



WHAT EVERY
CHRISTIAN
NEEDS TO KNOW
ABOUT THE
QUR'AN



JAMES R.
WHITE



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Contents

- Introduction: Why Study the Qur'an? 9
1. The Qur'an and Muhammad of Mecca 19
 2. The Qur'an: A Brief Introduction 51
 3. Allah: *Tawhid*, *Shirk*, the *Mithaq* and the *Fitra* 59
 4. "Say Not Three": The Qur'an and the Trinity 75
 5. Jesus in the Qur'an 105
 6. The Qur'an and the Cross 129
 7. The Scales: Salvation in the Qur'an 145
 8. Did the "People of the Book" Corrupt the Gospel? 165
 9. Prophecies of Muhammad in the Bible 193
 10. The Perfection of the Qur'an? Parallels and Sources 217
 11. The Perfection of the Qur'an? Transmission and Text 249

Contents

Conclusion	283
Bibliography	289
Glossary	293
Biblical Reference Index	303
Qur'an Reference Index	309
Subject Index	313
About the Author	000

Introduction

Why Study the Qur'an?

The Qur'an is the kalaam of Allah, not created, and whoever states that it is created is a disbeliever.

Imam Malik was asked concerning one who says the Qur'an is created, what should be done to him? He replied, "He should be forced to repent, and if he refuses, then his head should be cut off!"¹

Why would a believing Christian write a book about the Qur'an? If he does, why should believing Christians read it? Shouldn't we go to the Muslims to learn about their own sacred book?

In answering, I hope to encourage you to press forward through this book with a desire to understand and to make application. First, a response to these questions, and then a word to the two audiences I have in mind as I write.

In the three decades during which I have been involved in Christian ministry, I have studied a number of religious movements

that are in direct contradiction to and in conflict with my own faith. I learned as a young person that the single best way to honor the truth and to show honor to those you seek to reach is to “hear them in their own language,” that is, to enter into their worldview and their theology. I have done this primarily through first reading their own works (not just resources directed to outsiders, but more important, those written for internal consumption) and listening to sermons and lectures designed for their fellow believers.

There is no substitute for original sources, to be sure. But haven't I now argued *against* reading this book by a Christian about the Muslim holy book?

The reality is that there are areas—one being Islam in general and the Qur'an in particular—in which the literature is so vast, and the terminology gap so large, that the resultant task is, or at least seems, too daunting for even the most committed believer. While some of these works are intended for non-Muslims, most Christians who become desirous of learning about Islamic beliefs and of reading the Qur'an find it necessary to obtain the help of fellow believers who already have been led to a deeper study of the field. This is especially true if one wishes to hear “the other side” of the story about the Qur'an, the one normally not included in Islamic sources, about the text's compilation, the differences among the early Islamic community, and so on.

The Christian who writes on this subject must do so first and foremost with a commitment to the highest standards of truthfulness and accuracy. While none of us is perfect, and hence none can claim infallibility in anything we do, our highest goal always must be to honor our commitment to Christ by seeking transparent honesty in all things. Islamic doctrine denies many of the central truths that followers of the Messiah hold dear, and because many today use the Qur'an as a pretext for

the persecution of Christians,² many Christians are willing in essence to let slide the standard and accept unfair, biased, and distorted counterarguments. While I fully understand the human emotion and motivation, I cannot allow myself to entertain such a temptation.

My study of the Qur'an has been born of a deep desire to fulfill three goals in my work in this field:

- (1) To honor Jesus, my Lord, my Savior, my King, through the defense of His gospel
- (2) To bless the people of God by providing sound biblical and historical responses to Islamic claims in general and of the Qur'an in particular
- (3) To be used of God to bring the glorious message of salvation in Jesus Christ to the precious Muslim people who honor the Qur'an

In pursuit of these goals, I have had the opportunity to debate dozens of Islamic representatives on three continents.³ This book arises out of that study and preparation, and my sincere hope is that it will bless my fellow believers by helping to better prepare them to minister the life-giving gospel to others.

Everything You Need to Know?

It is not my intention to write an exhaustive compendium of Qur'anic knowledge. Almost no one could, and certainly I could not, even if I wished to do so. My aims are far more focused and modest.

As to focus, mine is provided by my primary audience, my fellow believers in Jesus. This book's title is purposeful: I seek to focus on what Christians *need* to understand about the Qur'an's teachings particularly as it impacts our interactions

with Muslims and our thinking on events throughout our world. I operate on the assumption that Christians believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6) and that salvation is only by His death and resurrection.

I will seek to honestly communicate what the Qur'an says about who God is, what His purposes are, and how we are to know Him. I will pay special attention to what it teaches positively about *tawhid*—the oneness and uniqueness of Allah—and what it teaches about Jesus (in its own nomenclature, *Isa ibn Mariam*). And I will seek to consider its teaching on salvation, on the Scriptures revealed before it was written (in particular, the Torah and the Injil [the Law and the Gospel]), and on the vital relationship it must bear to those revelations. In other words, I wish to draw out the Qur'an's teachings on the key issues that separate Muslims and Christians and that form the basis of our dialogues and differences.

I am *not* attempting to write a book that is, at its heart, a refutation of the Qur'an. But I will note the main areas of conflict and point out what I deem to be the best reasons for not believing it a revelation from God. (If I believed it divine in origin, I would not be a Christian.) I believe the best, weightiest, most useful refutation is the establishment of the truth of the gospel. So we will focus upon the issues that directly relate to Christian and Islamic core teachings and hope that this introduction will compel Christian and Muslim alike to look further and deeper into these topics.

We may appear to go a bit beyond this work's educational purposes in chapters 10 and 11 on the Qur'an's history and transmission in comparison with that of the New Testament in particular. This arises from my work in New Testament textual criticism and also my many debates with Muslims, all of which, to one degree or another, have devolved down to the issue of

divine authority and the Islamic accusation of the corruption of the Torah and the Injil (in contrast to the Qur'an's supposed perfection). Since this is central to needful conversation between Christians and Muslims, and since the history of these books' transmission through time rarely is an area of strength for adherents to either faith, it's vital that we examine the requisite backgrounds.

The Qur'an is the single uniting factor in the complex study of Islam. From the strictest Salafi⁴ Sunni to the most devoted Shiite to the most spiritually minded Sufi, the Qur'an provides the connection, the bridge, that defines the broad spectrum of beliefs and practices known today as Islam. However, in the Christian mind it would be a mistake to make a direct connection to the role of the Bible, for the true parallel between the Qur'an and Christianity is to be found in Jesus Himself, the Word of God. As we will see, Muslims view the mechanism of "inspiration" very differently and have another source of authority (*hadith*) that, at least in function, more closely parallels the Bible than does the Qur'an.

Still, the Qur'an, widely available in English, is the most accessible source of Islamic belief to the Western world. Here we must emphasize that the Muslim normally does not refer to "translations" but to "transliterations of the meanings" and other such phrases meant to indicate that the Qur'an cannot be translated to any other tongue without ceasing to be the Qur'an. And while a number of acceptable translations exist, all suffer to a greater or lesser extent from obvious theological or traditional biases.

The most widely used rendering in English, Yusuf Ali's, is arguably one of the most tradition-bound of all the popular translations (and for that reason is rarely utilized in this work).⁵ Even so, hundreds of thousands of copies have been printed

in English by the Saudi Arabian government, and it is easily available to anyone seeking to read the Qur'an for themselves.

Lecturing on this topic over the past few years, in Western countries I frequently have asked how many have read the Qur'an. Rarely do more than two or three hands go up, and often none at all. If I were to pose the parallel question in an Islamic context—how many Muslims have read the Bible—the numbers would be virtually the same. Generally, our two communities are abysmally ignorant of the other's sacred texts, so we tend to talk right past each other, assuming nonexistent commonalities of language and definition, which makes for dangerous scenarios (as the headlines bear out).

