

MUHAMMAD IN MECCA

It is alleged in popular stories (and only God knows the truth) that Amina, the daughter of Wahb, the mother of God's apostle, used to say when she was pregnant with God's apostle that a voice said to her, "You are pregnant with the lord of this people and when he is born say, 'I put him in the care of the One from the evil of every envier,' then call him Muhammad." As she was pregnant with him she saw a light come forth from her by which she could see the castles of Busra in Syria. (Ibn Ishaq, 69)

Monotheism and Paganism in Muhammad's Arabia

The Prophet Muhammad, according to the traditional Islamic sources, was an orphan.

His father, Abdallah, died three months before he was born, and his mother, Amina, died when he was only six. After his mother died, Muhammad was adopted by Abu Talib, his paternal uncle. Abu Talib was an important merchant in Mecca, a city of merchants, and when Muhammad was twelve, Abu Talib agreed to take him on a trading journey north to Syria. It was to be a fateful journey.

Muhammad and the Monk

Their route took them near the city of Bostra, by the cave of a Christian hermit named Bahira. Now Bahira had never taken notice of the Meccan caravan before, but on this occasion he noticed a cloud that hovered over the head of the boy Muhammad even as the

caravan drove forward. Thus Bahira came down from his cave, stopped the Meccans, and insisted they come eat with him. When the Meccans went up to Bahira's cave, they left the young Muhammad behind with the baggage. Bahira, however, noticed Muhammad's absence and insisted that he be summoned. When Muhammad finally arrived, Bahira examined him closely and found a mark on his back, between his shoulder blades, "the very place described in his book." This, Bahira explained, was the "seal of prophethood." It confirmed to Bahira that the boy was the one predicted by Christ. Before seeing his guests off, Bahira announced to Abu Talib (after warning him that the Jews would plot against Muhammad): "A great future lies before this nephew of yours, so take him home quickly."

The account of Muhammad's meeting with the mysterious monk Bahira illustrates three themes in the traditional narrative of Islam's emergence. First, it presents Islam as a religion that completes and corrects Christianity. The figure of the monk is meant to show that a true Christian recognizes Muhammad as a prophet. The Qur'an itself describes the reaction of Christians who hear Muhammad proclaim his revelations: "When they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize. They say, 'Our Lord, we believe; so do Thou write us down among the witnesses'" (Q 5:83). The reference to a book in Bahira's possession that contained a description of the new prophet (including his birthmark) suggests that Bahira was not reading the Christian Bible but the "true" scriptures

of Jesus (which, perhaps, he preserved secretly in his secluded cave). Thus Bahira appears to be a bridge between Jesus and Muhammad. He preserves the Scriptures of the first prophet, Jesus, and he recognizes the appearance of the new prophet, Muhammad.

Second, this account also makes Muhammad the fulfillment, or the consummation, of biblical prophets. It is reminiscent of Samuel's anointing of David as king of Israel (1 Sam. 16). When Samuel examines the elder sons of Jesse to find the one whom God has chosen to be king, none pass the test. "Are these all the sons you have?" he asks Jesse. At this Jesse finally brings his youngest son, David (who had been watching not baggage but sheep), and God tells Samuel that David is the chosen one. So too, this account is reminiscent of Moses' leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Yahweh precedes the Israelites in a cloud in Exodus 13, while a cloud hovers over the head of Muhammad in the Bahira story.

The Bahira story is also reminiscent of Jesus' travel as a boy of twelve to Jerusalem with his parents (Luke 2). Jesus' parents find him in the temple asking questions of the teachers and amazing them with his intelligence. Similarly, Muhammad proves himself unusually wise on religious matters during his meeting with Bahira. When Bahira swears by the pagan goddesses of Mecca—al-Lat and al-Uzza—Muhammad rebukes him, saying: "By God nothing is more hateful to me than these two."

Third, this account evokes the struggle between monotheism and paganism. The Islamic sources make it clear that Bahira

himself did not believe in the gods of Mecca; he only swore by them “because he had heard [Muhammad’s] people swearing by these gods.” Mecca, according to the traditional narrative, was a city awash in idols, a city possessed by the abomination of paganism. Accordingly, the Islamic sources refer to Arab society before the arrival of Islam as the *jahiliyya*: “the realm of ignorance.” Muhammad, they relate, was born to be a bearer of light in a city of darkness.

The Pagan City of Mecca and the War of the Elephant

Western scholars generally date the birth of Muhammad to 570 CE (although this date is quite uncertain; it is based only on the assumption that Muhammad was sixty-two at his death, in 632). According to Islamic tradition, the leading figure in Mecca at the time of Muhammad’s birth was his paternal grandfather, ‘Abd al-Muttalib, who was known as “the lord” of the Quraysh” (the principal tribe of Mecca, to which Muhammad belonged).

A descendent of Abraham (through Ishmael), ‘Abd al-Muttalib was a holy man in a city of unholiness. He is closely connected in Islamic traditions with the Ka’ba, the square stone shrine in Mecca around which Muslims circle during their pilgrimage.

It was ‘Abd al-Muttalib who, guided by a dream, found the spring next to the Ka’ba known as Zamzam, originally discovered by Abraham’s young son Ishmael when, suffering from thirst in the heat of Arabia, he scratched at the ground with his feet (according to another tradition, the angel Gabriel released

the water of Zamzam by digging at this spot with his wing). When Muhammad was born, one tradition reports, ‘Abd al-Muttalib immediately took the child to the Ka’ba to give thanks to God.

This connection with the Ka’ba is also a connection with Abraham himself, who is said to have built the Ka’ba as a shrine for the worship of God (although some traditions insist the Ka’ba was first built by Adam and only restored by Abraham). Evidently, the Islamic tradition on Abraham and Mecca departs from the biblical story of Abraham, which never has him travel anywhere near Mecca (a city hundreds of miles south of the biblical land of Canaan).

