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Tahera Qutbuddin, "Muhammad," in Roger Allen and Shawkat Toorawa, eds., I*slam: A Short Guide to the Faith*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Press, 2011, pp. 28-37.

Chapter Three

MUHAMMAD

Tahera Qutbuddin

Early Life in Mecca

Muhammad (d. 632), the "Messenger of God," was born in 570 in the city of Mecca, located in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula. Flanked by two powerful empires — the Sassanids in Persia and the Byzantines in Syria-Palestine — the inhabitants of the peninsula led camel caravans through its arid wastes to trade in those lands. Arabian society was tribal, its security maintained through alliances among the tribes and by mutual threat of blood revenge. Although a few Jewish and Christian tribes lived in parts of the peninsula and in neighboring Syria and Mesopotamia, most of the inhabitants of the region worshiped pagan deities such as Lât, ʿUzza, and Manât. Moreover, the Arabs were largely nomadic; the majority of the tribes migrated with the seasons from one watering place to the next, and a few lived in towns that were settled next to oases, or around shrines built near water springs and dedicated to various deities. Mecca was one of these settled towns, and an important center of commerce and religion. It was home to the Kaʿba, a cubical structure built, according to Islamic belief, as the House of God *(Bayt Allâh)* by the Prophet Adam and later rebuilt by the Prophet Abraham, and converted over time into a pagan shrine. Large numbers of Arabs came to Mecca during the annual pilgrimage season to circumambulate the shrine, and also during the yearly fair at nearby ʿUkâz for trade and cultural exchange.

Mecca's population included the influential tribe of Quraysh, descended according to Muslim tradition from Abraham through his son Ishmael. Mu-

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hammad was born into one of its preeminent clans, the Banû Hâshim, who were the guardians of the Kaʿba. Orphaned at a tender age — his father ʿAbdallah died around the time he was born, and his mother Âmina passed away when he was six — Muhammad was raised by his paternal grandfather, ʿAbd-al-Muttalib, until he was eight, and then by his paternal uncle, Abû-Tâlib. Muhammad became known at an early age for his integrity and honesty, and the Meccans nicknamed him "the Trustworthy One" *(al-Amîn).*

In his youth, Muhammad often traveled to Syria with Abû-Tâlib to trade, and on one of these journeys a wealthy Meccan widow named Khadîja employed him as her commercial agent. Captivated by his uprightness and sagacity, she proposed to him and they were married. Muhammad was then twenty-five, Khadîja about forty. He and Khadîja had two sons, Qâsim and ʿAbdallah, nicknamed Tayyib ("the Good") and Tâhir ("the Pure"), who both died in infancy, and four daughters, Zaynab, Ruqayya, Umm-Kulthûm, and Fâtima, who all survived into adulthood. After Khadîja's death and his subsequent remarriages, Muhammad would have just one more child, a son named Ibrâhîm (Abraham) who also died in infancy. Muhammad's line was destined to continue solely through the progeny of Fâtima and her husband ʿAlî (the son of Abû-Tâlib), a line that would become the locus for the Shiʿite doctrine of the imamate (see "Shiʿites, Shiʿism," chapter 8).

Revelation, Prophecy, and the Birth of Islam

Muhammad was a man given to deep thought, and he regularly spent quiet hours meditating in a cave on Mount Hira outside Mecca. According to Muslim historians, it was here in 610 at the age of forty that he first received God's message, when the archangel Gabriel came to him and instructed, "Recite in the name of your Lord, who created human beings from a blood clot" (Q 96:1-2). This revealed "recitation" *(Qur'ân)* became the first of many that together — in 6,236 verses *(âyât)* and 114 chapters (suras) of varying lengths — would constitute the scripture of Islam, the Qur'an (see "Qur'an," chapter 2).

The early suras laid out some of the fundamentals of Islam. Among the first revelations was the "Sura of Sincerity" (*Ikhlâs,* Q 112:1-4):

> *In the Name of God, Ever Compassionate, Full of Compassion,*
> Say: He is God, Matchless; God, Ceaseless;
> Not begetting and Not begotten; Without a single partner, Peerless.

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With its four pithy verses proclaiming God's unity, this sura comprised the core doctrine of Islam. Another was the "Sura of Praise" *(Hamd),* also called "The Opening" (*Fâtiha,* Q 1:1-7):

> *In the Name of God, Ever Compassionate, Full of Compassion,*
> Praise to the Lord of all Creation, Ever Compassionate, Full of Compassion, Sovereign of The Day of Determination: You alone do we worship, and You alone do we ask for aid. Guide us on the straight path, The path of those you favor, not of those who earn Your wrath, nor of those in deviation.