This is a situation Christians must labor to change, so that we who are commanded to bring the message of the gospel to all can obey our Lord's mandate with reference to the Muslim people. It is my hope that with the material in this book, you will be encouraged to engage in open and frank dialogue with Muslims, who regularly are eager to do likewise.

A Word to Our Muslim Readers

I thank you for taking the time to read this work. I have been in your position many times in spending many hours listening to Muslim scholars and leaders speak on the Bible and the Christian faith, and reading many of their related books. Listening to someone “from the other side” as such can be uncomfortable; I welcome your attention and hope you find this work helpful.

As noted, I am writing primarily to my fellow Christians, but I wish to ensure that, should you desire to know how a Christian apologist, theologian, and minister “hears” your sacred text and religious beliefs, you can do so here.

Also, I ask you to realize that I cannot delve into all the minutiae that separate various groups. I know there are differences—sometimes very wide ones, laden with emotion and zeal—that mark off Islamic divisions. I will focus as much as possible on “majority” views and sometimes note when a particular group diverges from the main body of Sunni belief. Often I use expressions like “most Muslims,” “many Muslims,” or the like to avoid attributing to the entire Islamic world a belief that is not or may not be universal. But should I mistakenly fail to make proper distinction when addressing a particular belief, please extend to me a small modicum of mercy in the matter. If I do not specifically delineate your own viewpoint, please believe I am doing my best to address the topics as fairly as possible.

I have a deep-seated, heartfelt compassion for your believing community. I recognize that we share much in common; the Qur’an speaks of God’s sovereign power, His creatorship, His immutability, His essential oneness and divine prerogatives, all truths I confess and believe, even if classical Islamic belief denies that I do.⁶

However, I also realize that our most basic differences—especially seen in our views of *tawhid* and the Trinity, in our understanding of who Jesus was and is, and in our proclamation of how one can have peace with God and an assurance of acceptance with Him leading to eternal life—do separate us in matters of confession, faith, and practice. I do not believe I honor God, the truth, myself, or my Muslim friends if in any way I whitewash or minimize significant disagreements. May I suggest, against the trends of contemporary culture, that to ignore our differences or refuse to discuss them forthrightly is itself an act of disrespect to your faith and to mine?

In other words, I respect those who disagree with me enough to tell them when I believe they are wrong. The world today says

we cannot openly disagree, especially in the area of religion, without being hateful or bigoted. I suggest that, conversely, it is the world's attitude that is hateful and bigoted. If we will not say that anything is wrong, then at the same time, whether or not we want to admit it, we also are saying there is nothing that is right. Herein we are denying the existence of truth in the realm of faith, and that is a slap in the face of every believer of every creed or background. I sincerely hope you can hear my heart and will keep these words in mind as you read.

The Real Reason

So why read an entire book about the Qur'an's key teachings as they relate to the Christian faith? For followers of Jesus, the answer is simple: We desire to honor and glorify the One who has given us life, redemption, forgiveness, and peace. Redeemed people want to tell others about the Redeemer. We share this planet with more than a billion Muslims, and we should want to introduce them to our Lord.

An accurate knowledge of the Qur'an can help open doors to those conversations. This will provide a foundation of knowledge and insight for communication and understanding. To that task we now turn, beginning where any such inquiry must: the origins of the Qur'an and a man named Muhammad.

Notes

1. See the discussion by Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'aan* (Birmingham, UK: Al-Hidaayah, 2003), 34–45.

2. The level of emotion often accompanying discussion of the Qur'an is well-known in post-9/11 Western nations. On the part of self-professed Muslims, riots and death have followed from even the hint of the possible mistreatment of printed editions. And many Christians who live where they are persecuted regularly for their faith feel no less resentment toward the book always quoted as

the basis of their suffering. In summer 2012, the world was shocked by a video of Muslims beheading, for apostasy, a young convert to the Christian faith. Those who understand Arabic knew well that the words chanted just before and then during this act come directly from the pages of the Qur'an. Many Muslims were as repulsed by that hatred and violence as were virtually all others who saw it.

3. As of this writing, this includes moderated, public debates with Sheikh Shabir Ally, Abdullah Kunde, Abdullah Al-Andalusi, Adnan Rashid, Sami Zaatari, Dr. Zulfiqar Ali Shah, Imam Shamsi Ali, Imam Syed Z. Sayeed, Sheikh Ahmed Mohammed Awal, Sheikh Jalal Abualrub, and Zakir Hussain, among others.

4. Unless you are very familiar with Islamic studies, please utilize the provided glossary at the back of the book as often as needed, for the Arabic language is intrinsic to the history, theology, and practices of all Islamic groups, even those whose majority is non-Arabic-speaking. As Muslims hold the Qur'an to be God's very words, eternally existent in the Arabic language itself, use of Arabic terminology is a necessary if sometimes daunting aspect of studying Islam in all its forms.

5. I am using a far-less-well-known version for its smoothly reading yet consistent and accurate rendering of the Arabic original that avoids many of the aforementioned biased readings. The Christian reader can relate to why I felt it crucial to utilize a Muslim translation; a Muslim has distrust for one rendered by a non-Muslim just as a Christian would distrust a translation of the Bible by a non-Christian. (*The Majestic Qur'an: An English Rendition of Its Meanings*, 4th ed. [note the title as indicative of the Islamic attitude toward "translation"], eds. Abdal Hakim Murad, Mostafa Badawi, and Uthman Hutchinson. Translation committee: Ali Ozek, Nureddin Uzunoglu, Tevfik R. Topuzoglu, Mehmet Maksutoglu [Chicago: Nawawi Foundation; London: Ibn Khaldun Foundation, 2000]. Previous editions were titled *The Holy Qur'an With English Translation*; the first appeared in 1992. It is expensive in print but also available to read online [scribd.com/doc/55420649].)

6. Traditionally Islam has denied that Christianity is truly monotheistic due to the doctrine of the Trinity, which Muslims in general interpret as a form of polytheism. From the start, Christians have insisted that Islam has misunderstood our faith. This leads to the vital question (examined in this book—see especially chapter 4) as to whether the Qur'an understands and rightly represents the doctrine of the Trinity.

1

The Qur'an and Muhammad of Mecca

From the position of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy, the Qur'an is as eternal as Allah himself. It is the very Word of God, without even the slightest imperfection. The finger of man has no place in it, as the book held reverently in the hand today is an exact copy of a tablet in heaven upon which the Qur'an has been written from eternity past.

How did this book, about three-quarters of the New Testament in length, written during the early seventh century in the region around Mecca, come to be viewed by a billion people as an everlasting revelation from God?

While the story is believed to originate in eternity, historically it begins with a man born circa AD 570 in the town of Mecca in what we call Saudi Arabia. Muslims deny Muhammad any role other than passive reception for the Qur'anic text, yet the rest of the human family can be forgiven for considering his importance—his life, his experience, his understanding—as a proper context for the Islamic holy book. Though many long

tomes have been written on Muhammad, a brief introduction is a must, as a start, for anyone desiring proper historical and theological perspective on the Qur'an.

The Earliest Years

Putting together Muhammad's story is a challenge, as the sources from which the orthodox Islamic account are drawn come from at least a century after the events of his life. Further, even those show clear evidence of legendary expansion and the influence of piety in the early generations of adherents. Some scholars today actually question the entire existence of such a historical person,¹ and while without applying vastly far-reaching conspiracy theories, it is difficult to conceive of a scenario where a narrative this complex could be fabricated, the fact remains: Most Muslims accept a story that is not nearly as foundationally certain as they think it is. Given Muhammad's centrality to the Islamic experience, the paucity of modern critical inquiry into his life by Muslims themselves is noteworthy.