Most Islamic traditions explain that at a certain point Abraham asked his second wife, Hagar, and their son, Ishmael (but not Sarah or Isaac), to join him on a journey into the desert, a journey that led them to a deserted valley where Abraham built the Ka’ba. Other traditions explain that the Ka’ba was built as a precise replica of a shrine in heaven, around which angels process in prayer. However, in the days of ‘Abd al-Muttalib, the Ka’ba had become a pagan shrine, housing the idols of various Arab tribes (360 idols, according to one count).

By describing the Ka’ba in this way, the Islamic sources suggest that Muhammad did not teach a new religion in Mecca. Instead, he taught people to worship one God, as Abraham had done. In other words, Islam existed in Mecca before the city declined into the darkness of paganism. This idea seems to emerge from a passage in the Qur’an.

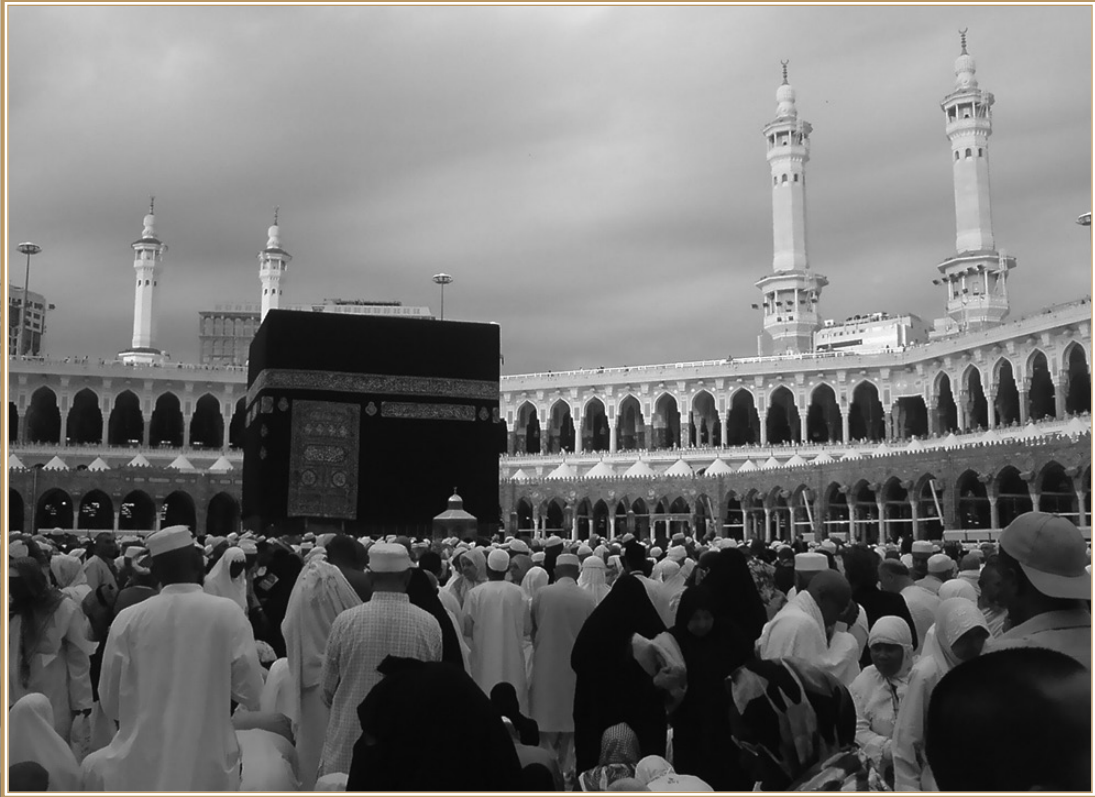


FIGURE I.1. *Muslim Pilgrims around the Ka'ba, Mecca 2007*

And when Abraham, and Ishmael with him, raised up the foundations of the House: “Our Lord, receive this from us; Thou art the All-hearing, the All-knowing; *and, our Lord, make us submissive [*muslimin*] to Thee, and of our seed a nation submissive to Thee; and show us our holy rites, and turn towards us; surely Thou turnest, and art All-compassionate. (Q 2:127-28)

Here Abraham and Ishmael ask God to make them “submissive”—in Arabic *muslimin*—to God. The followers of Muhammad’s religion would later call themselves by this term:

Muslims (the ending *-in* makes the word plural in Arabic). Moreover, they would insist that Abraham and Ishmael were not only “submissive” (or *muslims* with a lowercase *m*) but also that they were Muslims (with a capital *M*). Islam, in other words, did not begin with Muhammad. It began long before.

In the qur’anic passage above, Abraham and Ishmael also pray that God will raise up a nation among their descendants, a nation that will likewise be “submissive” (or *muslim*). In the subsequent verse, the Qur’an has them pray for the appearance of a prophet among

them, “Our Lord, do Thou send among them a Messenger, one of them, who shall recite to them Thy signs, and teach them the Book and the Wisdom, and purify them; Thou art the All-mighty, the All-wise” (Q 2:129).

To Muslims, Muhammad is this messenger, this new Abraham. The connection between Abraham and Muhammad is seen again in a tradition that Muhammad, after he met Abraham face-to-face during his ascent to

