, and could not serve in the military.

**Hadith** – “Prophetic tradition.” Collected reports of the words, actions, and attitudes of the prophet Muhammad, constituting a body of literature second only to the Qur’an in authority for Muslims. The most accepted Hadith collections are those of al-Bukhari and Muslim.

**Hijra** – “Migration.” The Hijra refers to an event where Muslims of Mecca migrated to Medina to avoid religious persecution. The event occurred in September of 622 AD and taken as the starting event for the Muslim calendar.

**Hums** – A group of Quraysh professing a very strict fundamentalist belief regarding worship at the Ka’ba of Mecca. They viewed the Ka’ba and the ritual practices as coming from Abraham, a belief that would be embraced by Muhammad. They rejected any practices that did not center upon Mecca and held very specific dietary and domestic taboos and a great emphasis upon the clothes connected with Ka’ba rituals.

**Intercalation (or postponement)** – The ancient Arabs followed a solar-lunar calendar, that is, they followed a lunar calendar (12 months of 30 days each) but periodically added an extra month to keep the lunar months aligned with the solar calendar and with the seasons.

**Isnad** – Chain of Transmission. Stories or sayings of Muhammad in the Hadith or Sunna were often accompanied by a listing of the individuals who had transmitted the information, for example, “Al-Zhuri related from Urwa ibn Zubayr that Aisha told him...” The *isnad* was often used to “prove” the authenticity of the transmitted story or saying that it accompanies.

**Jizra** – “Poll-tax.” A special tax on non-Muslims who were made subjects of Islam.

**Ka’ba** - Literally the “cube.” A shrine built of unmortared stone and covered by a black curtain located in the center of Mecca and believed by Muslims to have been constructed by Abraham and Ishmael. It is considered to be the “temple and mosque of Abraham the friend of God.”

**Masjid (pl. masjid)** – Literally “place of prostration” or “shrine” – A *masjid* was a pre-Islamic Arabic word to describe a fixed religious shrine. It was also used to describe the Ka’ba and also the word for Mosque.

**Night of Destiny** – On the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the fast of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate the “sending down” of the Qur’an to Muhammad. Traditionally, this marks the day in which Muhammad received the first revelation from the angel Gabriel.

**Oikoumene** – Greek for “the inhabited world.”

**Ramadan** - Ramadan is a time of fasting, abstinence from sex and smoking, and prayer during daylight hours for an entire month and commemorates Muhammad’s practice of fasting and praying during which he is said to have first received revelations. The fast is named for the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Arabic calendar during which Muhammad had practiced his prayers. Ramadan is considered one of the five pillars of Islam.

**Rifada** – The practice of providing food for visiting pilgrims at Mecca. Also referred to a tax collected from pilgrims for providing their food and water.

**Salat** – “Liturgical Prayer.” *Salat* was a loan from Syriac, the language used by neighboring Christian communities. This form of prayer was a formal liturgical prayer and was distinct from the pre-Islamic concept of prayer.

**Siqaya** – The practice of providing water for visiting pilgrims at Mecca.

**Sunna** – “Customary Practice.” Much of Islam is defined by Muhammad’s example, that is, whatever his “customary practice” was, became the established standard for all Muslims. The *Sunna* also refers to a written collection of stories regarding Muhammad’s behavior and practice and is the basis of practice for most Muslims.

**Tahannuth** – “Leading a solitary life” or “acts of devotion.” The term denotes a period of withdrawal from family and the world to devote to God in prayer and fasting. It was during one of these times of praying that Muhammad claims to have received his first revelation from God. Muhammad’s practice of *tahannuth* was later celebrated in Islam by the month-long fast of Ramadan.

**Qibla** – Prayer direction. When Muslims pray, they are to pray toward the Ka’ba in Mecca regardless of where they are on earth.

**Umma** – Community. Initially, *umma* referred to a group of people united as a single political unit under Muhammad. Later, this would evolve to mean an exclusive religious-political body united by an acceptance of Islam with Muhammad as their prophet.

**Zakat** – Alms tax. A tax collected to join the new Islamic political body. This tax was originally obligatory and tax collectors were sent to collect it. The *zakat* is one of the five obligatory duties of all Muslims.

**Zamzam** – Well used to provide water for pilgrims in Mecca. This well was believed to be the well that provided water for Hagar and Ishmael.

## Words Relating to Names

**Abd** – “Slave of” or “servant of.” For example, Abd al-Muttalib means “slave of al-Muttalib” and Abdullah means “slave of Allah.”

**Abu** – “Father of.” A common prefix in names, such as Abu Talib.

**Ibn** – “Son of.” For example, Muhammad ibn Abdullah means “Muhammad son of Abdullah.”

**Bint** – “Daughter of.” For example, Sayyida bint Mudad means “Sayyida daughter of Mudad.”

**Banu** – “Descents of” or “Tribe of.” For example, the Banu Qaynuqa’ means the “tribe of Qaynuqa’.”



# Genealogy of Muhammad