The story of Muhammad is immensely bound up with the Islamic focus on Mecca, which today no non-Muslim can enter. Located in the Hijaz, about forty miles inland from Jeddah (the region's largest city), Mecca—according to Islamic orthodoxy—was an important center of religious worship all the way back to the days of Abraham. There, it is maintained, Abraham and his son Ishmael established the Kaaba, a site of true worship of the one true God.²

Thereafter, a gradual religious decline took place among the Arabs at Mecca. At first, they allowed images to be placed in the Kaaba, and then they began to worship them. This period of *jahaliya*, or ignorance, continued all the way to the days of Muhammad. When he eventually was successful in overcoming

opposition there and taking control of the city, he purged the Kaaba of its idols and reestablished the original monotheistic worship.

It was in Mecca, around AD 570, that a man named Abdullah, of the Banu Hashim clan, had a son by a woman named Amina. According to tradition, the child was sent to live with Bedouins in the desert (in popular belief this was a healthier climate than that of the city). His father had passed away shortly after his birth, and at age six, his mother also passed, leaving him an orphan.

At eight, he was taken in by his uncle, Abu Talib, an influential man who became vitally important in Muhammad's life and would even come to have theological significance in Islam. Due to Abu Talib's position, Muhammad had opportunity to travel with caravans up into the region of Syria, gaining knowledge of this vital commercial exercise. Later traditions would narrate an encounter on one journey with a Christian monk named Bahira, who it is said recognized the mark of prophecy on the young man and warned those around him to protect him.

Of the specifics of this time in his life, we have little of serious historical value. However, note that both Christianity and Judaism were present en masse in the areas into which Meccan caravans traveled. Muhammad would have been exposed, at least through the spoken word, to stories told and retold from not only the pagan Arab tribes but also the Jews and Christians. Of course, when hearing marketplace conversations or listening around the fire at night on the long, slow routes, it would be difficult for a teenage youth from Mecca to differentiate between the various sects and groups in both faiths, as well as to distinguish legend and myth from what was based upon historical records. Did the young Muhammad look inside any of the Christian churches in southern Syria? If he did, what would

he have seen? We may never be able to answer these tantalizing questions, but as we will see (in chapter 5), we might be able to theorize based on information from later in his life.

Islamic tradition indicates that as he grew older, Muhammad was known as an honest businessman, even gaining the nickname *Al-Amin*, “the faithful” or “reliable” or “trustworthy.” His trustworthiness may have attracted the attention of Khadijah, a widow of some wealth, said to be about fifteen years his senior. They were wed around AD 595, and for the next decade and a half it seems Muhammad took his place as a leader in his tribe and clan, for all intents and purposes living a life normal for an inhabitant of Mecca.

First Encounter With Gabriel

Muhammad seems to have been troubled by the polytheistic worship around the Kaaba, though by one story he himself had once been chosen to replace the sacred “Black Stone” in the corner of the Kaaba itself, the one central to Islamic worship to this day. Tradition states that he began to retire for times of contemplation and meditation in a cave on Mount Hira. In 610, at age forty, toward the end of the month of Ramadan, he claimed to experience a supernatural visitation there. In the words of Martin Lings, who wrote one of the most popular biographies of Muhammad,

... there came to him an Angel in the form of a man. The Angel said to him: “Recite!” and he said: “I am not a reciter,” whereupon, as he himself told it, “the angel took me and whelmed me in his embrace until he had reached the limit of my endurance. Then he released me and said ‘recite!’ I said: ‘I am not a reciter,’ and again he took me and whelmed me in his embrace, and again when he had reached the limit of my endurance he released me

and said, 'recite!' and again I said 'I am not a reciter.' Then a third time he whelmed me as before, then released me and said:

Recite in the name of thy Lord who created!
He created man from a clot of blood.
Recite; and thy Lord is the most bountiful,
He who hath taught by the pen,
taught man what he knew not.

He recited these words after the angel, who thereupon left him; and he said; "It was as though the words were written on my heart." But he feared this might mean that he become a jinn-inspired poet or a man possessed. So he fled from the cave, and when he was halfway down the slope of the mountain, he heard a voice above him saying: "Oh Muhammad, thou art the messenger of God, and I am Gabriel." He raised his eyes heavenwards and there was his visitant, still recognizable but now clearly an angel, filling the whole horizon, and again he said: "Oh Muhammad, thou art the messenger of God, and I am Gabriel." The Prophet stood gazing at the angel; then he turned away from him, but whichever way he looked the angel was always there, astride the horizon, whether it was to the north, to the south, the East or to the West. Finally the Angel turned away, and the prophet descended the slope and went to his house.³

What followed should interest everyone, particularly Christian readers seeking to understand and evaluate the claims of the Islamic faith. Its sources indicate that Muhammad, deeply troubled by his encounter, rushed home to Khadijah, not to rejoice in his calling as the Prophet of Allah but to express deep concern over what had occurred. Again, he was fearful about possession by a *jinn* (spirit) so as to become spiritually inspired. Al-Tabari puts it this way:

There was no one of God's creation more hateful to me than a poet or a madman; I could not bear to look at either of them.

I said to myself, “Your humble servant [Muhammad] is either a poet or a madman, but Quraysh shall never say this of me. I shall take myself to a mountain crag, hurl myself down from it, kill myself, and find relief that way.”⁴

In fact, Al-Tabari says that as Muhammad was going to commit suicide, Gabriel stopped him and addressed him as the Prophet of Allah.

Khadijah believed his experience was with the divine and sought to calm his fears. She told her aged cousin, Waraqah ibn Nawfal, what had happened, and he sent word to Muhammad that the prophets of old encountered the same. When Muhammad met with Waraqah a little later, the elderly man also warned that the people would treat him badly because of his prophetic calling. Waraqah did not live to see this, passing on shortly thereafter.

The Beginnings of the Qur'anic Revelation

Tradition says Muhammad did not control the speed or frequency of receiving the revelations from Allah that would comprise the document we know today as the Qur'an. The classical belief is that while its entirety was “sent down” in one night—*Laylat al-Qadr*, the Night of Power—Muhammad himself received it piecemeal over twenty-two years. And at first there was hesitation and periods of silence, during which he suffered concern that what he had experienced was not from God at all. Al-Tabari recounts one such incident:

The inspiration ceased to come to the Messenger of God for a while, and he was deeply grieved. He began to go to the tops of mountain crags, in order to fling himself from them; but every time he reached the summit of a mountain, Gabriel appeared to

him and said to him, “You are the Prophet of God.” Thereupon his anxiety would subside and he would come back to himself.⁵

In later traditions, Muhammad would liken the inspiration's coming to the “ringing of a bell.” Others reported seeing him sweating even on a cold day as he received it. Many have theorized on physical sources of his behavior, but we lack sufficient information upon which to engage in speculation.

In any case, the revelations began to outline the primary elements of the message Muhammad believed he was being called to deliver. Amid the polytheistic worship associated with the Kaaba, he began to proclaim not a new faith but an old one, needing to be reestablished. His was a message of pure monotheism: *tawhid*, as it became known, Allah's oneness and unity, over against the impure worship that had developed over all the generations since Abraham, said to have originally set up the Kaaba.

Muhammad started emphasizing a coming judgment day everyone will face, answering to Allah for all actions. He preached the resurrection of the dead, the joys of paradise for those Allah would favor, and the realities of eternal punishment for those who find their “scales light” (lacking in faith and good works). “Fire” is the abode of those who do not bow, *submit* (the core meaning of “Islam”) to Allah; Muhammad's descriptions were graphic. He also emphasized the simple rituals of prayer and fasting, giving to the poor, and rejecting unfair practices that lead the wealthy to mistreat the poor.