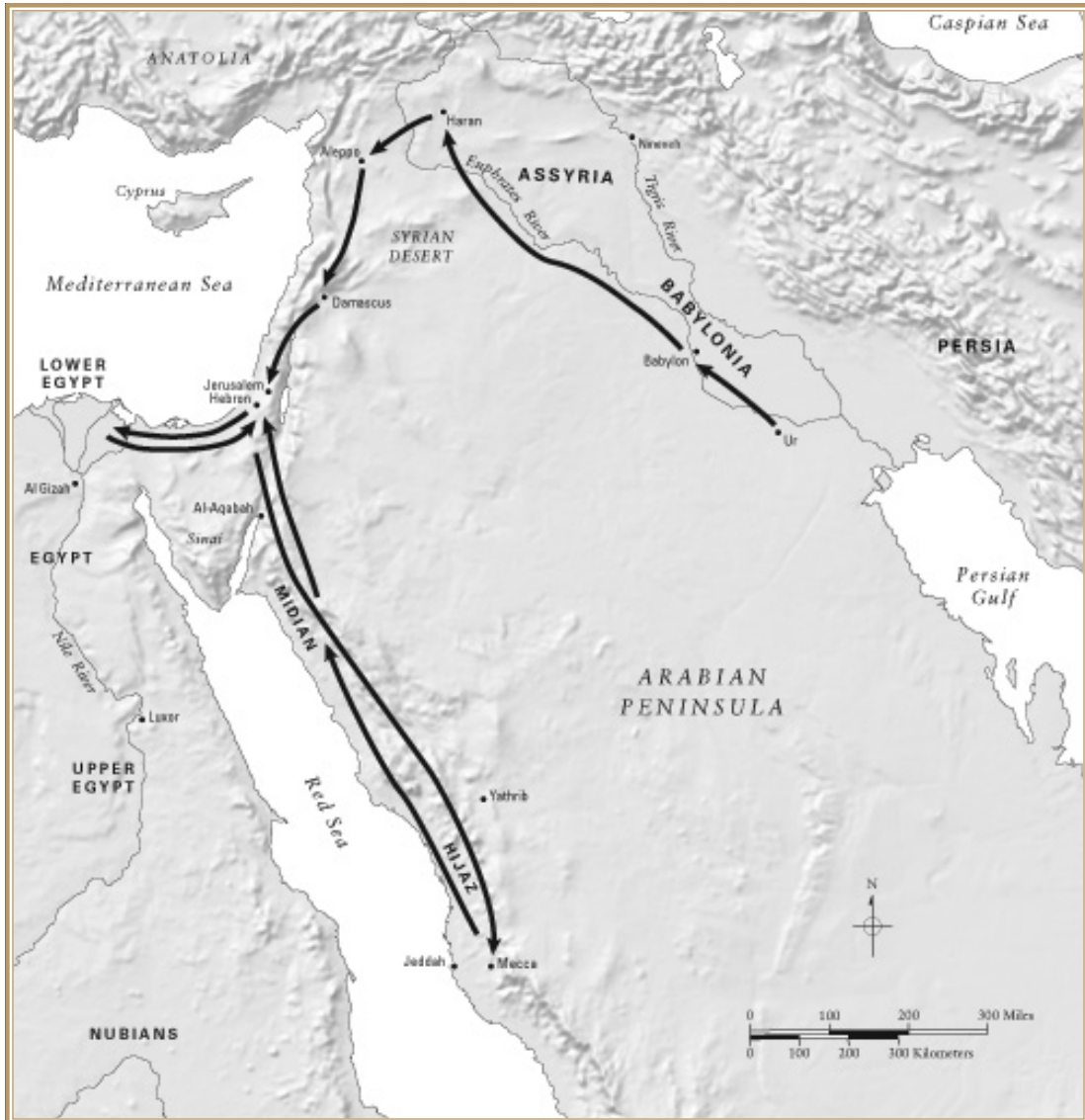


FIGURE I.2. A map depicting Abraham's route to Mecca.

heaven, commented: “Never have I seen a man so much like myself.”

As for ‘Abd al-Muttalib, in the traditional Islamic narrative he is an enigmatic figure. He lived and died before Muhammad preached Islam (most accounts have him die when Muhammad was only eight years old), and his close association with the Ka’ba puts him at the city’s pagan heart. Nevertheless, he is described as a holy man. ‘Abd al-Muttalib is celebrated in particular for his defense of the Ka’ba during the “War of the Elephant.”

The story of this “war” (which in fact does not involve any fighting at all) in the classical Islamic sources centers on the ambitions of Abraha, a Christian ruler from the south of the Arabian peninsula. Abraha had built a grand cathedral in the city of San‘a, and he planned to turn this cathedral into a site of pilgrimage for all of the Arabs—and to make a profit from the pilgrims who would come. The principal obstacle to his plans was the Ka’ba of Mecca and its 360 idols. Many of these idols belonged to individual tribes who made a pilgrimage once a year to Mecca to venerate them. Abraha, according to the story, decided that a good way to convince them to come to San‘a instead was to destroy those idols and the building that housed them. Thus Abraha set out to attack Mecca, supplying his troops with an elephant for battle.

A ruler named Abraha is indeed known to us from Christian chronicles and South Arabian inscriptions, but outside of Islamic tradition there is no mention of his attack on Mecca. Moreover, the idea that he would attack Mecca with one single elephant seems

curious. Presumably, if Abraha was able to get his hands on one elephant, he would have gotten at least a couple more to help out. In fact, the entire story seems to have been written to explain Qur’an 105: “Hast thou not seen how thy Lord did with the Men of the Elephant? * Did He not make their guile to go astray? * And He loosed upon them birds in flights, * hurling against them stones of baked clay, * and He made them like green blades devoured” (Q 105:1-5). Presumably, later Muslim scholars simply attached the well-known name of Abraha to the story they wrote to explain this otherwise opaque passage about the “Men of the Elephant.”

In any case, according to this story, ‘Abd al-Muttalib—having heard of Abraha’s approach—put the fate of the city in God’s hands: “God knows that we do not wish to fight [Abraha] for we have not the power to do so. This is God’s sanctuary and the temple of His friend Abraham. . . . If He defends it against [Abraha] it is His temple and His sanctuary; and if He lets [Abraha] have it by God we cannot defend it!” (Ibn Ishaq, 24). Like the Egyptians in the days of Moses, the forces of Abraha were facing not humans but God. The next day, as they prepared for battle, they discovered that their elephant (called Mahmud, a good Islamic name) refused to approach Mecca. Even worse, birds came from the sea, each of which brought three small stones, which they dropped on the soldiers of Abraha. Everyone hit by these stones was killed. Abraha himself was hit repeatedly and slowly dismembered. By the time he reached San‘a, he had nothing but a miserable stump of a body.

His heart burst from his chest, and he died. So the year of the War of the Elephant was a year of death. But it was also a year of life, for in that same year Muhammad was born.

