

## Chapter Nineteen

### Muhammad and the Beginnings of Islam

Between the third century and the sixth God replaced the gods throughout much but not all of western Eurasia and North Africa. Still pagan were the people living in regions that were not readily accessible from the great centers of civilization in the Mediterranean and the Near East: like sub-Saharan Africa, the far north of Europe was too remote to have been affected by Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeism or Zoroastrianism. Another largely pagan region, closer to the Mediterranean but difficult to traverse because of its lack of water, was the Arabian peninsula. Most of the bedouin tribes that roamed this land in the sixth century still worshiped their ancestral gods.

#### **Arabia and its inhabitants before the birth of Muhammad: the Hijaz, Asir and Saba**

The Arabian peninsula lies on the same latitude as the Sahara desert, divided from it by the Red Sea. Like the Sahara, the peninsula receives little or no rain and much of it either is barren or supports only scrub vegetation. Although much of the peninsula was too dry even for pastoralists, an exception was the land bordering the Red Sea. At the southwestern tip of the peninsula was Saba, roughly corresponding to today's Yemen, from which came frankincense, myrrh and spices. Stretching northward from Saba was Asir, a narrow corridor several hundred miles long and hemmed in between the sea and the Asir mountains, some of which rise to 10,000 feet. Here rainfall was sufficient (up to twenty inches annually) to permit farming of grain, fruit and vegetables on the terraced foothills. North of the Asir was a much wider land called the Hijaz, and this was inhabited by Arabic-speaking pastoralists. The Hijaz lies between the Red Sea and the Hijaz mountains, a low chain that crests (at 4000 feet) in the Jebel Shammar. East of these mountains is the red Nafud desert, which receives only two or three inches of rain a year. West of the mountains, the Hijaz is blest with as much as ten inches of rain, a gift from the Red Sea. Although insufficient for farming, the moisture was enough to support the pasturing of sheep, goats, camels and horses. From Mecca (Makkah) in the south to the Gulf of Aqaba in the north, the Hijaz spans some seven hundred miles.

In sharp contrast to the desert and semi-desert are the occasional oases, spots of lush vegetation made possible by voluminous natural springs, often supplemented by dug wells. Less spectacular in the Hijaz were settlements in drainage basins where groundwater was plentiful. The more important settlements in northwestern Arabia were - from south to north - Ta'if, Mecca, Yathrib (Medina), Khaybar, Dedan, Tema, Tabuk, and Duma. In the sixth century these settlements - seldom less than fifty and often more than a hundred miles apart - were thickly settled, the towns being interdependent with the bedouin tribes round about. The largest city by far was Yathrib, with a population in five figures. Smaller oases supported towns of a few thousand inhabitants or villages of several hundred. The typical oasis settlement included carpenters, smiths, potters, weavers and other craftsmen and merchants. Except for Duma, all of the major oases named above were within reach of the Hijaz. Nomadic tribes - the bedouin -

pastured their sheep and goats on the thin vegetation of the Hijaz, moving their tents across the semi-desert, following the wells and wadis, and stopping at the oases to exchange their animals and fleeces for tools, weapons, and trinkets.

While Saba and the Asir had been inhabited already in the neolithic period, by agriculturalists who probably spoke a language akin to Ge'ez (the South Semitic language of ancient Ethiopia), the Hijaz and the adjacent oases were hardly inhabited before the end of the second millennium BC. It was not until then that people were able to ride horses and camels securely.<sup>1</sup> With horses and camels it was possible for pastoralists to penetrate the semi-desert and for some of them to settle down in the oases. The people who moved into the Hijaz came from the Levant and spoke a Northwest Semitic language closely related to Hebrew, Phoenician and Aramaic. By ca. 700 BC the pastoralists' language had evolved into Proto-Arabic, which subsequently split into the various regional languages of northern Arabia that are attested in inscriptions. Some of the pastoralists near Edom were called "Midianites," but more generally they were called *arabim* in their own language and in Hebrew, and *arabioi* in Greek (the name may have meant "wanderers", but the etymology is uncertain). These "Arabians" gave their name to the land that they peopled. Until Hellenistic times "Arabia" was just the northern part of the desert, but as Greek navigators mapped the shores of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf, they extended the name to the entire peninsula.