Opposition and Persecution

Tradition says, and logic dictates, that preaching monotheism in Mecca, which received so much of its economic activity from

idol worship at the Kaaba and from pilgrimages, would engender severe opposition. Muhammad's followers were few in his ministry's first decade, and he often was the object of ridicule, persecution, even plots. After Khadijah, he was joined by some whose names would become well known in Islamic history: his close friend, Abu Bakr, whose young daughter, Aisha, became his favorite bride; Zayd, his adopted son; and Ali ibn Abi Talib, his young cousin who eventually became Caliph (Islamic head of state), but whose name forever would be linked with Islam's Sunni vs. Shiite division. As the numbers grew, the movement was an annoyance and then a threat to Mecca's vested interests. This period was taken up with usually short but frequent revelations, often addressing justice, worship, and the coming judgment upon those who refused to submit to Allah.

The "Satanic Verses"

It is easy to understand how, after years of persecution, few followers, and opposition by the Meccan leaders, Muhammad would seek ways to gain their hearing. The Qur'an is full of examples of polytheistic foolishness, yet many stood firm in their fidelity to ancestral traditions. And so occurred during this time an infamous incident in Muhammad's life.

A number of Islamic sources record what has become an embarrassment to modern Muslim apologists, regarding the "Satanic Verses." This includes two of the most important early sources for Muhammad's life: Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah* (*The Life of the Messenger of Allah*) and Al-Tabari's massive history. From the former:

Now the apostle was anxious for the welfare of his people, wishing to attract them as far as he could. It has been mentioned

that he longed for a way to attract them, and the method he adopted is what Ibn Hamid told me that Salama said M. b. Ishaq told him from Yazid b. Ziyad of Medina from M. b. Ka'b al-Qurazi: When the apostle saw that his people turned their backs on him and he was pained by their estrangement from what he brought them from God he longed that there should come to him from God a message that would reconcile his people to him. Because of his love for his people and his anxiety over them it would delight him if the obstacle that made his task so difficult could be removed; so that he meditated on the project and longed for it and it was dear to him. Then God sent down "By the star when it sets your comrade errs not and is not deceived, he speaks not from his own desire," and when he reached His words "Have you thought of al-Lat and al-'Uzza and Manat the third, the others," Satan, when he was meditating upon it, and desiring to bring it (sc. reconciliation) to his people, put upon his tongue "these are the exalted Gharaniq whose intercession is approved." When the Quraysh heard that, they were delighted and greatly pleased at the way in which he spoke of their gods and they listened to him; while the believers were holding that what their prophet brought from their Lord was true, not suspecting a mistake or a vain desire or slip, and when he reached the prostration and the end of the Sura in which he prostrated himself the Muslims prostrated themselves when their prophet prostrated confirming what he brought and obeying his command, and the polytheists of Quraysh and others who were in the mosque prostrated when they heard the mention of their gods, so that everyone in the mosque believer and unbeliever prostrated, except al-Walid b. al-Mughira who was an old man who could not do so, so he took a handful of dirt from the valley and bent over it. Then the people dispersed and the Quraysh went out, delighted at what had been said about their gods, saying, "Muhammad has spoken of our gods in splendid fashion. He alleged in what he read that they are the exalted Gharaniq whose intercession is approved."

The news reached the prophet's companions who were in Abyssinia, it being reported that Quraysh had accepted Islam, so some men started to return while others remained behind. Then Gabriel came to the apostle and said, "What have you done, Muhammad? You have read to these people something I did not bring you from God and you have said what He did not say to you." The apostle was bitterly grieved and was greatly in fear of God. So God sent down (a revelation), for he was merciful to him comforting him and making light of the affair and telling him that every prophet and apostle before him desired as he desired and wanted what he wanted and Satan interjected something into his desires as he had on his tongue. So God annulled what Satan had suggested and God established His verses i.e. you are just like the prophets and apostles. Then God sent down: "We have not sent a prophet or apostle before you but when he longed Satan cast suggestions into his longing. But God will annul what Satan has suggested. Then God will establish his verses, God being knowing and wise." Thus God relieved his prophet's grief, and made him feel safe from his fears and annulled what Satan had suggested in the words used above about their gods by his revelation "Are yours the males and His the females? That were indeed an unfair division" (i.e. most unjust); "they are nothing but names which your fathers gave them" as far as the words "to whom he pleases and accepts," i.e., how can the intercession of their gods avail with Him?

When the annulment of what Satan had put upon the prophet's tongue came from God, Quraysh said: "Muhammad has repented of what he said about the position of your gods with Allah, altered it and brought something else."⁶

Later Muslim scholars and theologians would dispute this story, but they always must face the question: Why would these very early sources, vital for our understanding of claims concerning Muhammad in so many other areas, record such an incident if it were not true? And, in this case, there is a telltale sign found

elsewhere that the event was in fact based in the earliest stories about his life.

The most authoritative collection of *hadith* (which we will reference throughout), known as *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, narrates⁷ that when Muhammad prostrated while reciting *Surah An-Najm*—*Surah 53*, the same one in which the alleged Satan-inspired verses were first inserted—“with him prostrated the Muslims, the pagans, the jinns, and all human beings.” Why would the pagans also bow down in the very same way mentioned above? These *ahadith* seem to have been edited, with the offensive reason for the pagan prostration later removed out of embarrassment. For Christians, whether or not this incident took place is very relevant to our evaluation of Muhammad’s claims, for just as we find it most unusual for a prophet of God to seek to take his own life after his initial calling, so too we would see this as a further significant element in his story and his self-proclaimed role not just as *a* prophet but as *the final* prophet.

The Isra and the Mi’raj

According to Islamic tradition, another event placed in the Meccan period is the Isra, Muhammad’s night flight, and the Mi’raj, his visitation to heaven. Early sources differ somewhat in how they view it, but today Muslims in general believe the Mi’raj was not merely a spiritual experience or a dream but happened in reality. In the Isra, he was given a winged steed, the *Buraq*, that he rode, traditionally to Jerusalem, the location of the “farthest mosque.” From there, guided by Gabriel, he ascended through the levels of heaven and received the commandment as to the five daily prayers of the Muslim people.

There are a number of versions in the early literature. Given its centrality to belief in the divine nature of Muhammad’s

prophethood, we must read through at least one. The following is found in *Sahih Al-Bukhari*:

Narrated Abbas bin Malik:

Malik bin Sasaa said that Allah's Apostle described to them his Night Journey saying, "While I was lying in Al-Hatim or Al-Hijr, suddenly someone came to me and cut my body open from here to here." I asked Al-Jarud who was by my side, "What does he mean?" He said, "It means from his throat to his pubic area," or said, "From the top of the chest." The Prophet further said, "He then took out my heart. Then a gold tray of Belief was brought to me and my heart was washed and was filled (with Belief) and then returned to its original place. Then a white animal which was smaller than a mule and bigger than a donkey was brought to me." (On this Al-Jarud asked, "Was it the Buraq, O Abu Hamza?" I (i.e. Anas) replied in the affirmative.) The Prophet said, "The animal's step (was so wide that it) reached the farthest point within the reach of the animal's sight. I was carried on it, and Gabriel set out with me till we reached the nearest heaven.

"When he asked for the gate to be opened, it was asked, 'Who is it?' Gabriel answered, 'Gabriel.' It was asked, 'Who is accompanying you?' Gabriel replied, 'Muhammad.' It was asked, 'Has Muhammad been called?' Gabriel replied in the affirmative. Then it was said, 'He is welcomed. What an excellent visit his is!' The gate was opened, and when I went over the first heaven, I saw Adam there. Gabriel said (to me), 'This is your father, Adam; pay him your greetings.' So I greeted him and he returned the greeting to me and said, 'You are welcomed, O pious son and pious Prophet.' Then Gabriel ascended with me till we reached the second heaven. Gabriel asked for the gate to be opened. It was asked, 'Who is it?' Gabriel answered, 'Gabriel.' It was asked, 'Who is accompanying you?' Gabriel replied, 'Muhammad.' It was asked, 'Has he been called?' Gabriel answered in the affirmative. Then it was said, 'He is welcomed. What an excellent visit his is!' The gate was opened.

