

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88607-9 - The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad

Edited by Jonathan E. Brockopp

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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Muḥammad is the world's most popular name for boys. The king of Morocco, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the president of Egypt are all named Muḥammad, and when the famous boxer Cassius Clay became a Muslim, he was given the name Muhammad Ali. If there is a Muslim family in the world that does not have a brother, grandfather, or uncle named Muḥammad, they almost certainly have a relative who has been given one of the Prophet's other names: Muṣṭafā', Aḥmad, or al-Amīn. One also finds the names Muḥammadī ("Muḥammad like") and Muḥammadayn ("double Muḥammad"). These habits of naming are indicative of a popular devotion to the Prophet that enhances, and in some cases overwhelms, the historical limits of the man who died more than fourteen centuries ago.

The fact of this devotion should not surprise. The popular veneration of Muḥammad is quite similar to that offered to Jesus, the Buddha, and countless other religious figures around the world. Yet time and again – whether in reaction to Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* or to cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* – Muslims' reactions in defense of their prophet have caught non-Muslims off guard. There are many reasons for this gap in understanding, but three concern me here. First, although Jesus and the Buddha have overwhelmingly positive reputations in contemporary Western civilization, that of Muḥammad is decidedly more mixed. Second, many readers are simply unaware of the breadth and depth of devotion to Muḥammad in Muslim societies as evidenced in the riches of Persian literary traditions, rituals surrounding the celebration of his birthday, modern poetry, music festivals, and more. But the third, and perhaps most important, reason for this misunderstanding has to do with the unique role of the Prophet Muḥammad in Islamic religious history.

Muḥammad is much more than a man who died more than 1,400 years ago; he is the central animating figure of the Islamic tradition. He is imitated in virtually every act of ritual, leadership, devotion to

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God, morality, and public comportment. Muslims pray in just the way that Muḥammad did, and the Ṣūfī quest for unity with God is based on Muḥammad's own journey to heaven. Some Muslim men seek to dress and wear their hair as the Prophet did, and some Muslim women seek to dress as did his wives. To carry out these actions, Muslims study the life of their prophet to perfect their own religious practice. But every act of reading is also one of interpretation, and imitation is no rote repetition but a creative adaptation to current circumstances. We could even say that Muslims continue to define Muḥammad as they reread and apply the events of his life to their own time and place.

It is fair to suggest that Muḥammad would be amazed at the Islam of today. He was an Arab and perceived of himself as a prophet to the Arabs, yet less than a fifth of the world's Muslims speak Arabic today. Muslim rituals and practices, from Indonesia to the Americas, incorporate tradition and modernity in an almost-bewildering variety. Yet almost all Muslims use some Arabic phrases in prayer, including recitation of the Qur'ān in its original language, though they may not understand the meaning of the words. Further, scholars of Muslim history must master the Qur'ān and the earliest Islamic literary sources, all of which are written in Arabic. To learn about Muḥammad, then, first requires an imaginary journey into the time and space of Arabia some fourteen centuries ago.

Muḥammad was born, lived, and died in Arabia, or more specifically, in the part of western Arabia we call the Ḥijāz. This is a strip of mountains with a coastal plain that parallels the Red Sea and receives a small amount of rainfall (about four inches) each year, just enough to support small animal herds and, in the lowland oases and the highland plateaus, some agriculture. Archeological evidence tells us of lively cultural centers in the south and north of the Arabian Peninsula, but we still have much to learn about the area where Muḥammad was born. His hometown of Mecca was probably an important trading town, with a religious cult centering on the Ka'ba, a shrine that would later become the physical center of Islam. Caravans of camels were apparently organized both north to Syria and south to Yemen, as well as east to Iraq, but local trade was probably also important.

The religious world of the Ḥijāz likely reflected that of the surrounding regions, where local traditions lived side by side with various forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. What little we know about these local traditions, often called paganism or polytheism, comes largely from later Islamic sources. These inform us that Meccans venerated many different gods and goddesses, some of them representing qualities of strength or of fate, whereas others represented natural forces.