Muhammad's Early Life

According to Ibn Ishaq, in the days when Muhammad was born, it was common for city-dwelling Arabs to place their children into the care of Bedouins so that they would be exposed to the healthy air of the desert. Muhammad's mother, Amina, did just that, giving the young boy to a Bedouin woman named Halima. Soon after Halima took Muhammad in, a miracle took place that proved the boy was unlike any other.

Childhood

For some time, Halima had been unable to nurse, but soon after she took in Muhammad, her breasts filled with so much milk that she was able to nurse both Muhammad and her own child. Even the udders of her old she-camel suddenly filled with milk. Halima had once been hesitant to accept Muhammad (a fatherless child), but now she counted herself lucky. "Do you know, Halima, you have taken a blessed creature," exclaimed her husband.

Yet a miracle still more fantastic was to take place during Muhammad's residence with Halima in the desert. Muhammad himself recounts how it took place: "While I was with a [foster] brother of mine behind our tents shepherding the lambs, two men in white raiment came to me with a gold basin full of

snow. Then they seized me and opened up my belly, extracted my heart and split it; then they extracted a black drop from it and threw it away; they washed my heart and my belly with that snow" (Ibn Ishaq, 72). This account seems to symbolize Muhammad's purification in preparation for his call to prophecy, although that call would not come until many years later.

Marriage and Call to Prophecy

Most accounts of Muhammad's adult life begin with the report that Muhammad worked as a merchant for an older woman named Khadija, known both for her dignity and her wealth. Many men desired to marry Khadija in order to get to this wealth, but Khadija desired to marry Muhammad, whom she knew to be both reliable and honest.

Even more, Khadija recognized that Muhammad was a holy man. One of Khadija's servants had told her that a monk saw Muhammad sit under a tree where only prophets sit. Khadija's own cousin Waraqa, who is often described as a Christian, explained: "If this is true, Khadija, verily Muhammad is the prophet of this people. I knew that a prophet of this people was to be expected. His time has come" (Ibn Ishaq, 83). Thus Khadija and Muhammad were married. Muhammad would later marry many women, but as long as he was married to Khadija, he remained monogamous. Years later, Muhammad's young wife 'A'isha would recall, "I did not feel jealous of any woman as much as I did of Khadija because Allah's Apostle used to mention her very often" (Bukhari, 5:165).

As for Waraqa, Ibn Ishaq makes him one of four Arabs who broke away from paganism even before Muhammad proclaimed Islam. Islamic tradition names these four figures *hanifs*, and Muhammad, before his call to prophethood, is sometimes thought to have been influenced by them. He is said to have spent one month of each year praying

in a cave on a mountain named Hira, outside Mecca. It was during one of these retreats when Muhammad, who had reached the age of forty, was first visited by the angel Gabriel.

“He came to me,” said the apostle of God, “while I was asleep, with a coverlet of brocade whereon was some writing, and said, “Read!”

Personalities in Islam I.1

KHADIJA

According to the traditional biography of the Prophet, Khadija was Muhammad's first wife, the only wife older than him, the only wife to bear him children who lived to adulthood, and the only wife with whom he lived monogamously (that is, Muhammad did not marry other women while Khadija was still alive). Ibn Ishaq describes Khadija as “a merchant woman of dignity and wealth” and adds, “All her people were eager to get possession of her wealth” (Ibn Ishaq, 82). Although Ibn Ishaq does not tell us how Khadija achieved this status (let alone what sort of merchant trade she was involved in), he does credit Khadija for recognizing Muhammad's “truthfulness, trustworthiness, and honorable character.” He relates how Khadija hears from another of her employees (named Maysara) that miraculous signs accompany Muhammad (such as angels shading him from the sun). In this way, she recognizes that Muhammad possesses a quality beyond mere virtue and asks to marry him.

Thus Khadija is one of several pious wisdom figures in the biography of the Prophet, figures who insightfully perceive Muhammad's special qualities. Among these is the monk Bahira and Khadija's own cousin Waraqa, who (being learned in the Scriptures) identifies Muhammad as a prophet like Moses.

To Shi'ite Muslims, Khadija is also a figure of particular value as the mother of Fatima. Muhammad's cousin 'Ali—whom Shi'ites recognize as the first Imam, the rightful successor to the Prophet—would marry Fatima. From this marriage would be born Hasan and Husayn (the second and third Imams, grandsons of the Prophet). Shi'ite authors also contrast Khadija, “the woman of dignity,” with another wife of the Prophet: 'A'isha, the daughter of Abu Bakr (who, from a Shi'ite perspective, wrongly usurped 'Ali's place as successor to the Prophet). Whereas Khadija thought only of the mission of Muhammad, 'A'isha often thought of her own interests, or those of her father.

I said, “What shall I read?” He pressed me with it so tightly that I thought it was death; then he let me go and said, “Read!” I said, “What shall I read?” He pressed me with it again so that I thought it was death; then he let me go and said “Read!” I said, “What shall I read?” He pressed me with it the third time so that I thought it was death and said “Read!” I said, “What then shall I read?”—and this I said only to deliver myself from him, lest he should do the same to me again. He said: “Read in the name of thy Lord who created, who created man of blood coagulated. Read! Thy Lord is the most beneficent, who taught by the pen, taught that which they knew not unto men.” (Ibn Ishaq, 106)

This final phrase is found in Qur’an 96, verses 1-5, which, according to this account, were the first words God revealed to the Prophet. Over the next twenty-three years, Muhammad continued to receive such revelations from God, brought to him by the angel Gabriel, who would indicate to the Prophet how these revelations, delivered in pieces (such as that cited above), were to be arranged. Muhammad referred to these messages as “The Recitation,” or “The Reading”—in Arabic, the *Qur’an*.

Ibn Ishaq explains that when Muhammad was on his way down from Mount Hira, he heard a voice from above, which declared to him, “Thou art the apostle [that is, the messenger] of God and I am Gabriel” (Ibn Ishaq, 106). When he reached the bottom of the mountain, Muhammad rushed to find Khadija and told her all that he had seen and

heard. Khadija declared, “Verily, by Him in whose hand is Khadija’s soul, I have hope that thou wilt be the prophet of this people.” Thus Khadija believed, becoming the first follower of Muhammad’s religion.