By far the most favored part of the peninsula was that which fell within the kingdom of Saba, and later of Himyar, the Judaization of which was discussed in the first pages of the preceding chapter. This prosperous region, corresponding roughly to modern Yemen, was separated from Africa only by the straits of Bab al-Mandab (the western tip of Yemen is visible from the African coast). Not surprisingly, Ethiopians and Sabaeans were in close contact with each other all through antiquity. In the Hellenistic period trade from India began to come to the ports of Saba, and this trade was much increased after sailors learned to exploit the monsoon winds. Cargo destined for Ptolemaic ports continued on shipboard through the Red Sea, and other cargo was carried by camel caravans through southern Arabia, the Hijaz and Petra to Damascus and other cities of the Levant. In the second or third century CE Himyarites defeated the Sabaeans, and a Himyarite dynasty ruled the land until - ca. 525 - it was conquered by Ethiopia. Although located in what we call the Arabian peninsula, ancient Saba, Himyar and Asir were in no sense "Arabic": their inhabitants did not speak the Arabic language and they made a distinction between themselves and "the Arabians." In generalizing about "the Arabians" we must therefore exclude the Sabaeans and Himyarites and restrict ourselves to the Arabic-speaking inhabitants of the Hijaz and the rest of the northern and central peninsula.

### **Economy and society in pre-Islamic Arabia**

Throughout antiquity Arabic society was both local and tribal.<sup>2</sup> The tribe (in Arabic, the *qabīla*) was in theory and myth a kinship group, descended from a common ancestor, and was in practice a mutual aid group. It was composed of clans, each of which was in turn composed of lineages, and in each lineage were several extended families. These "blood ties" were never forgotten and always important. Less urgent and more negotiable was the local community, whether an oasis town or a bedouin encampment. A large town, such as Yathrib, might house

several tribes, but the primary loyalty of every man at Yathrib was to his *qabīla*, not to the town. Among the bedouin the local and kin communities were less complicated. In a bedouin encampment of fifteen or twenty tents the men would belong to several families and perhaps to several lineages, but almost always they were of the same clan and invariably of the same tribe. Islam provided a community much wider than the tribe but did not put an end to the tribal system.

It was the tribe that provided - for the encampment, the family, and the individual - the protection needed to survive in a stateless society. If an encampment was attacked by outsiders, it was the solemn duty of the tribe to exact vengeance. Although loosely spread out over many encampments, the tribe was nevertheless a community, ranging in population (men, women and children) from a few thousand to tens of thousands. Early in the seventh century the Arabians seem to have numbered about two million and were divided into several dozen tribes. Typically, a tribe had a territory - each with well-known springs, wells and wadis and at least one oasis town within reach - through which its encampments moved and which it defended against would-be intruders. Although all Arabians observed "holy months" in which warfare was forbidden and the many tribes gathered for religious celebrations, during the rest of the year hostilities between tribes were frequent. The very solidarity and the territorial prerogatives of the single *qabīla* encouraged inter-tribal rivalries and feuds.

In day-to-day life, enemies from within one's own clan, or tribe, were encountered much more frequently than enemies from another tribe. Against your own clansmen or tribesmen your protection came from your lineage, which was your most immediate community and your first line of defense. As a young man you may have been relatively vulnerable, but you were the son, brother, nephew and cousin of many brave men who lived nearby and would be quick either to defend or to avenge you. These were the kinship networks that protected you in a pre-state society, and that would make a hostile acquaintance think twice about striking or even insulting you. In exchange for the protection provided by your kin-group you were of course required to stand up for anyone else in your kin-group who was victimized by an outsider. Every lineage had its own acknowledged leader, almost always an older man who was respected for his wealth and wisdom, and whom the entire lineage looked to for guidance and approval. Individualism was not much prized in such a society: individuals who cut themselves off from their kin in order to strike out on their own were not likely to survive very long. When a man needed to visit another settlement, he typically requested the protection of a clan or at least of a lineage that was respected in that settlement.

Arabic men usually, although not always, married within their own tribe. Although by Late Antiquity polygamy was long obsolete in most of the civilized world it was still common in Arabic society. The number of a man's wives, like the number of his camels and other animals, was a rough index of his wealth and prestige. Polygamy was in part a reflection of the endemic warfare of pre-Islamic Arabia. When a man was killed in battle, his widows were normally taken (with their children) as wives by his surviving comrades. Only with this kind of "insurance" could a married man be asked to risk his life on the battlefield. After winning the battle at Badr, for example, Muhammad saw to it that the widows of his slain followers were taken in marriage by those of the victors who had the wherewithal to support additional wives.