With its seven short verses of prayer, this sura became a basic invocation in Islam, in status not unlike the Lord's Prayer in Christianity.

Summoned to God's service, Muhammad began calling others to the worship of the one God. He professed the creed that was to become the key testimony *(shahâda)* of Islam: "There is no god but God." At first he approached his wife Khadîja, who accepted Islam, then his young cousin and ward ʿAli. Then, one by one, he brought aboard several members of his clan and other members and affiliates of the Quraysh tribe, including Abû-Bakr and ʿUmar (who later became leaders), until the Muslims numbered a few dozen. Muhammad then began preaching openly to his people and also to the pilgrims who visited Mecca, warning of the transitory nature of this world and the imminence of the hereafter. Emphasizing accountability for one's actions, the early Meccan revelations (and Muhammad's own speeches) painted vivid pictures of the rewards and punishments of one's deeds, embodied in the pleasures of paradise and the tortures of hellfire. They condemned many of the immoral social practices of pagan Arabia such as female infanticide, usury, and blood revenge.

The Meccans were not pleased with Muhammad's activities. Fearing his growing influence and the possible political consequences of the spread of Islam, they began to starve and beat many of the weaker members of the new religion. In 615, Muhammad had to send these followers away for their own safety under the leadership of his cousin Jaʿfar to seek refuge with the Christian ruler of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia in Africa, across the Red Sea from Arabia). In 616, two powerful clans of the Quraysh (Makhzûm and ʿAbd-Shams/Umayya) instituted a social boycott prohibiting interaction with Muhammad's Hâshim clan. Except for Muhammad's paternal uncle Abû-Lahab, who vehemently opposed him, the Hâshimites had by and large supported Muhammad. Abû-Tâlib, their

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chief, had offered him the full protection of the clan; now they lived in dire straits until the boycott ended three years later in 619.

It is from Mecca that Muhammad is believed to have made the Night Journey *(Isrâ')* to the holy land of Jerusalem and to have led all the earlier prophets in congregational prayer there. From Jerusalem, he is said to have attained ascension *(Mi'râj)* to the seven heavens, until he "drew close and yet closer, till he was at a distance of a bow's length or even closer" to God (Q 53:9). Some Muslims regard this as a miraculous physical journey; others deem it to have been a spiritual experience. During the ascension Muhammad received instructions from God to make obligatory the five daily ritual-prayers *(salât).* Indeed, it is during Muhammad's years of preaching in Mecca that he instituted many of the worship rites that would become part of the mandatory "pillars" of Islam.

When Abû-Tâlib and Khadîja both died in 619, the Quraysh stepped up their offensive against Muhammad and the Muslims. Abû-Lahab had become the new Hâshimite chief, and he withdrew the clan's protection from Muhammad, leaving him open to attacks on his very life. Continued residence in Mecca became not only difficult, but dangerous, so Muhammad began looking for a more favorable location for his mission. He journeyed to the neighboring shrine city of Tâ'if, but found its inhabitants from the powerful Thaqîf tribe unwelcoming. Two years later during the 621 pilgrimage season in Mecca, a small delegation from the flourishing northern agricultural settlement of Yathrib came to Muhammad at the hill of ʿAqaba outside Mecca. They accepted Islam and pledged allegiance to Muhammad. Early the following year, in 622, they came again in greater numbers and reached a formal agreement, whereby Muhammad would come to Yathrib as its chief and his followers would enter into its protection. Soon thereafter Muhammad's followers in Mecca began migrating to Yathrib in small groups; they came to be known as the "Emigrants" *(Muhâjirûn),* and along with the Muslims of Medina who gave succor to them, known as the "Helpers" *(Ansâr),* they would be honored by later Muslims for their sincere service to Islam. They would also be known as the Companions *(Sahâba)* of Muhammad. In the spring of that year, Muhammad himself migrated to Yathrib, which from then on was called Madînat al-Nabi, the "City of the Prophet," shortened to Medina. The year of his migration was later marked as year 1 of the lunar Islamic calendar, called the Hijri calendar, from the word *Hijra,* "the Migration."