When Muhammad told Khadija’s cousin Waraqa what had occurred, Waraqa replied, “Surely by Him in whose hand is Waraqa’s soul, thou art the prophet of this people.” To these words Waraqa added a warning: “Thou wilt be called a liar, and they will use thee despitefully and cast thee out and fight against thee” (Ibn Ishaq, 107). Thus the drama of Muhammad’s confrontation with the pagan people of Mecca was set to begin.

Muhammad’s Conflict with the Pagans of Mecca

According to the traditional Islamic sources, the Meccans—not unlike the Roman administration of Palestine in the time of Jesus—were hardly zealous in religious matters. The Romans of course had their gods, not least of which was their emperor. After the defeat of the Bar Kochba revolt in 135 CE, they erected a statue of the emperor Hadrian on the site of the Jerusalem temple. But for long stretches of time, the Roman administration allowed Jews to practice their religion. The Romans’ principal concern was the preservation of order—and tax revenues.

The Infidelity of the Quraysh

According to Islamic sources, the Quraysh, the ruling tribe of Mecca, had similar

concerns. Western scholars generally refer to the Quraysh as pagans, a Latin term (*paganus*, or “civilian,” i.e., someone who is not in the “army of Christ”) that originally referred to non-Christians. Later, it became a pejorative label for any polytheists, for which reason Western scholars took to naming pre-Islamic Meccans “pagans.” Arabic speaking Muslim scholars name them “associators” (Ar. *mushrikun*), accusing them of associating gods, or idols, with the one true God. Like Roman pagans, the Meccan pagans of Islamic tradition had multiple gods and diverse religious practices. Worshipers could introduce new gods and new practices, and they were free to

choose the gods they would worship and the practices they would follow.

In other ways, however, the story of the pagans in Mecca is unlike that of the Romans in Jerusalem. In the Jerusalem of Jesus’ day, the pagan Romans were ruling over a Jewish city. Yet Mecca in Muhammad’s day, Ibn Ishaq tells us, was—both literally and figuratively—built around a pagan shrine, the Ka’ba. It was this shrine that gave Mecca its religious prestige. Once a year, tribes from around Arabia came to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage, the Hajj, in order to venerate the idols in the Ka’ba—and to do business. As a result, the Quraysh grew ever richer.

BOX 1.1 ❖ THE HAJJ

Muslims generally consider the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, to be one of the five pillars of Islam. All able Muslims are expected to perform the Hajj at least once in their lives. The Hajj takes place every year between the seventh and twelfth days of the last month of the Islamic calendar, or Dhu al-Hijja, the “Month of the Hajj.” (Since the Islamic calendar is based on a lunar year, and not a solar year, the dates of the Hajj on the standard Gregorian calendar move back approximately eleven days each year.) Before entering Mecca, the male pilgrim puts on a simple white cloak, leaving his head uncovered (a woman is simply to remain modestly veiled); during the period of the pilgrimage, he must refrain from certain acts (from shaving to sexual activity) understood to break this state of purity. The rituals of the Hajj include (1) proceeding seven times around the Ka’ba and kissing, if possible, the black stone embedded in it; (2) processing seven times between two rocky mounds, in imitation of Hagar, who did so as she searched for water (when she was left behind in Mecca by Abraham); (3) spending an afternoon standing near a small mountain known as ‘Arafat, about fifteen miles east of Mecca; (4) casting stones at a wall (originally three pillars, joined together in 2004), which symbolizes Satan, in commemoration of Abraham’s confrontation with the devil; and (5) slaughtering an animal (usually a sheep), in imitation of Abraham, who was given an animal by God to sacrifice in the place of his son whom he was prepared to kill (according to the majority view of Muslims, not Isaac but Ishmael).

The Scottish scholar William Montgomery Watt argues that in the days of Muhammad, Mecca had become a wealthy city. The city's wealth, he maintains, was in part due to the presence of the Ka'ba. Watt reports that the area around the Ka'ba was considered a sanctuary, an inviolable refuge in which business could be conducted without fear of harassment. Watt argues additionally that the Quraysh benefited economically from the strategic location of their city, since Mecca "stood at the cross-roads of routes from the Yemen to Syria and from Abyssinia to Iraq." The Quraysh, by his telling, dominated "most of the trade from the Yemen to Syria—an important route by which the West got Indian luxury goods as well as South Arabian frankincense" (*Muhammad at Mecca*, 3). Watt adds that the privileged economic situation of the Quraysh had led them to become a crafty and money-hungry people, "skilful in the manipulation of credit," and "shrewd in their speculations" (*Muhammad at Mecca*, 3).

In fact, there is no record at all of this Meccan trade in non-Islamic sources, and Mecca is hardly the easiest land route between Yemen and Syria. (In order to get to Mecca from the coastline of the Red Sea, an arduous inland detour is necessary.) Indeed, it seems that the idea of Mecca as a trading center, and the Quraysh as a tribe of greedy merchants, is a myth developed by Islamic tradition to explain certain Qur'anic passages (notably Q 106, a Sura titled "Quraysh"). This myth was then used by Western scholars such as Watt who were eager to find social and cultural factors to explain the emergence of Islam.

Maxime Rodinson argues that the caravan trade had enriched the nomadic Bedouins, who began to settle in cities, notably Mecca. Their riches, and the comforts of settled life, soon led them to forget their old tribal values. A moral crisis ensued, as some began searching for new, more universal values: "The poor, the young and the honest were suffering from upstart arrogance. There was a vague feeling that the old tribal principles, which might have been invoked to prevent it, were somehow out of date" (Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 36). To Rodinson, this vague feeling lies behind the rise of Islam in Mecca.

But if there was so much trade going on in Mecca before Islam, it is amazing that the Islamic sources have essentially *nothing* to say about Meccan trade after the city became Islamic. Watt speculates that Islamic rules against usury "stopped the old lucrative speculations in high finance" (*Muhammad at Medina*, 76), but one wonders why trade continued in other Islamic cities. Indeed, as Francis Peters correctly notes, the only problem with the idea of Mecca as a major trading center is that "it happens not to be true" (Peters, *Jesus and Muhammad*, 59.)