Arabic society also included slaves, who typically had been captured in raids on other tribes or on lands bordering the Arabian desert.

The tribesman earned his livelihood by tending his livestock. Camels and horses provided milk and occasionally meat as well as transportation, and were most highly valued. More numerous by far were sheep and goats, which provided not only milk and meat but also wool and hair, goat's hair serving very well for tenting (according to Exodus 26: 7 Yahweh had ordered the Israelites to make his tabernacle tent out of eleven curtains of goat's hair). One domesticated animal totally unsuited to the semi-desert was the pig, which soon sickens and dies in that climate.<sup>3</sup> For the nomadic Arabians, as for the Israelites, the eating of pork was forbidden.

The tribesman was of necessity also a warrior. A tribe had no army because it *was* an army. In the open country the tribesman had to be ready to defend himself, his family, his livestock and his encampment not only from members of hostile tribes but also from predatory animals. The young boy was therefore early introduced to weapons, both long-range and hand-to-hand. Most expensive was the composite bow, which could be purchased from the bowyers in Yathrib, and iron swords and cutlasses were also highly prized. The contrast between the warlike Arabic tribesmen and the pacific inhabitants of the Sassanid and Roman empires was almost complete.

### **Languages, literacy, and a pre-literary society**

Some forty thousand graffiti and a small number of formal inscriptions show that many Arabians were able to read and write at a relatively early date.<sup>4</sup> In the oases of Tema and Duma an original North Arabian (Proto-Arabic) language diverged into Temaitic and Dumaitic respectively, and at the Dedan oasis into Dedanitic and Lihyānite. All of these languages are attested by many inscriptions and graffiti in various alphabetic scripts. Individuals who belonged to the Thamūd, a tribe or tribal coalition in northern Arabia, left behind several thousand inscriptions. Some of the earliest Thamūdic inscriptions (dating from the sixth century BC) come from the Tema oasis, but most of them come from further north and date to the later centuries BC and the early centuries CE. Thousands more inscriptions, in a related script and language, come from an area centered at Safa, a place on the western fringe of the Arabian desert and roughly a hundred miles due east of the Sea of Galilee. The earliest of the Safaitic inscriptions date from the first century BC, and the latest from the third century CE.

The language conventionally called Arabic - the language, that is, in which Muhammad recited the suras of the Quran - was closely related to and cognate with Thamūdic, Safaitic, Dedanitic and the others, but was nevertheless clearly distinct from them by the fourth century CE. In other words, by that time these were no longer multiple dialects of a single language but were a constellation of separate languages. It is probable, however, that - like Spanish and Italian today - most of these North Arabian languages were still similar enough that with some effort, application and confusion they were mutually intelligible. In any case, the oasis dwellers were at least bilingual and a few of them may have been able to understand almost all of the languages cognate with their own. After the spread of Islam throughout the peninsula, the

language of Muhammad was dispersed over all of Arabia and so its conventional name - "Arabic" - is appropriate. But in the early seventh century "Arabic" was obviously just one of many languages spoken in the Arabian peninsula.

One explanation for the origins of the language called Arabic is that its differentiation from the other North Arabian languages was simply the result of geographical isolation, as was the case with the oases languages. "Arabic," in other words may have been the language of the Hijaz and so may have been a regional cognate of Thamūdic, Safaitic and the languages of the various oases. An alternative explanation is that "Arabic" was a poetic *koine*, and that although it was nobody's language in daily life it was the language in which all poets - no matter where in Arabia they lived - traditionally composed their poems. Still another explanation, which seems to me most likely, is that Arabic was the *lingua franca* of the central and northern parts of the Arabian peninsula, and the first language of most of the bedouin tribesmen, whether inside or outside the Hijaz. Unlike the inhabitants of the oases, most of the bedouin were illiterate. Pre-Islamic inscriptions in "Arabic" are very rare, and the few that have been found are much later than those in Thamūdic, Safaitic and the several other languages that evolved in the several oases. Although it may have been the vernacular of a million bedouin, Arabic seems to have had less prestige than the other languages of northern Arabia. The earliest known inscription in what we call the Arabic language was found in the desert southeast of Damascus, and therefore far to the north of the Hijaz. Dating from 328 CE, it graces the tomb and celebrates the great deeds of Imru' al-Qays, who called himself "king of the Arabians."<sup>5</sup> The text was inscribed in a script derived from the Aramaic alphabet used by the Nabataeans. Over the next three centuries that script evolved toward the classical form of the Arabic script, and literacy among Arabic speakers may have become more common. At Mecca certainly many of Muhammad's contemporaries were able to read and write,<sup>6</sup> although an "epigraphic habit" in the Arabic language did not begin until well into the Islamic period.