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TAHERA QUTBUDDIN

The Making of the Muslim Community in Medina

Arriving in Medina in 622, Muhammad embarked upon a new phase; in addition to his role as the Prophet of Islam, he became the political and military head of the nascent Muslim community *(umma)*. The Constitution of Medina — a document preserved by an early historian — lays out in some detail the tribal-religious makeup and political composition of the Medinan community at the time of the Prophet's migration there. Large numbers from both of Medina's pagan tribes of Aws and Khazraj had already converted to Islam when Muhammad arrived, and this continued until both groups were almost entirely Muslim. The three Medinan Jewish tribes of Nadîr, Qurayza, and Qaynuqa' did not convert, but they accepted Muhammad as their political leader and entered into an alliance with the Muslims to defend and protect one another. The Constitution of Medina named "God and His Prophet Muhammad" final arbiter for all the residents of Medina, and made it incumbent upon them to obey Muhammad.

Even as the new community was being set up in Medina, the discord between the Muslims and the Meccans was escalating. Small armed skirmishes between them had begun to take place almost immediately following the migration, preludes to several larger, pitched battles. In 624, a Meccan caravan on its way home from Syria learned of Muhammad's plans to attack it and called up a large military force to engage the much smaller group of three hundred Muslims. In the Battle of Badr (the site of some wells a short distance from Medina), the pagan force was roundly defeated by the Muslims; news of their victory over the powerful Meccans immediately resonated throughout the peninsula, establishing Muhammad as a force to be reckoned with. The Meccans came back to fight the Muslims again in 625 at the Battle of Uhud (the name of a hill just outside Medina), and again in 627 at the Battle of Khandaq (literally "trench," named for the trench the Muslims dug around their city to prevent the Meccans and their allies from entering). There were ups and downs for both sides, but overall, the power of the Meccan Quraysh was clearly slipping.

Meanwhile, conflicts had erupted internally in Medina between the Muslims and the local Jewish tribes. The Constitution of Medina had made Jews equal to Muslims in exchange for political loyalty, but during the Battles of Badr and Uhud, leaders of the Jewish tribes collaborated secretly with the Quraysh to overthrow Muhammad. Consequently in 624 and 625, Muhammad expelled the Qaynuqa' and Nadîr with their families and possessions from Medina. After the Battle of Khandaq in 627, the re-

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maining Jewish tribe was accused of plotting with the Meccans against Muhammad's life. An arbiter was selected jointly by the Muslims and the Jews who passed an execution order against the male members of the Qurayza. Also in the Battle of Khandaq, the Jews of Khaybar (an oasis northwest of Medina that housed large numbers of the erstwhile Medinan Nadîr tribe members) had incited neighboring tribes to join the Meccan confederation against Muhammad. In 628, Muhammad fought and defeated them in the Battle of Khaybar. (See "Islam and Judaism," chapter 13.)

On the Meccan front, Muhammad had signed the Treaty of Hudaybiyya with the Quraysh in 628 agreeing to cease hostilities. But soon thereafter, the Meccans broke the treaty by aiding a third party against a Muslim tribe, and Muhammad declared a resumption of warfare. In the interim of peace, Muhammad had concentrated on proselytizing among the tribes, and by this time about ten thousand peninsula Arabs had converted to Islam. In 630, Muhammad entered Mecca in triumph with a huge army, and took control of the city without bloodshed. He granted amnesty to his erstwhile enemies, and the Quraysh accepted Islam en masse. With the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad's authority in the peninsula became supreme. In the next year, 631, called the Year of the Delegations, tribes from all over the peninsula sent deputations to declare their acceptance of Muhammad as spiritual prophet and political leader. By the end of that year, almost all of Arabia pledged allegiance to Muhammad.

Over the years in Medina, Muhammad had continued to receive revelations that elaborated Islamic doctrine and practice, and were underwritten by a call for community-oriented living and socioeconomic justice. They addressed in detail some of the ritual and legal issues that arose in the early Muslim society, combining spirituality with humane ideals. In the second year of the Hijra came the stipulation of fasting *(sawm)* — dawn-to-dusk abstention, annually during the ninth Muslim month of Ramadan, from all food, drink, and sexual activity. A little later, the Medinan revelations instituted a compulsory yearly alms-tax on wealth *(zakât)* to be collected from all who had the means and distributed among the poor; it was to be considered part of the rites of worship. The suras revealed at this time also set down laws governing civic issues such as marriage and inheritance, and directives dealing with crimes such as stealing and murder. Additionally, these suras dwelt in great detail upon the earlier prophets and their missions, including Moses (the prophet mentioned most in the Qur'an) and Jesus, as well as most biblical prophets and some Arabian ones; they presented Muhammad as the current, the last, and the