For their part, the Islamic sources attribute the rise of Islam not to any "vague feeling" but to God. Nevertheless, they still emphasize the Meccans' involvement in trade. The idea of the Quraysh as a tribe of greedy traders presumably lies behind the report that on several occasions they sought to pay Muhammad to keep quiet. Muhammad, however, would not betray his cause, declaring at one point: "If they put the sun in my right hand and

the moon in my left on the condition that I abandoned this course, until God has made it victorious, or I perish therein, I would not abandon it” (Ibn Ishaq, 119).

In most accounts of the Quraysh’s opposition to Muhammad, however, the issue is not Meccan trade but Meccan pride. Jerusalem, after all, was a foreign city to the Romans stationed there, but the pagans of Mecca were in their native city. Muhammad was one of their own, and he was insulting the religion of their fathers.

Accordingly, when Muhammad began preaching Islam, a group of the Quraysh complained to his uncle, Abu Talib, declaring: “Your nephew has cursed our gods, insulted our religion, mocked our way of life and accused our forefathers of error!” (Ibn Ishaq, 119). On a second occasion they came to Abu Talib and complained, “By God, we cannot endure that our fathers should be reviled” (Ibn Ishaq, 119). For its part, the Qur’an condemns the unbelievers’ attachment to the religion of their fathers: “And when it is said to them, ‘Follow what God has sent down,’ they say, ‘No; but we will follow such things as we found our fathers doing.’ What? And if their fathers had no understanding of anything, and if they were not guided?” (Q 2:170).

The standoff continued for some time. Most of the Quraysh refused to accept Islam, and Muhammad continued to malign their religion. Eventually the Quraysh sought to attack him. On one occasion, they threatened him and seized his robe in front of the Ka’ba, but Muhammad’s friend Abu Bakr intervened and saved him. On another occasion,

Muhammad’s fiercest opponent, Abu Jahl, approached the Prophet with a stone in order to attack him, but he was confronted with a vision of a terrible camel. “He made as though he would eat me,” Abu Jahl later explained (Ibn Ishaq, 135).

The Quraysh also began to persecute Muhammad’s growing number of followers. According to one report, Umar, who would later become a Muslim (and the second caliph), beat one of his slave girls who had become a Muslim until he could hit her no more. “I have only stopped beating you because I am tired,” he said. “May God treat you in the same way,” she replied.

Eventually Muhammad became so distraught at the persecution of his followers that he decided to send some of them to the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia across the Red Sea, where they were welcomed and given protection. Most traditions put this event in the fifth or sixth year of Muhammad’s ministry (ca. 614–15 CE).

The Quraysh, Islamic tradition tells us, responded by sending two men of their own to the Ethiopian king, in order to deprive Muhammad’s followers of this refuge. They lavished gifts upon the Ethiopians and asked the king to hand over the Muslims to them. The king, however, insisted on hearing about the Muslims’ new religion first. In response, one of the Muslims (a son of Abu Talib named Ja’far) explained Islam briefly and then read a passage from the Qur’an. The Christian king stood up and proclaimed: “Of a truth, this and what Jesus brought have come from the same niche. You two may go, for by God, I will never

give them up to them and they shall not be betrayed” (Ibn Ishaq, 152). Although nothing is said of this incident in Ethiopian tradition, Islamic tradition recounts that the Muslims remained peacefully in Ethiopia and that the king himself became a Muslim before he died.

The Satanic Verses

Nevertheless, Muhammad’s conflict with the pagans in Mecca continued. When the Quraysh perceived Muhammad’s power growing, they signed a pact to boycott the two clans with the largest numbers of Muslims. Muhammad cursed the man who wrote the pact, and his fingers miraculously withered, but the Quraysh enforced the boycott (which included abstaining from business and marriages) nevertheless.

They also began to confront Muhammad publicly. On one occasion, a member of the pagan Quraysh took out an old bone, crushed it, and blew it in pieces before Muhammad’s face in order to ridicule the idea (preached by Muhammad) of the resurrection of the body. The pagan declared: “Do you allege that God can revivify this after it has decayed?” Muhammad replied, “Yes I do say that. God will raise it and you, after you have become like this. Then God will send you to Hell” (Ibn Ishaq, 165).

It was this state of affairs, so the classical Islamic sources tell us, that led to the proclamation of the satanic verses. Muhammad had grown increasingly depressed by the hard-heartedness of the Quraysh—his own people—and he meditated often on how he

might convince them to accept Islam. He was in this state of longing when God revealed the first part of chapter 53 in the Qur’an, up to the verses (19-20) that mention the pagan goddesses of the Meccans: “Have you considered El-Lat and El-‘Uzza, * and Manat the third, the other?”

However, Satan too was meditating, and this was the moment he chose to act, whispering to the Prophet a false revelation: “These are the exalted cranes, whose intercession is approved.” The Quraysh heard the Prophet praise their goddesses and bowed down in prostration with the Muslims. But the angel Gabriel intervened, declaring to the Prophet, “What have you done, Muhammad?” (Ibn Ishaq, 166). Muhammad realized his mistake and repented. He retracted the message that had come from Satan, and God gave him new verses in its place.

A Heavenly and an Earthly Journey

Indeed, if Satan was prowling about looking for ways to seduce Muhammad, God was constantly finding ways to support him. This support frequently took the form of miracles. When a man named Rukana, famed among the Quraysh for his strength, expressed his doubt in Muhammad’s claims, the Prophet challenged him to a wrestling match (Ibn Ishaq, 178). Muhammad promptly threw him to the ground. Rukana was amazed, and Muhammad added, “I can show you something more wonderful than that if you wish.” At this the

Prophet called out to a tree, which traveled across the earth and planted itself before him.