“When I went over the second heaven, there I saw Yahya (i.e. John the Baptist) and ‘Isa (i.e. Jesus) who were cousins of each other. Gabriel said (to me), ‘These are John and Jesus; pay them your greetings.’ So I greeted them and both of them returned my greetings to me and said, ‘You are welcomed, O pious brother and pious Prophet.’ Then Gabriel ascended with me to the third heaven and asked for its gate to be opened. It was asked, ‘Who is it?’ Gabriel replied, ‘Gabriel.’ It was asked, ‘Who is accompanying you?’ Gabriel replied, ‘Muhammad.’ It was asked, ‘Has he been called?’ Gabriel replied in the affirmative. Then it was said, ‘He is welcomed, what an excellent visit his is!’ The gate was opened, and when I went over the third heaven there I saw Joseph. Gabriel said (to me), ‘This is Joseph; pay him your greetings.’ So I greeted him and he returned the greeting to me and said, ‘You are welcomed, O pious brother and pious Prophet.’ Then Gabriel ascended with me to the fourth heaven and asked for its gate to be opened. It was asked, ‘Who is it?’ Gabriel replied, ‘Gabriel.’ It was asked, ‘Who is accompanying you?’ Gabriel replied, ‘Muhammad.’ It was asked, ‘Has he been called?’ Gabriel replied in the affirmative. Then it was said, ‘He is welcomed, what an excellent visit his is!’

“The gate was opened, and when I went over the fourth heaven, there I saw Idris. Gabriel said (to me), ‘This is Idris; pay him your greetings.’ So I greeted him and he returned the greeting to me and said, ‘You are welcomed, O pious brother and pious Prophet.’ Then Gabriel ascended with me to the fifth heaven and asked for its gate to be opened. It was asked, ‘Who is it?’ Gabriel replied, ‘Gabriel.’ It was asked, ‘Who is accompanying you?’ Gabriel replied, ‘Muhammad.’ It was asked, ‘Has he been called?’ Gabriel replied in the affirmative. Then it was said ‘He is welcomed, what an excellent visit his is!’ So when I went over the fifth heaven, there I saw Harun (i.e. Aaron), Gabriel said, (to me). This is Aaron; pay him your greetings.’ I greeted him and he returned the greeting to me and said, ‘You are welcomed, O pious brother and pious Prophet.’ Then Gabriel ascended with me to the sixth heaven and asked for its gate to be opened. It

was asked, 'Who is it?' Gabriel replied, 'Gabriel.' It was asked, 'Who is accompanying you?' Gabriel replied, 'Muhammad.' It was asked, 'Has he been called?' Gabriel replied in the affirmative. It was said, 'He is welcomed. What an excellent visit his is!'

"When I went (over the sixth heaven), there I saw Moses. Gabriel said (to me), 'This is Moses; pay him your greeting.' So I greeted him and he returned the greetings to me and said, 'You are welcomed, O pious brother and pious Prophet.' When I left him (i.e. Moses) he wept. Someone asked him, 'What makes you weep?' Moses said, 'I weep because after me there has been sent (as Prophet) a young man whose followers will enter Paradise in greater numbers than my followers.' Then Gabriel ascended with me to the seventh heaven and asked for its gate to be opened. It was asked, 'Who is it?' Gabriel replied, 'Gabriel.' It was asked, 'Who is accompanying you?' Gabriel replied, 'Muhammad.' It was asked, 'Has he been called?' Gabriel replied in the affirmative. Then it was said, 'He is welcomed. What an excellent visit his is!'

"So when I went (over the seventh heaven), there I saw Abraham. Gabriel said (to me), 'This is your father; pay your greetings to him.' So I greeted him and he returned the greetings to me and said, 'You are welcomed, O pious son and pious Prophet.' Then I was made to ascend to *Sidrat-ul-Muntaha* (i.e. the Lote Tree of the utmost boundary) Behold! Its fruits were like the jars of Hajr (i.e. a place near Medina) and its leaves were as big as the ears of elephants. Gabriel said, 'This is the Lote Tree of the utmost boundary.' Behold! There ran four rivers, two were hidden and two were visible, I asked, 'What are these two kinds of rivers, O Gabriel?' He replied, 'As for the hidden rivers, they are two rivers in Paradise and the visible rivers are the Nile and the Euphrates.'

"Then *Al-Bait-ul-Ma'mur* (i.e. the Sacred House) was shown to me and a container full of wine and another full of milk and a third full of honey were brought to me. I took the milk. Gabriel remarked, 'This is the Islamic religion which you and your followers are following.' Then the prayers were enjoined on me: They were fifty prayers a day. When I returned, I passed by Moses who asked (me), 'What have you been ordered to do?' I

replied, 'I have been ordered to offer fifty prayers a day.' Moses said, 'Your followers cannot bear fifty prayers a day, and by Allah, I have tested people before you, and I have tried my level best with Bani Israel (in vain). Go back to your Lord and ask for reduction to lessen your followers' burden.' So I went back, and Allah reduced ten prayers for me. Then again I came to Moses, but He repeated the same as he had said before. Then again I went back to Allah and He reduced ten more prayers. When I came back to Moses he said the same, I went back to Allah and He ordered me to observe ten prayers a day. When I came back to Moses, he repeated the same advice, so I went back to Allah and was ordered to observe five prayers a day.

"When I came back to Moses, he said, 'What have you been ordered?' I replied, 'I have been ordered to observe five prayers a day.' He said, 'Your followers cannot bear five prayers a day, and no doubt, I have got an experience of the people before you, and I have tried my level best with Bani Israel, so go back to your Lord and ask for reduction to lessen your followers' burden.' I said, 'I have requested so much of my Lord that I feel ashamed, but I am satisfied now and surrender to Allah's Order.' When I left, I heard a voice saying, 'I have passed My Order and have lessened the burden of My Worshipers.'"⁸

This event has become central in the later traditions for proving the divine approbation of Muhammad's prophethood. The discerning Christian likewise notes his unusual exaltation and especially his being placed in privilege above Jesus (and Moses). It is hard not to see an element of apologetic in the story, as it coincides with the Qur'anic argumentation that Islam is the natural, but purified and exalted, continuation of Judaism and Christianity.

The *Hijra*

The Islamic calendar is based upon one of its history's most important events, the *Hijra*—the pilgrimage of Muhammad's

followers from Mecca to Yathrib, a city 210 miles to the north, later renamed Medina, the city of the Prophet. According to tradition, this exodus was necessary for simple survival; not only were plots against Muhammad a clear and present danger, but in fact one was hatched the night he fled, just missing the mark. By now Abu Talib and Khadijah had passed away. The Meccan situation had become unbearable.

Upon arriving, Muhammad found a city divided, major Jewish tribes mixed together with various Arab clans. He soon was looked to for leadership and began the process of consolidating his position over Medina. In the next decade, inexorably, while primarily in conflict with Meccan powers, he would establish himself as The Prophet, also by a new and growing aspect essentially unknown in Mecca: political power. Elements of his teaching that in Mecca had been present but not emphasized, now came to the fore as new challenges faced the growing Islamic faith and indeed the growing Islamic state.

Military Conflicts

We will briefly mention Muhammad's major battles, mainly because they figure prominently in the Qur'anic revelations received during these years, and because Christians, in discussing the relationship of Muhammad and Jesus, point to these as an example of the differences between them and the faiths that look to them. Entire books document Muhammad's military career,⁹ and his followers treasure the stories of his exploits. Christians need to realize how deeply these accounts have entered into the hearts and minds of Muslims.