Map 1. Map of the Arabian Peninsula, showing the location of Mecca and Medina.

The name Allāh was known to them, however, as that of a high god who had especial control of weather and ships at sea (Q 29:63–5; 31:31–2). As for other religions, it must be recalled that Arabia was quite distant from the centers of those cults, and that Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism were all undergoing significant shifts in their identity during this period. Therefore, the adherents of those traditions, who made their way to the Ḥijāz for one reason or another, may have had beliefs and practices quite different from what we might normally associate with the versions of those religions that have been transmitted to us.

#### THE LIFE OF MUḤAMMAD

Just as we depend on internal sources for our knowledge of early Christianity and Buddhism, so also we are entirely dependent on Islamic sources for Muḥammad's own history, especially the most significant events of his life. These tell us that Muḥammad was born to 'Abd Allāh

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and Āmina, perhaps in the year 570 CE. Most biographers emphasize the miraculous events associated with his conception and birth, such as the appearance of a mystical light on his father's brow before conception and the emerging of this light from Āmina's womb. Further signs of his calling are recorded in his childhood, including a visitation from angels who split open his breast to remove from it the black spot of sin. These are some of the hints that this man had already been chosen by God to be his special servant and to receive the Qur'ān, the last of God's revelations to humankind. Before that moment, however, Muḥammad lived in Mecca, and like many inhabitants of that town, he was involved with organizing caravans. For a time he worked for a wealthy widow named Khadija, and his industriousness caught her eye; they were married and started a family together. So life was quite ordinary when, at the age of forty (in 610 CE), Muḥammad began meditating in a cave high in the hills outside of Mecca.

During these meditations, he was overwhelmed by a vision of the angel Gabriel commanding him, "Recite!" This event changed his life forever, and he began, slowly, to understand that God had chosen him for a special mission. From that point forward, Muḥammad's life would be caught up with the persistent, at times unpredictable, appearance of revelations from God, revelations that would eventually be gathered together to make up the Qur'ān.

Muḥammad's life is, in many ways, inseparable from that of the Qur'ān. Just as the Qur'ān is traditionally divided into Meccan and Medinan phases, so also Muḥammad's life may usefully be separated into two periods: the first from 610 to 622, from the time he first received revelation until his flight (*hijra*) from Mecca to Yathrib (later called Medina), and the second from 622 until his death in 632. This break is significant in many ways and is marked by the fact that Muslims begin their calendar in 622, the year that the new Muslim community was founded in Yathrib.

In terms of the Qur'ān, the Meccan and Medinan phases mark a difference in language, content, and style. For example, a typical seven-verse sample (Q 80:17–23) from the Meccan period reads like this:

May humankind perish! How ungrateful!  
 Of what things did He create them?  
 Of a drop of fluid  
 He created them, and determined them,  
 then He made the path easy for them,  
 then makes them to die, and buries them,  
 then, when He wills, He raises them.

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In pithy language, the Qur'ān reprimands humankind for being ingrates. The audience for these short verses is universal, and the scope reaches from conception to resurrection; further, the Arabic is punctuated with rhythmic language and rhymes. In contrast, here are three verses (Q 2:183–5) typical of the Medinan period:

O you who believe! The Fast is prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those who were before you – perhaps you will be aware!

Days numbered – but if anyone is sick, or on a journey, then a number of other days, and for those who are able to fast, a redemption by feeding a poor person. But those who willingly do the better, so it is better for them, and should you fast it is better for you, if you only knew.

The month of Ramaḍān, in which the Qur'ān was sent down as a guidance to people, and as clear signs of guidance and salvation. So those of you who witness the month should fast it. As for the one who is sick, or on a journey, then a number of other days. God desires ease for you, not hardship; and that you complete the number, and magnify God according to that to which He has guided you, perhaps you will be grateful.