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greatest incumbent of divine messengerhood — the "seal of the prophets" *(khâtam al-anbiyâ').* In both their recounting of these issues and independently of them, the Medinan suras continued to encourage Muslims to lead pious lives and be good human beings. In social areas this included caring for orphans, encouraging widow remarriage, and ensuring the well-being of the disadvantaged members of society; in ethical matters, speaking truth, being trustworthy in one's dealings, and nurturing one's fellows; in spiritual issues, establishing regular prayer, and fasting. All these teachings were underpinned by a consistent injunction to God-fearing piety *(taqwa).*

In 631, Muhammad led the annual pilgrimage *(hajj)* to the Kaʿba in Mecca; this too was presented as another compulsory duty in Islam, to be performed by every able Muslim man and woman at least once in his or her lifetime. By bringing Muslims regardless of position, wealth, or gender to stand together in the sight of God, the pilgrimage, in addition to its spiritual function, had a social utility. Muhammad encouraged all the Muslims of the Arabian Peninsula to attend the pilgrimage with him, indicating that this first one of his would also be his last, and large numbers flocked to Mecca. On the return journey, he stopped at the springs of Ghadir Khumm, where, according to the Shiʿites, he publicly appointed ʿAlî his successor. According to the Sunnis, Muhammad's speech at Khumm extolled ʿAlî but had no succession context; they believe the Prophet died without appointing an heir. (See "Sunnis, Sunnism," chapter 9, and "Islamic Government," chapter 11.)

Back in Medina, Muhammad fell ill, and soon thereafter, in 632, at sixty-three years of age, he passed away. In just twenty-three years — thirteen in Mecca and ten in Medina — he had transformed Arabia from an inward-looking, fractured, largely pagan society into a dynamic community of believers united by their faith in the monotheistic teachings of Islam.

Muhammad in Muslim Piety and Literature

Muhammad is a constant presence in the lives of Muslims, as beloved guide and source of comfort in this world, and as intercessor for forgiveness of sins in the next. The Qur'an calls him the embodiment of God's "mercy for all the worlds" (*rahma lil-ʿâlamîn,* Q 21:107), and Muslims earnestly solicit his benevolence. Moreover, they invoke him in their personal lives as well as their public ones, in private contemplation and prayer, and

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in the performance of a myriad of mundane activities. Although there are few images of Muhammad (visual representation is considered reprehensible by many Muslims lest it lead to worship of icons and idols), Muslims laud and quote the Prophet regularly in poetry, Qur'anic exegesis, and theological treatises, and they reference him in their legal activities as well as their spiritual teaching and religious ritual. The historical record of his deeds and words — known collectively as the Prophet's Sunna (tradition), or the Hadith, and individually as hadiths (traditions) — is critically important for Muslims; scholars and laypeople alike consistently cite the Prophetic hadiths alongside the Qur'an as a font of inspiration and a source of guidance. (See "Hadith and Sunna," chapter 4.)

Muslims regard Muhammad as the model of the perfect human being, and the paradigmatic exemplar par excellence. Having reached the pinnacle of human goodness, he is the one to be emulated in all aspects of a Muslim's life. The Qur'an enjoins Muslims to follow his example, saying, "You will find in the Messenger of God a righteous model" (Q 33:21); it emphasizes his high character in the verse "Indeed, you [O Muhammad] possess excellent moral principles" (Q 68:4). Muslim mystics such as Ibn-ʿArabî (d. 1240) and Jalâl-al-dîn Rûmî (d. 1273) consider Muhammad one of the highest links in the initiate's spiritual chain to God, the saints themselves being illuminated by the "Muhammadan light" (see "Sufism," chapter 7). Philosophers such as Ibn-Sîna (Avicenna, d. 1037) deem him a perfect intellectual who was also a perfect communicator, one who received the highest truths and was able to convey them to mankind (see "Islamic Philosophy," chapter 6). And Shiʿites such as Mu'ayyad Shîrâzî (d. 1078) find in him both the embodiment of an angelic being and the zenith of humanity in the perfect fruition of the faculty of reason.