In Medina, shortly after arriving, Muhammad instructed his followers to begin raiding Meccan caravans. Today we are told this was a just response to Meccan seizures of Muslim property,

and of course caravan raiding was a way of life, a normal part of desert existence for Arabs at the time. Rare was the loss of life in such adventures, but still there was more to it than regular tribal clashing, and both Muhammad and the Meccan leadership knew it.

Three major conflicts between them flared over a relatively short period: the Battles of Badr (AD 624), Uhud (625), and the Trench (627).¹⁰ In each encounter, the Muslims faced superior forces. Prevailing at Badr was seen, as one would expect, as evidence of God's blessing of the movement. Brave exploits of the Muslims there are told and retold to this day.

At Uhud, victory was imminent when certain archers Muhammad had installed abandoned their posts to get some war booty, causing a disastrous turn and then defeat. However, the Meccans did not capitalize, partly because at first they thought Muhammad was dead, though he had only been wounded.

In response, a revelation came down that is now part of the Qur'an:

Allah fulfilled His pledge to you when by His leave you defeated them, until [the moment] your courage failed you, and you disagreed about the order and you disobeyed, after He had shown you that for which you long. Some of you desired the world, and some of you desired the Hereafter. Therefore He made you flee from them, that He might try you. But now He has pardoned you; Allah is gracious to believers. (Surah 3:152)

The third major Muslim-Meccan engagement essentially was a brief siege. Taking advice from a Persian, Muhammad, informed that the Meccans planned to come against him with overwhelming force, introduced something of an innovation for the time in having a trench dug to protect the vulnerable approaches to Medina. This allowed the smaller Muslim forces

to keep foot soldiers at bay, with the enemy cavalry unable to cross the crevasse. Once again revelation came down, normally associated with Surah 33:9–27.

Following the Meccan withdrawal, Muhammad turned against the Jewish tribe of the Banu Qurayza, who allegedly had entered into negotiations with the Meccans, betraying their allegiance to him and the city. After a few weeks' siege, the tribe surrendered. According to the earliest sources (disputed by later writers, for obvious reasons), all but a few men (who converted to Islam) were beheaded, and all women and children were enslaved. Normally, his role in this event is explained as purely political, but again the intermixture of state and religion, General and Prophet, is troubling.

Muhammad's Wives

As Muhammad's political power increased, so did the number of his wives. Though the Qur'an had limited legal wives to four (Surah 4:3), it was not long before a new revelation allowed him, as the Prophet, to exceed this number. Modern Islamic apologists explain this in light of his political alliances, and surely that could be part of it but, as we will see, was not always the issue.

Entire volumes also have been dedicated to discussion of Muhammad's ethics and morals regarding human sexuality, marriage, and the resultant impact on family and culture. We will limit our review to the two major issues directly related to the Qur'an: his child bride, Aisha, and the matter of Zaynab bint Jash. We will step out, briefly, from a recitation of the Islamic story, *per se*, for "Muhammad's wives" is one of the most controversial aspects of Islamic history and continues to engender strife even among Muslims.

Aisha, Daughter of Abu Bakr

Without question, the harshest denunciations of Muhammad have been based upon his marriage to the young Aisha, who was betrothed at age six. Islamic sources are almost unanimous in saying the marriage was consummated at age nine (one major source saying ten). The idea of a fifty-three- or fifty-four-year-old man together with a child of nine is the basis upon which many have denounced even Islam as a whole. Add to this the scandal of Islamic child brides around the world today, and related horror stories associated with Taliban-like violence toward women and girls, and one can see why this conversation can become most strident.

But the Qur'an gives no evidence of any embarrassment or apology as to Muhammad's taking of Aisha. Unlike the Zaynab situation (see below), where a clear cultural taboo was broken, no such concern comes into the text here. Life spans were considerably shorter, and child brides were common. In fact, the Islamic literature's emphasis on Aisha's youthfulness may well be related to defense of her obvious virginity and purity. The denunciation of such marriages in most societies is fairly recent, and though modern sensibilities recoil at the image, people then plainly did not consider it strange or odd.

This brings us once again to the problem of setting up Muhammad as the paragon of moral virtue *for all people and for all time*. He was a man of his day, deeply influenced by the mores and traditions of seventh-century Arabia. It's when those mores and traditions are made *specifically normative* for all cultures and all times¹¹ that conflict is sure to result.

It is not Aisha's age but an incident in her life around AD 627 that figures prominently in the Qur'anic text. As with so many other aspects of the Islamic story, the many versions vary in assorted elements, but the gist is clear.

When accompanying Muhammad in a caravan, the still-young Aisha had her own attendants and would ride in her own *howdah*, a covered carrier that afforded privacy befitting a wife of the Prophet. The story is that at one time the entire army had to stop so that she could look for a prized necklace that had disappeared. Many were displeased, for their location was inhospitable.

When Aisha's camel stood up, the necklace was found underneath it. They all moved on, and they came to a nicer spot where they made camp. In some versions, the necklace became lost again due to a faulty clasp. In others, the string broke and spilled the beads or stones on the ground. In either case, she went once more to find it, and this time she felt sure of where to look. When she found it, she had to restore the beads, which took some time.

Meanwhile, Aisha's attendants came, found her *howdah*, and, assuming she was in it (she being just a girl and very light), picked it up and went on their way. When she returned with her necklace to the camp, she found it abandoned and the caravan out of sight. So she sat down on the ground and waited for them to realize their mistake and return for her. And she fell asleep.

Meanwhile, a young man named Safwan happened by, having fallen behind the army. When he saw Aisha, he recognized her as the Prophet's wife. He offered her his camel and strolled along on foot, bringing her to the army's next camping location. When the wife of the Prophet came in on a camel led by a young man, rumors began to fly. Aisha, only a girl, was unaware of this for a time. Shortly thereafter she became ill, and it was during her illness that she learned many were accusing her of infidelity.

When word reached Muhammad, he was greatly troubled by the accusations. He inquired of one of Aisha's maidservants,

whose sole word of complaint about Aisha was that being a young girl, she often fell asleep while kneading dough, which then allowed her pet lamb to consume it. But Ali, the future Caliph and Muhammad's cousin, made the fateful decision to suggest to him that there were plenty of other women he could marry. This would result in major strife in the coming years between Aisha and Ali.

Eventually revelation came down, exonerating Aisha and condemning those who had spread the rumors about her. This is found in Surah 24:11–15:

Those who brought the slander are a group of you. Regard it not as evil for you. No, it is good for you. To every man among them shall it be done according to the sin he has committed. As for him that had the greater part of it among them, his shall be a formidable torment.

If only when you heard of it had believing men and women thought well of their people, and said, "This is a manifest slander."

Why have they not brought four witnesses? Since they failed to bring the witnesses, they are the liars in the sight of Allah.

And had it not been for the grace of Allah and His mercy on you in this world and the hereafter, a great punishment would have befallen you, because of that which you spread abroad.

You received it with your tongues [and passed it around] and uttered with your mouths that of which you had no knowledge. You counted it a trifle, while it was serious in the sight of Allah.

Should you not have said, when you heard of it, "It is not right of us to talk about this. Transcendent are You! This is a grievous calumny."

Allah admonishes you that you never repeat the like of this, if you are [in truth] believers.

And those who had slandered Aisha were flogged but later forgiven.

The Story of Zaynab bint Jash

There is no other account in the Qur'an that, to me as a Christian reader of the Qur'an, the *hadith*, and the *tafsir* literature, is more indicative of the fundamental problem with Muhammad's claimed prophethood than that of his relationship with Zaynab bint Jash. When one takes into consideration not only the situation itself but also its results in the lives of countless millions down through the centuries, the importance of following the biblical pattern for the recognition of prophethood is readily seen.¹²

Zaynab bint Jash was by all accounts a strikingly beautiful woman. She also was a married woman, to a young man named Zayd bin Muhammad, the Prophet's own adopted son, a freed former slave. He was an early convert to the Islamic faith, and the two men were close. Up to that time, the Arab tribes, like the Jews, Romans, and so many others, had practiced—and honored—the concept of adoption. For a man to marry the divorced wife of his adopted son was a fundamental violation of morality and custom, tantamount to incest. The relationships that arose through adoption were held to be truly valid.