In these Medinan verses the scope is narrower. Instead of all humankind, a specific group of believers is addressed and given the task of fasting. Whereas the Meccan verses invoke the natural world and speak of its ultimate end in apocalyptic terms, the Medinan verses are often interested in providing a community with order and rules. What ties them together is the command to remember God's activities (e.g., creation, revelation) and to be grateful for them. This is only one example of the complex relationship between the two styles of writing, but the distinctions here form a striking parallel to the stories we have of the Prophet. During the Meccan period, we are told that the Prophet was caught up in an adversarial relationship with the population of Mecca, which largely rejected his preaching. The strong exclamations in the first excerpt seem especially suited to this crowd. In contrast, the Prophet found a receptive community in Medina, one that needed to differentiate itself from surrounding communities of Jews, pagans, and, outside of Medina, Christians.

To some Western scholars, the relationship between the Qur'ān and Muḥammad seems too convenient, as if stories of the Prophet's life were designed to explain differences found in the Qur'ān. For the Meccan period, the problem is complicated by the fact that the Qur'ān is the only

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writing we possess that derives from that period. All the rest – histories of the period, biographies of the Prophet, interpretation of the Qurʾān – was written down long after the Arab conquest of the Sassanid empire and the southern half of the Byzantine Empire (632–645 CE) and certainly after Muḥammad’s successes in Medina. As several contributors to this volume point out, Muḥammad’s doubts in his early mission (as described in the Qurʾān) were hard to understand given the almost-unbelievable expansion of Islam after his death. Although some histories dutifully record the Prophet’s despair, others gloss over those weak moments in favor of a more triumphant picture, one that fits better with his ultimate success.

Nonetheless, all the sources agree on this basic outline of events: After his first experience of receiving the revelation, Muḥammad took three years before he began preaching publicly. During that time, he discussed these incidents with his wife, Khadīja, who helped him understand the nature of the supernatural events. All agree that she was the first to believe in his mission, though there is a significant dispute about who among the men was first: his cousin and eventual son-in-law ‘Alī, his freedman Zayd b. Ḥāritha, his friend Abū Bakr, or several others. The members of this intimate circle are worth noting, especially his wife, Khadīja; his daughter, Fāṭima; his cousin, ‘Alī; and his friend Abū Bakr, as their examples are precedent setting for Muslims, and their names are often mentioned in this volume. But it is also worth noting that this close circle did not include his influential uncles, though the precise role of Abū Ṭālib, Muḥammad’s protector after his father and grandfather died, is disputed. Abū Ṭālib did, however, continue to extend his protection to Muḥammad, even after his nephew (Muḥammad) and son (‘Alī) rejected the religion of their fathers.

One may wonder, however, to what extent either Muḥammad or the earliest sūras of the Qurʾān demanded a rejection of pre-Islamic religious practices. After all, the verses quoted herein demand that “He” has ultimate authority over life and death but do not explicitly deny the existence of other divine powers. (In contrast, later sūras of the Qurʾān are quite clear in their rejection of polytheism or, in the language of the Qurʾān, of “ascribing partners to God.”) One indication that Muḥammad may have sought reconciliation early in his career is the event now known as the Satanic Verses. The story, as told to us by the historian Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922–923<sup>1</sup>), goes that Muḥammad

<sup>1</sup> In the field of Islamic studies, it is common to use “double dating.” The first year refers to the Muslim calendar, which begins with the Prophet’s flight (or *hijra*) from Mecca

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wished so fervently for reconciliation with the religion of his forebears that when Satan whispered false verses in his ears, he mistook them for true revelation.

Whether true or not, the story points to an increasing animosity between Muḥammad and his Meccan audience, an animosity discussed at length by Walid A. Saleh in Chapter 1 and illustrated by an emigration of some of Muḥammad's followers from Mecca to the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia and by a boycott against Muḥammad's clan. Tradition has also preserved many stories of both Muḥammad's and his followers' suffering, especially after the deaths of Abū Ṭālib and Khadija in 619.

With the loss of his protectors, Muḥammad was openly mocked in Mecca and forced to look outside the town for support. Numerous verses in the Qur'ān, said to come from this period, seem to console Muḥammad, encouraging him to be patient. This is also the time when most sources say that this verse (Q 17:1) was revealed:

Glory be to Him who transported His servant by night from  
the sacred mosque to the farthest mosque, which We have sur-  
rounded with blessing, in order to show him one of Our signs.