Muhammad has been the subject of a large body of Islamic literature, in languages ranging from Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu to Swahili, Malay, Hausa, and English; in historical writings and biographies of the Prophet *(sîra);* and in treatises on specialized topics such as the Prophet's Night Journey to Jerusalem and ascent to heaven. One of the most prominent genres in Muhammad-related Muslim literature is praise poetry *(naʿt* and *madh).* The tradition began in the Prophet's lifetime itself, with Hassân-ibn-Thâbit writing verses praising Muhammad and defending him against the invective of the Meccan poets, and the newly converted Kaʿb-ibn-Zuhayr addressing a panegyric to him after the conquest of Mecca called the "Ode of the Mantle" *(Qasîdat al-Burda).* Poetry composed in praise of the Prophet developed yet further in medieval times to

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become a prominent literary genre. The high point of the tradition came in the form of the Egyptian Berber poet al-Busîri's (d. ca. 1296) 160-line Arabic encomium of the same name as Kaʿb's "Ode of the Mantle." Al-Busîri's ode attracted numerous commentaries and adaptations, and was imitated time and again across different periods, places, and languages. In South Asia, the tradition was emulated with vigor, and Âzâd Bilgrâmî (d. 1785), author of lyrical Arabic poems, came to be likened to Muhammad's own panegyrist.

Muhammad is known by many names and titles, which reflect his standing in the eyes of the Muslims and their relationship to him. Most commonly, he is called the Prophet *(nabî)* and the Messenger of God (*rasûl Allah* in Arabic, *payghambar* in Persian, Turkish, and Urdu). He is also described by the Qur'anic epithets "warner" *(nadhîr),* "bringer of good tidings" *(bashîr),* "witness" *(shâhid),* "shining lamp" *(sirâj munîr),* "one who summons" (others to God) *(dâʿî),* and *ummî* (interpreted by some to mean "unlettered," and thus a pure vessel for God's message, and by others to be "of a community, *umma*"). He is further known by the names Ahmad (a variation of Muhammad, literally "praiseworthy"), Mustafa and Mukhtar (both meaning "the chosen one"), and Tâhâ and Yâsîn (two names for him in the Qur'an). The name Muhammad — along with its derivatives Ahmad, Mahmûd, and Hamada in Arabic, and its renditions into other languages as Mehmet, Mamadou, and Amadou — is said to be the most common given name in the world.

Muhammad is credited by Muslims with the performance of miracles *(muʿjiza).* Many say his greatest miracle is the Qur'an and its divine guidance. But they also relate more physical wonders, particularly at his birth, such as a large crack appearing suddenly in the grand hall of the Persian monarch Chosroes, signaling the end of the mighty Persian Empire at his hands; later, a cloud continuously moved over Muhammad to give him shade, protecting him from the hot desert sun. One of the most famous miracles attributed to Muhammad is the splitting of the moon at his behest, validating him as God's messenger, one whom the very elements obey. These miracles are prominent themes in Muslim literary works.

For most Muslims, a visit *(ziyâra)* to Muhammad's tomb at Medina is a dearly beloved aspiration, and they consider it a source of healing *(shifâʾ)* and grace *(baraka).* Indeed, a visit to the Prophet's earthly resting place — to perform the ritual prayer in his mosque and pay respects at his grave — is deemed a duty alongside the required pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Qur'an enjoins Muslims to invoke peace and blessings *(salawât)*

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upon the Prophet, in the verse: "Verily, God and His angels invoke blessings upon the Prophet. O you who believe, you too invoke blessings upon him and send greeting of peace" (Q 33:56). The most commonly used form of the invocation is "O God, shower blessings and peace upon Muhammad and his progeny," and the Sunnis (and sometimes the Shiʿites too) add "and upon his Companions." Muslims recite this blessings formula alongside their own individual and collective prayers, with religious ritual; at the opening and closing of speeches, sermons, and treatises on religious and secular topics; and often apart from any specific occasion. They also invoke blessings upon Muhammad whenever they mention his name.

The way Muslims revere Muhammad is different from the way Christians revere Christ. For Christians, Jesus is the Son of God, part of the Holy Trinity, and himself divine. For Muslims, Muhammad (like Jesus before him) is a creature of God, not a deity; God transcendent is indivisible and "one . . . not begetting and not begotten." Muslims do not worship Muhammad; they are followers of Muhammad inasmuch as they accept his message. But in the manner detailed above, Muhammad is a constant presence in their lives. They invoke him constantly as guide and model, as intercessor and friend, and as the prophet who taught them to lead a righteous life and to worship the one true God. They reaffirm his divine messengerhood — and their deep personal bond with him — in each of their five daily ritual prayers, with the muezzin's chanted call that echoes the key Islamic doctrine cited earlier: "I bear witness that there is no god but God. I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

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