With this background in mind, consider these texts from *Surah Al-Abzab*:

Allah has not made for any man two hearts within him, nor has he made your wives whom you declare to be like your mothers your mothers, nor has he made those whom you claim to be your sons your sons. This is but what you say with your mouths. And Allah says the truth and He guides to the path.

Attribute them to their fathers. That is more equitable in the sight of Allah. And if you know not their fathers, then they are your brothers in religion and your clients. And there is no sin for you in the mistakes that you make unintentionally but what your hearts purpose [that will be a sin for you]. Allah is Forgiving, Compassionate. (33:4–5)

And when you said to him on whom Allah has conferred favor and you have conferred favor: “Keep your wife to yourself and fear Allah.” And you hide within yourself that which Allah was to bring to light, and you fear the people whereas Allah had a better right that you should fear Him. So when Zayd had accomplished of her what he would, We gave her to you in marriage so that [henceforth] there may be no sin for believers in respect of wives of their adopted sons, when the latter have accomplished of them what they would. The commandment of Allah must be fulfilled.

There is no reproach for the Prophet in what Allah has made his due. That was Allah’s way with those who passed away of old, and the wish of Allah is certain to be fulfilled. (33:37–38)

Now, according to Islamic orthodoxy, these words were inscribed on the heavenly tablet in eternity past. They are as eternal as Allah is. And yet here are two sections that both deal with the same awkward situation that arose in history regarding Muhammad, Zayd, and Zaynab.

The first verses cited give Allah’s command relating to adoption. No longer would Zayd be known as Zayd bin Muhammad; now he would be known as Zayd bin Haritha. Adoption as a stabilizing and gracious societal element would be forever damaged due to this change. *Why* do this?¹³ As the second verses show, there was a major problem among the people—one highlighted by Allah having commanded Muhammad to marry the divorced wife of his adopted son.

To let the Muslim sources explain,¹⁴ we start with Al-Tabari’s massive history, which places the story’s backdrop in its all-too-human setting:

The Messenger of God came to the house of Zayd b. Harithah. (Zayd was always called Zayd b. Muhammad.) Perhaps the Messenger of God missed him at that moment, so as to ask, “Where

is Zayd?” He came to his residence to look for him but did not find him. Zaynab bt. Jash, Zayd’s wife, rose to meet him. Because she was dressed only in a shift, the Messenger of God turned away from her. She said: “He is not here, Messenger of God. Come in, you who are as dear to me as my father and mother!” The Messenger of God refused to enter. Zaynab had dressed in haste when she was told “the Messenger of God is at the door.” She jumped up in haste and excited the admiration of the Messenger of God, so that he turned away murmuring something that could scarcely be understood. However, he did say overtly: “Glory be to God the Almighty! Glory be to God, who causes the hearts to turn!”

When Zayd came home, his wife told him that the Messenger of God had come to his house. Zayd said, “Why didn’t you ask him to come in?” She replied, “I asked him, but he refused.” “Did you hear him say anything?” he asked. She replied, “As he turned away, I heard him say: ‘Glory be to God the Almighty! Glory be to God, who causes hearts to turn!’”

So Zayd left, and having come to the Messenger of God, he said: “Messenger of God, I have heard that you came to my house. Why didn’t you go in, you who are as dear to me as my father and mother? Messenger of God, perhaps Zaynab has excited your admiration, and so I will separate myself from her.” Zayd could find no possible way to [approach] her after that day. He would come to the Messenger of God and tell him so, but the Messenger of God would say to him, “Keep your wife.” Zayd separated from her and left her, and she became free.

While the Messenger of God was talking with ‘A’ishah, a fainting overcame him. When he was released from it, he smiled and said, “Who will go to Zaynab to tell her the good news, saying that God has married her to me?” Then the Messenger of God recited: “And when you said unto him on whom God has conferred favor and you have conferred favor, ‘Keep your wife to yourself.’” and the entire passage.

According to ‘A’ishah, who said: “I became very uneasy because of what we heard about her beauty and another thing, the

greatest and loftiest of matters—what God had done for her by giving her in marriage. I said she would boast of it over us.”¹⁵

Martin Lings narrates the same story in this way:

It happened one day that he went to speak to his Zayd about something and went to his house. Zayd was out, and Zaynab, not expecting any visitors at that time, was lightly clad. But when she was told that the Prophet had come, she was so eager to greet him that she leapt to her feet and ran to the door, to invite him to stay until Zayd returned. “He is not here, O Messenger of God,” she said, “but comes out in, my father and my mother be thy ransom.” As she stood in the doorway, a radiant figure of joyous welcome, the prophet was amazed at her beauty. Deeply moved, he turned aside, and murmured something which she could not grasp. All she heard clearly were his words of wonderment as he walked away: “Glory be to God the Infinite! Glory be to Him who disposeth men’s hearts!” When Zayd returned she told him of the Prophet’s visit and of the glorification she had heard him utter. Zayd immediately went to him and said: “I have been told thou camest unto my house. Why didst not enter, thou who art more to me than my father and my mother? Was it that Zaynab hath found favor with thee? If it be so, I will leave her.” “Keep thy wife and fear God,” said the Prophet with some insistence. He had said on another occasion: “Of all things licit the most hateful unto God is divorce.” And when Zayd came again the next day with the same proposal, again the Prophet insisted that he should keep his wife. But the marriage between Zayd and Zaynab had not been a happy one, and Zayd found it no longer tolerable, so by mutual agreement with Zaynab he divorced her. This did not, however, make Zaynab eligible as a wife for the Prophet, for although the Koran had only specified that men were forbidden to marry the wives of sons sprung from their loins, it was a strong social principle not to make a distinction between sons by birth and sons by adoption. Nor was the Prophet himself

eligible, for he had already four wives, the most that the Islamic law allows.

Some months passed and then one day when the Prophet was talking with one of his wives the power of Revelation overwhelmed him; and when he came to himself his first words were: "Who will go unto Zaynab and tell her the good tidings that God hath given her to me in marriage, even from Heaven?" Salma was near at hand . . . and she went in haste to Zaynab's house. When she heard the wonderful tidings, Zaynab magnified God and threw herself down in prostration toward Mecca. Then she took off her anklets and bracelets of silver, and gave them to Salma.¹⁶

Zayd is one of the few people to be mentioned by name in the Qur'an, and it is in this very context, of Allah rebuking Muhammad for hiding what Allah had revealed, and that in reference to Muhammad marrying Zayd's divorced wife.

To overcome immediate charges of impropriety (even of incest), a revelation comes down to solve the great and vexing problem of the marriage of divorced wives of adopted sons. Except, of course, it is more than hard to believe this was a great and vexing problem. We would expect the great and vexing problem to be divorce, let alone even the consideration of marrying your former daughter-in-law.¹⁷ But Allah commands his Prophet to break the customs of his day and marry his first cousin.

Again, in the process, incalculable damage has been done to millions of children and families. In distancing himself from his adopted son, whether or not for political purposes (so that there would be none to take Muhammad's place, as Zayd would have), the culture-enriching, humanity-raising, love-engendering institution of adoption was mortally wounded in Islamic society. And upon what authority? *That of the Qur'an.*

Is this not a clear example of the problem with the orthodox view of the Qur'an's nature? Muhammad suddenly goes into some kind of faint and, when he recovers, announces that adoption is undone and Zaynab is his wife—*this* was inscribed in eternity past upon a tablet in Arabic? It seems even Aisha, his favorite (but who clearly experienced much jealousy toward his other wives), recognized an issue, for she is recorded to have said, “I feel that your Lord hastens in fulfilling your wishes and desires.”¹⁸ Certainly this must give one pause in weighing the claims of the Qur'an to status as a divine revelation.