This verse, of especial importance to Sūfīs, is the scriptural basis for Muḥammad's Night Journey, in which God transported him to Jerusalem. This event is often combined with the *mi'raj*, Muḥammad's ascent into heaven, where he spoke with God face-to-face. Early historians disagreed on when, precisely, these trips occurred, but their connection to a period of persecution is psychologically satisfying: in Muḥammad's time of trouble, God granted him a vision that marked his special place among the prophets.

## MUḤAMMAD IN MEDINA

Eventually, Muḥammad left Mecca, negotiating safe passage for him and for his followers to the oasis of Yathrib, some two hundred miles to the north. This *hijra*, the emigration of Muslims from Mecca to Yathrib in 622, was a turning point for the early community. Yathrib would come to be known as Medina (Ar. *madīnat al-nabī*, "the city of the Prophet"), and there hundreds converted to the new religion; when the Prophet died there in 632, he left behind thousands of believers.

We know much more about Muḥammad's ten years in Medina than about his time in Mecca. In addition to the Qur'ān, we have the accounts

to Medina; it is sometimes marked by the symbol AH (*anno hegira*). The second date refers to the Common or Christian Era (CE).

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transmitted by his ever-increasing cohort of followers. It is also worth noting, however, that although the key events of Mecca were interior (Muḥammad's first revelations, his response to his mission and to the Meccan resistance, his Night Journey), the key events of Medina were public (community organization, several significant battles, and many minor raids). Public events not only have more witnesses but also conform to known patterns of human social behavior. Medina was also home to a diverse community of social and religious groups, and Muḥammad's increasing stature brought him into negotiations with even more such groups in the surrounding territory. As a result, we often have competing accounts of single events, thus reflecting the different interests of those groups.

Unlike Mecca, Medina did not have a single town center but rather a variety of settlements strewn across an area of some twenty square miles. As Michael Lecker discusses in Chapter 3, we know a good deal about who occupied which areas of land because of recorded disputes over prestige (in providing land for the Prophet, for example) and other sources, such as histories of Medina, that do not belong to the traditional biographical literature. From these accounts we know that Medina had two key Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, which were split into a number of clans. In addition, there were other tribal groups in the oasis, including several Jewish tribes; they were Arabic speakers and fully integrated into the political and economic life of the oasis, but we know little of their precise religious practices or of what contact, if any, they had with the larger Jewish communities of Palestine and Iraq.

Ostensibly, Muḥammad's arrival (traditionally on the twelfth of Rabī' al-Awwal, year 1 of the *hijra* [September 24, 622]), was meant to provide some central leadership to the various warring elements of the oasis. That he did, but he also brought along a further division, one that would prove decisive for Medina's future. From Mecca, Muḥammad was accompanied by numerous followers (known as *muhājirūn*, "those who had undertaken the *hijra*"), all of whom were believers in his message. These were largely settled among the Medinan believers of the Aws and Khazraj tribes, a group sensibly known as the helpers (Ar. *anṣār*). Although the *muhājirūn* and the *anṣār* were united in faith, they were divided by tribal and other loyalties. The negotiation of those loyalties, and the relationship of the believers with the other inhabitants of Medina, is the subject of a curious document that Western historians have dubbed the Constitution of Medina (see the appendix to Chapter 3).

The Medinan verses of the Qur'ān give us an insight into the social complexity of this community. There are lengthy disputes with Jews



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and Christians, collectively known as the People of the Book (Ar. *ahl al-kitāb*), on theological matters, ranging from the nature of God to the nature of Jesus. There is extensive regulation of family matters: marriage, divorce, manumission of slaves, and treatment of children. There are descriptions of ritual cleansing, exhortations to pray and remember God, and rules of warfare. These last have received a good deal of attention, and rightfully so, as the transformation of *jihād* (from struggling against persecution in Mecca to taking up arms in Medina) coincides with the establishment of the community in Medina.