It is also important to observe that apparently neither in "Arabic" nor in any of the other North Arabian languages had anyone written a book before the publication of the Quran.<sup>7</sup> In other words, although an elementary and utilitarian literacy in one or more of the North Arabian languages extended back more than a millennium before the birth of Muhammad, on present evidence we must conclude that in none of these languages had a *literature* been produced. This is not surprising. For the last five hundred years almost all the languages of the civilized world have been literary languages. In antiquity things were very different. In the great majority of the ancient languages a literary tradition - the writing and reading of books - either was very late in making its appearance or never appeared at all. The catalyst for the inception of a literary tradition was often Christianity, a religion based on not only a book but a book that could be translated into any language without losing its authority. Amid the general absence of literary traditions in antiquity the striking exceptions were Greek and Latin, although even in Latin no literature was produced until late in the third century BC, five hundred years after Latin speakers had first learned to write. In Aramaic too a literary tradition began no earlier than the Hellenistic period, and in many other languages a literary tradition never began at all. Macedonian, Thracian, Phrygian, the western Anatolian languages (Carian, Lycian, Lydian), the Keltic languages of western Europe, and the pre-Roman languages of Italy all died out without ever having served as vehicles for literature.

It is therefore not at all an anomaly that for a very long time many tribesmen in northern Arabia had been able to read and write their languages, but that both in the Hijaz and elsewhere in northern Arabia society remained at the pre-literary level. An important intellectual consequence was that those Arabians who could read and write had no *auctores* (authors, authorities) whose texts they could read and evaluate, and with whose views they could agree or disagree. This kind of intellectual activity and literary discourse had begun when the first prose writers appeared in Greece in the fifth century BC, and for the educated elite a predominantly oral culture began to give way to a culture of the written word. Over the next six hundred years this literary culture spread - albeit thinly - over much of the Hellenistic world and the Roman empire, and by the second century CE a book-reading minority could be found in all of civilized Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Among Arabic speakers, however, even in the seventh century CE a literary culture had not yet begun. As a result, the prerequisites for entering into extended arguments or for dealing critically with abstract ideas were not available.

Although in pre-Islamic times (and in fact until late in the eighth century) Arabic society was oral rather than literary, a noteworthy feature of that society was the recitation of poetry. The best of the Arabic bards sang their songs during the annual fair at 'Ukāz, near the al-Ta'if oasis and well south of Mecca. At the 'Ukāz fair all of the tribes congregated to buy and sell, and a competition was held with a prize given for the best poem. Celebrated poets did much to shape an Arabic culture. In the eighth and ninth century a large corpus of Arabic poetry that had been composed by "the suspended poets" of pre-Islamic times was collected and written down in books, and so has been preserved. According to the standard aetiology for the adjective, "suspended," the pagan Meccans honored a talented poet by "suspending" his poems on the walls of the Ka'ba, but the aetiology is evidently an invention.<sup>8</sup> However that may be, it is agreed all round that the poems were orally composed and were orally transmitted over the generations. The poets sang of victorious battles, of successful raids, and of their love affairs. The imagery is vivid and sensual, and is evidence that in the pre-Islamic period the Arabians delighted in figurative language and poetic diction. An especially admired sixth-century poet was Imru' al-Qays, the namesake of the celebrated fourth-century king.

### **The neglect of Arabia by the imperial powers**

Because northern Arabia was so difficult to traverse and had no products that the ancients valued, it was not considered worth conquering. The Assyrian empire, from the tenth through most of the seventh century BC, took the form of a crescent above the Arabian desert. In the middle of the sixth century BC Nabonidus the Chaldaean spent years at the Tema oasis and may have contemplated adding other oases to his empire, based at Babylon. If so, however, the plan came to naught. Neither Cyrus nor the Achaemenid kings of Persia took the trouble to subdue Arabia, regarding it as an impoverished wilderness. They required Arabian cooperation only when Cambyses made a great overland expedition against Egypt and had necessarily to cross through the Sinai peninsula (Arabian tribesmen came with thousands of camels to transport drinking water for Cambyses' army as it made its transit of the Sinai). Even the Ptolemies and the Seleukids, although recipients of trade that came north from Saba, made no serious attempt at conquests in Arabia.