Modern Islamic orthodoxy identifies Muhammad as the ideal man, the model to which all should seek to conform their behavior and lifestyle. Yet here, plainly the Qur'an displays acute embarrassment and must provide an apologetic, a defense of his actions. Many motives are possible, from the seemingly blatant marriage breakup, and the resultant diminishment of the evil of divorce, to the political tensions that were formative of the early generations of Islam and that led to the formation of its two major branches, Sunni and Shia. Whatever the motivation, the attempt to justify Muhammad's actions and their wide-ranging results is obvious and forceful.

The Conquest of Mecca

One might well say it was inevitable. When the Meccans failed repeatedly to crush the small but growing new movement, their own downfall seemed certain. The Muslims expanded through alliances, as Muhammad consolidated Arab tribes under the banner of Islamic monotheism, while the Meccan leadership dwindled and lost influence.

In 628, he marched on Mecca, not to conquer it but to engage in *hajj* (pilgrimage). While the group was stopped from entering,

an agreement known as the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah was worked out that allowed them to return the following year. At the time, certain terms displeased some of Muhammad's followers, yet in hindsight it sealed the fate of the Meccans.

Finally, in 630, Muhammad led a huge force into Mecca, cleansing the Kaaba by removing its idols and establishing himself as Central Arabia's undisputed leader. A relatively small number of people lost their lives, and he actually angered some faithful adherents by treating his former enemies kindly, primarily to advance his cause of bringing together the tribes. All non-Muslims ultimately were driven out of Mecca and Medina, as it is to this day.

Muhammad's Death

Muhammad's remaining days would be short. He continued to build the Islamic nation, setting his sights on expansion northward. The final revelations he received were focused upon obedience to the *sharia* and the propriety of fighting in defense of the *Ummah*, the Muslim people.

The man who often had said he wished to die in jihad died instead on Aisha's lap in her apartment. Sunnis and Shias differ over the cause. One major strand of tradition attributes his death to the lingering effects of poison administered by a woman whose family had been killed by the Muslims. Others reject that Allah's final prophet could die so ignominiously and attribute his passing to stroke or fever. In any case, after a few days of sickness, Muhammad died on Monday, June 8, 632. Tradition says he was sixty-three.

He was buried in Aisha's apartment, a spot over which a green dome stands today. Many Muslims believe the bodies of prophets do not decay and that hence his would look now as it

did the day of his death. A few followers known as the Companions of the Prophet are buried nearby, and by tradition, an empty tomb also is there for the burial of Jesus after He returns.

Now that we have a basic outline of the context out of which the Qur'an arose, let us look briefly at what Muslims believe about it and how it came into its present form, and then we will be able to properly, respectfully, truthfully, and accurately analyze what it says about Jesus and the Christian faith.

Notes

1. Recently published works that raise issues concerning the whole Islamic narrative include Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword* (New York: Doubleday, 2012) and, on a more popular level, Robert Spencer, *Did Muhammad Exist?: An Inquiry into Islam's Obscure Origins* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2012).

2. From a simple historical perspective, the Islamic narrative stands on very thin grounds in its claims. All we know of Abraham comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, which only once mention his coming anywhere near the modern location of Mecca. They record his once going to Egypt, before Ishmael's birth, but he returned to Canaan and died there. There is no evidence that he traveled a thousand miles southeast to a virtually uninhabitable area and built the Kaaba. In fact, that there is almost no evidence even of Mecca's existence prior to the time of Christ is one of the most difficult issues for Islamic apologists to overcome.

3. Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006), 44–45.

4. *The History of Al-Tabari: Muhammad at Mecca*, Vol. VI, trans. W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 71.

5. *Ibid.*, 76.

6. *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, with intro and notes by Alfred Guillaume (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 165–167.

7. *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 2:177; 6:385–6.

8. *Ibid.*, 5:227.

9. See especially *The Life of Muhammad: Al-Wāqidi's Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, recently published in English for the first time. Ed. Rizwi Faizer, trans. Rizwi Faizer, Amal Ismail, and AbdulKader Tayob (London: Routledge, 2011).

10. Historians may argue as to whether the last was really a battle or rather a comparatively short siege, but for our purposes, we will consider it a battle.

11. This is a major area of Christian/Islamic disagreement. Muslims often assert that the extensive nature of Islamic law (the *sharia*) provides guidance in all of life, and Muhammad's example is an integral part of that law. Christianity holds that personal holiness is not through the law's extensiveness but through applying principles of holiness by the indwelling work of God's Holy Spirit. This is why Christianity can transcend cultural boundaries and does not insist on bringing a particular *kind* of culture, instead making application to every culture, calling all believers to holy living within the parameters of where and when they live.

12. We do not enter here into the oft-repeated *hadith* claim that Muhammad possessed supernatural virility. (One *hadith* says Muhammad would "visit all his wives in a round, during the day and night and they were eleven in number. When asked if such was possible, Anas replied, "We used to say that the Prophet was given the strength of thirty (men)" [*Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 1:268].) We might well consider how such can be made conformable to the true evidence of prophethood: godliness, humility, and consistency with God's revealed truth.

13. There is a strong possibility that another vitally significant issue lurks in this story's background. It is too complex for an introductory work, but the reader drawn toward in-depth discussion should see the fine work of David S. Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Powers examines this text together with fascinating textual variations in the most primitive Qur'anic manuscripts. One of the most plausible contextual reconstructions revolves around leadership succession in the Islamic state, probably the key issue through the first decades of its history and what gave rise to the Sunni/Shia split. One theory examined relates to how prophets were supposed to be related to one another and how Muhammad, to be considered the last of the prophets, simply could not have an adult heir. The removal of the adoptive relationship from Zayd (and his eventual death in battle) is crucial to establishing a non-lineage-based succession in the Caliphate. Combine this with Uthman, the third Caliph, being intimately involved in Qur'anic textual redaction, and one can see how imperative further research into the Qur'anic text and its surrounding history really is.

14. Modern Muslims, especially those more Westernized, are scandalized by this account. Some simply dismiss it as without basis. Zaynab was Muhammad's first cousin, and he had given her in marriage to Zayd in the first place—why would he later be struck by her beauty when he had known her all her life? But this objection seems to ignore the fact that the early sources themselves record Muhammad's being flustered by his encounter with Zaynab.

15. *The History of Al-Tabari: The Victory of Islam*, Vol. VIII, trans. Michael Fishbein (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 2-3.

16. Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, 219-220. In an earlier version of the same work (1983), Lings worded the initial encounter at Zayd's house very differently. Specifically, he included: "Zaynab opened the door, and as she stood in the doorway telling him that Zayd was out but inviting him none the less to enter, a look passed between the two cousins, which made each one conscious of a deep and lasting bond of love between them. In a moment the Prophet knew that Zaynab loved him and that he loved her and that she knew he loved her." This does seem to go a good bit beyond historical narration of the events, to be sure.

17. From the earliest records we possess, history records Christians pointing to this incident as evidence against Muhammad. In one of the first defenses of the faith against Islam, Abd al-Masih b. Ishaq al-Kindi, a Christian with some connection to the court of Caliph al-Ma'mun, around AD 820, wrote: "And what of that affair between him and Zaynab? I have no wish to dwell on it here. I have too much respect for the paper on which I write to mention it; were it not for a matter which he has himself noticed and which he asserts was told him from above." *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries (AD 632—900) Translations with Commentary*, ed. N. A. Newman (Hatfield, PA: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 432.

18. *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, 6:311. The specific context was in reference to Surah 33:51, which gave Muhammad special privileges regarding his wives.