The Prophet's Journey to Heaven

Another, more famous, miracle story has the Prophet himself travel on a miraculous “night journey” to Jerusalem. Ibn Ishaq quotes a number of versions of this miracle. According to one of them, the Prophet was sleeping next to the Ka‘ba one night when the angel Gabriel stirred him with his foot three times. Muhammad stood up and saw “a white animal, half mule, half donkey, with wings on its sides” (Ibn Ishaq, 182). Muhammad mounted this animal, named Buraq, and flew to Jerusalem on its back, with Gabriel accompanying. In Jerusalem, Muhammad met Abraham, Moses, Jesus (“a reddish man with many freckles on his face as though he had just come from a bath”; 184), and other prophets. He led them in prayer and then returned to Mecca. However, a second tradition, attributed to the Prophet’s beloved wife ‘A’isha, relates that the Prophet indeed traveled to Jerusalem, but only in spirit.

According to still other accounts, the Prophet’s business that night did not end in Jerusalem. One tradition relates that while Muhammad was in Jerusalem, a ladder was brought to him. He climbed up it with the angel Gabriel until he reached the entrance of heaven. At the entrance of heaven, he saw a man who would not smile. This, Gabriel explained, is Malik, the keeper of hell. Muhammad had Gabriel ask Malik to open the cover to hell. Muhammad recounts what happened when

Malik did so: “The flames blazed high into the air until I thought that they would consume everything. So I asked Gabriel to order him to send them back to their place which he did” (Ibn Ishaq, 185).

Thereafter, Muhammad began to climb up through the various levels of heaven. On the first level, he saw Adam, who was reviewing souls, his offspring all, passing by him. According to a tradition in Bukhari, the Prophet saw Adam looking right and laughing and looking left and weeping. Muhammad asked Gabriel to explain why Adam was acting this way, and the angel replied: “Those on his right are the people of Paradise and those on his left are the people of Hell and when he looks towards his right he laughs and when he looks towards his left he weeps” (Bukhari, 1:345).

On the second level, Muhammad met Jesus and John the son of Zechariah (John the Baptist of Christian tradition). On the third level, he met Joseph, and on the fourth a Prophet named Idris. On the fifth level, he met Aaron, and on the sixth level Moses (“a dark man with a hooked nose”). Finally, he arrived at the seventh heaven, where he met Abraham.

According to one version of this story, Muhammad also met God Himself in the seventh heaven, who imposed on him the requirement of fifty prayers a day. On Muhammad’s way down from the seventh heaven, however, Moses stopped him and, after learning how many prayers he had been commanded to perform, explained: “Prayer is a weighty matter and your people are weak, so go back to

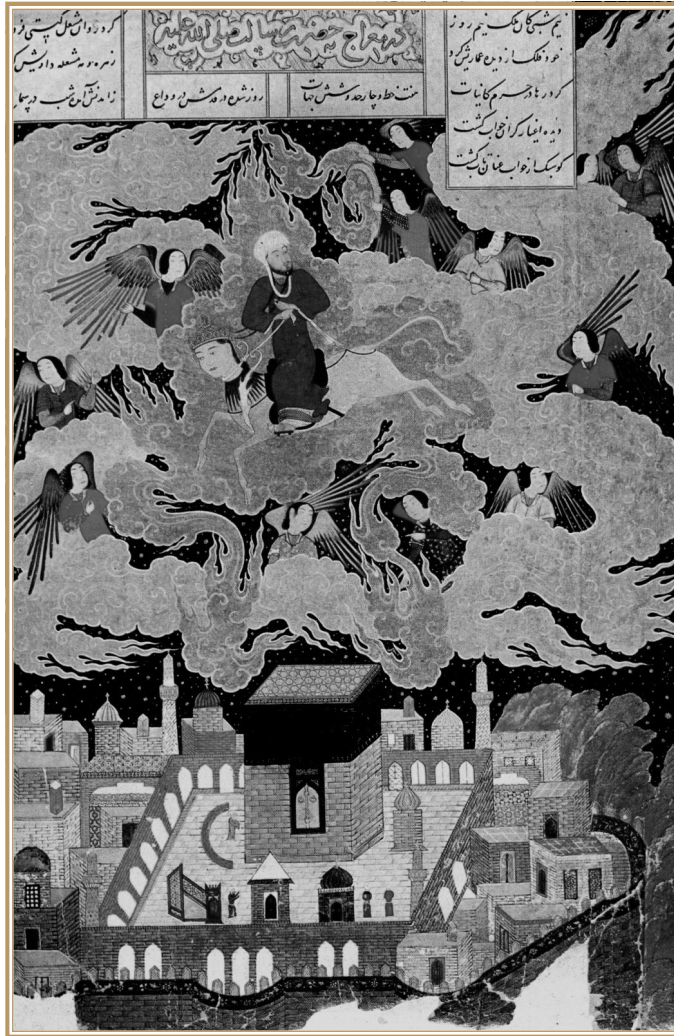


FIGURE I.4. A late-fifteenth-century painting by Nezami of the Prophet Muhammad on the heavenly mount Buraq, flying above Mecca toward Jerusalem on his night journey.

your Lord and ask Him to reduce the number for you and your community” (Ibn Ishaq, 186). Muhammad went back to God, and God removed ten prayers, but Moses insisted that forty was still too many. Again and again, Muhammad went between God and Moses,

until the number of prayers had reached five. Moses urged him to ask for a further reduction, but Muhammad refused to do so. He later explained to his followers that whoever prays the five prayers “in faith and trust will have the reward of fifty prayers” (Ibn Ishaq, 187).

The Prophet's Journey to Medina

Back in Mecca, the Prophet began to look for allies in his struggle against the pagan Quraysh, and he would soon find them in a city to the north named Yathrib. Watt reports that Yathrib—usually described as a settlement built around the cultivation of date palms—suffered from overpopulation. This overpopulation had led the city into “a malaise as serious as that of Mecca” (*Muhammad at Mecca*, 142). Watt’s interpretation finds little clear support in the Islamic sources, and appears (as with his interpretation of the situation in Mecca) principally to be the product of his imagination.

For their part, the Islamic sources tell us that the problem in the Yathrib was a long, and at times bloody, conflict between the two principal Arab clans in the settlement. Muhammad was to provide the solution. Members of both clans had heard of his preaching in Mecca. Some of them, on both sides, converted to Islam and looked to Muhammad to resolve their conflict.