It is clear that the *hijra* from Mecca to Medina did not end the hostile relations between Muḥammad and his hometown. The Battle of Badr (2/624) is the most important of these early skirmishes. While trying to raid a Meccan caravan, Muḥammad and about three hundred of his followers ran into a larger Meccan military force instead. The Muslims decided to stay their ground and fight, surprisingly winning the day. The event is celebrated in the Qurʾān, with God reminding the Muslims that He was behind their victory. Curiously, this animosity with the Meccans roughly coincides with a change in the prescribed prayer direction, one that put Mecca, not Jerusalem, at the center of the Muslim world. At the same time, verses are revealed that incorporate certain pre-Islamic practices, such as the pilgrimage to Mecca, into Islamic worship. In these ways, Islam was further differentiated from the practices of Jews and Christians.

The battles with the Meccans continued; some of these were barely survived by the Muslims (Uḥud in 3/625), and others were a draw (Battle of the Trench in 5/627). During this period, Muḥammad perceived the Jewish tribes in Medina to be a threat – they did not support his policies of war and refused to succumb to Muḥammad’s leadership. He banished one tribe after another, finally besieging the last significant tribe, the Qurayza, after the Battle of the Trench. In a brutal judgment, several hundred men of the tribe were executed and the women and children were enslaved. That this was a political and not a purely religious persecution seems evident from the fact that other, smaller groups of Jews remained in Medina.

The Battle of the Trench proved a turning point, emboldening Muḥammad to expand his influence among the Bedouin tribes to the north of Medina. In the year 6/628, he concluded the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyya with the Meccans, allowing Medinans to perform the pilgrimage rites in Mecca without fear of reprisals. Muḥammad then undertook the first two conquests of his career: Khaybar (7/629) and Mecca (8/630). Khaybar was a rich oasis largely inhabited by Jews, and

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Muḥammad's negotiation of that conquest (in which Jews would maintain their rights to their lives, religious practices, and land in exchange for recognizing Muslim authority) was a key precedent for the conquest of Byzantine and Sassanid territory after his death. At the conquest of Mecca, Muḥammad explicitly forbade his followers from killing any Meccans who stayed in their homes; the historian Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) records that only four Meccans were killed.

In the last three years of his life, Muḥammad devoted himself to consolidating his control over central Arabia through diplomacy and warfare. Having seen his rise to power, many surrounding leaders were anxious to curry his favor, sending emissaries to Medina. Muḥammad also led a sizable military force (our sources say thirty thousand men) to the Byzantine border town of Tabūk. The battle was not decisive, however, and it would not be until after Muḥammad's death that Muslim forces would successfully defeat a contingent of the Byzantine army. It is possible, however, to overestimate the extent of Muḥammad's influence in Arabia. Even up to his death there remained significant opposition to his rule both within Medina and without.

In the year 10/632, Muḥammad undertook his "farewell pilgrimage," accounts of which have been preserved by his Companions. His death a few months later was devastating to this early community. The believers were dismayed, and many left the new faith to return to their old ways. Eventually, leadership was unified under one of Muḥammad's close Companions, Abū Bakr, who was called a caliph, a deputy or a follower, of the Prophet. Abū Bakr was an old man, however, and at his death two years later, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, another early Companion of the Prophet, but one with more ambition, took over leadership of the community. It was under 'Umar and his successors that the conquests of surrounding territory began in earnest. Within a few decades, two of the world's major empires, the Byzantine and the Persian, would lose much of their territory to this new Arab-Islamic movement, a movement that gained strength with every successful conquest.

This early movement also survived enormous challenges. Numerous groups rejected the authority of the caliphs, including the partisans (Ar. *shī'a*) of 'Alī, who believed that leadership of the community should remain within the Prophet's own family. Significant civil wars were fought in 656, 660, and 680. Perhaps even more surprising is that this movement maintained a separate identity and did not lose itself among the powerful cultural influences of the major world empires it conquered. After all, empires do not disappear overnight, and neither were the early conquests missions of wanton destruction. Tax structures, bureaucracies, and property ownership were all maintained as they were found,