Thus the traditional sources relate that (in what would be the year 621) twelve Arabs of Yathrib (presumably a symbolic number, like the twelve apostles of Jesus) met with Muhammad during an annual trading fair at a site outside of Mecca named Aqaba. There they pledged their loyalty to the Prophet. In the following year, seventy-two Arabs of Yathrib met with Muhammad at Aqaba, swearing now to protect him, even in battle: “By Him Who sent you with the truth we will protect you as we protect our women. We give our allegiance and we are men of war possessing arms which

have been passed on from father to son” (Ibn Ishaq, 203).

Thus Muhammad made up his mind to leave Mecca and to pursue his destiny in Yathrib, soon to be known as *madinat al-nabi* (“The City of the Prophet”), or simply, Medina. Those Muslims who moved to Medina with the Prophet would be known in Islamic tradition as *muhajirun* (“the migrants”); those Medinans who joined Muhammad’s religion would be known as the *ansar* (“the helpers”). The Islamic sources have precious little to say about the resolution of the earlier conflict between the two clans in the settlement—they imply that all of the Arabs were almost immediately unified under the banner of Islam.

The sources say that Muhammad had his followers leave for Medina before him, and that the pagan Quraysh let them go freely. Watt suggests that the Quraysh were happy to see the troublesome Muslims leave (although one wonders why the Quraysh once attempted to impede the Muslims’ emigration to Ethiopia). Muhammad was one of the last to make the journey, which he arranged to do with his friend Abu Bakr. The only Muslims they would leave behind were Abu Bakr’s family and Muhammad’s cousin ‘Ali, the son of Abu Talib.

Before Muhammad left on his emigration (Ar. *hijra*), he became aware of a Quraysh plot to kill him. They planned—not unlike the assassins of Julius Caesar—to have one man from each clan stab him in his sleep, believing that thereby they would all be safe from vengeance (since Muhammad’s followers would not be able to seek revenge from all of

the clans). But the angel Gabriel warned the Prophet of their plot. Muhammad thus had ‘Ali lay down in his bed on the night of the attack, while he escaped to the desert. According to Tabari (6:144), when the Quraysh found ‘Ali they were furious but eventually let him go unharmed.

Meanwhile, Muhammad, accompanied by Abu Bakr, is said to have departed to a cave south of Mecca (in the opposite direction from Medina), on a mountain named Thawr. There they remained for three days. However, Ibn Ishaq’s description of their stay in the cave hardly inspires confidence in its authenticity. He tells us that Abu Bakr instructed his son to come up to the cave every night to relay news from Mecca, and his daughter to come up to the cave with food. If these visits would not have been enough to give away their hideout, presumably Abu Bakr’s instructions to a servant to bring his entire flock to the cave at night would have done the job. But the traditional narrative insists that the pagan Quraysh were confounded in their attempts to find Muhammad. Thus the Prophet and Abu Bakr proceeded to Medina, and ‘Ali joined them three days later.

As the young Muslim community settled into a new city, a second dramatic development was about to take place. Just before the *hijra*, Muhammad received a revelation from God permitting him to unsheathe his sword. God told him: “Fight [the unbelievers] until there is no more disorder and the religion is God’s alone” (Q 2:193a, my translation). The conflict between Muhammad and Quraysh was soon to be a bloody one.

Muhammad in Mecca and Historical Research

How much of this story told above—based primarily on the traditional biography of Ibn Ishaq—can be considered historically reliable? This is a difficult question to address, and one we will return to in part 2 of this work. For now, we should note that we know of these events only from Islamic sources such as Ibn Ishaq. No pagan, Jewish, or Christian authors who lived at the same time as Muhammad mention them (or him) at all. This does not mean, of course, that the story is entirely legendary. Indeed, if there are no non-Islamic sources that confirm this story, there are also none that contradict it, and much of the account of Muhammad in Mecca could very well have taken place as Ibn Ishaq describes it.

Yet in order to arrive at a closer estimation of the reliability of the traditional story, we must appreciate the nature of the Islamic sources. All of these sources (other than the Qur’an) date well after the emergence of Islam. Some of the accounts they relate include fantastic supernatural anecdotes, such as the account of a tree obediently coming forward at the Prophet’s call. Other accounts seem simply impractical—as when Muhammad and Abu Bakr successfully escape notice in a cave even though various people and animals visited them regularly.

Finally, the Islamic sources often include contradictory versions of the same account. As we saw, Ibn Ishaq describes Muhammad’s physical night journey to Jerusalem but then quotes a tradition in which ‘A’isha insists that

he journeyed only in spirit. In a further tradition (found in Bukhari), we find that the night journey skips Jerusalem entirely. Here it is combined with the story of the washing of Muhammad's heart, and Muhammad travels directly from Mecca to heaven: "While I was at Mecca the roof of my house was opened and Gabriel descended, opened my chest, and washed it with zam-zam water. Then he brought a golden tray full of wisdom and faith and having poured its contents into my chest, he closed it. Then he took my hand and ascended with me to the nearest heaven" (Bukhari, 1:345).

In brief, it is difficult to know how much the traditional narrative of Muhammad in Mecca tells us about the Muhammad of history. But it does teach us two important lessons about the Muhammad in whom Muslims believe: First, Muhammad did not found a new religion but rather preached anew the very religion that Abraham, Moses, and Jesus preached before him; second, Muhammad and his followers, not unlike the Israelites in Egypt, suffered abuse and persecution in Mecca. Their state of affairs, however, was soon to change dramatically.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 Describe the traditional Islamic portrayal of pre-Islamic Mecca. What role does this portrayal have in the biography of the prophet Muhammad?
- 2 Who were Bahira and Waraqa? What function do they have in the biography of the Prophet?
- 3 What is the symbolic importance of the story of Muhammad's night journey and ascent to heaven?
- 4 What are the principal differences between the two stories of emigration (the first to Ethiopia; the second to Yathrib/Medina)?