Soon after the death of Alexander the Great an Arabic tribe known as the Nabataeans settled at Petra, a natural fortress south of the Dead Sea. Petra was watered by the spring of the Wadi Musa (the “wadi of Moses,” Muslim folk history explaining that the spring was created when Moses struck the rock to bring forth water). At Petra the Nabataeans were in a position either to threaten or to protect the caravan trade that came north from the Hijaz or from the port of Eilat (Aqaba). By the second century BC the Nabataeans had evolved from a tribe to a state, ruled by kings, and in the chaos that followed the breakup of Seleukid power the Nabataean monarchy was a formidable power in the Levant. Although their vernacular was one of the North Arabian languages, many Nabataeans also learned Aramaic and Greek (the few inscriptions found at Petra are in those languages).

Pompeius established Roman control over the Levant in the 60s BC, but the Romans seem never to have contemplated extending their empire through the Arabian desert. In 106 CE Trajan conquered the Nabataeans and annexed Petra, creating a province that he called *Arabia Petraea* and constructing a military road from Damascus to the Gulf of Aqaba. But the Romans’ *Arabia Petraea* extended no further than a few dozen miles from the highway. Just as the Romans considered the Arabian desert to be a natural frontier, so the Parthians and Sassanids made no attempt to subdue northeastern Arabia, their empires effectively ending at the desert edge of Mesopotamia.

Because the ancient empires found it unprofitable to dominate Arabia militarily and politically, its inhabitants were unaffected by many of the cultural and religious currents that moved through the civilized world. The Hijaz and the rest of Arabia (except perhaps for Saba) lay outside what the Hellenes called the *oikoumenē*: “the inhabited world.” In many respects the world of the nomadic Arabic tribes in the early seventh century CE was not much different from the world that their ancestors had known fifteen hundred years earlier.

### **The Ghassan, the Lakhm, and Arabic raiders**

The Arabians were thus for a long time “barbarians,” outside the pale of ancient civilization. Like the Germanic barbarians of the far north, they were aware that the cities of the Roman empire were wealthy and poorly defended, and in the third century CE they began raiding villages, towns and sometimes even fortified cities within striking distance of the desert. The Arabic raiders would proceed through the desert for days or even weeks until they came close to their target. At that point they would set up a temporary encampment near the desert’s edge. Leaving the camels in the custody of a few guards, the raiders would mount their horses and ride toward the target city in the hours before dawn, hoping to surprise the watchmen and the garrison. If the raiders were successful in gaining entrance to the city they would slay whatever other defenders they found, loot the city, and then ride off into the desert with their booty. By the time Roman reinforcements arrived at the scene, the raiders would have vanished. For Roman cavalry to track the raiders through the desert would have been a fool’s errand.

The Romans’ response to the threat of desert raiders was to employ cooperative Arabic tribes, and entrust to them the task of guarding the empire’s perimeter.<sup>9</sup> In the chaotic years of

the third century various Roman emperors made alliances with the Tanukh tribe, the strongest in the northwestern corner of the Arabian desert, and the alliance more or less held through most of the fourth century. During the reign of Constantine the Tanukh were converted to a Nicene form of Christianity, and by the 370s they had a quasi-monarchy in the person of Queen Mawiyya. When Valens tried to convert the Tanukh from trinitarian to monotheist (Arian) Christianity they renounced their alliance with Rome and under Mawiyya's direction they raided Roman territory as far as the Nile. By Mawiyya's time Greek and Latin writers had begun calling the Arabians *Sarakenoi* (*Saraceni*), and "the Saracens" were regarded as an intractable although not a mortal menace.<sup>10</sup> In the early fifth century the emperors in Constantinople made an alliance with the Salih tribe and then, in the 470s, with the Ghassan. The Ghassan, who had become Monophysite Christians, remained the empire's "peacekeepers" on the Arabian frontier until the seventh century. Although in turn the Tanukh, Salih and Ghassan tribesmen did reduce the raiding by their fellow "Saracens" from the desert's interior, the raiding was never stopped and in Muhammad's day it was assumed that any bedouin tribe, given the chance, would conduct a raid on a tempting target.

The Sassanid rulers likewise allied themselves with Arabic frontier tribes in order to prevent raids on the cities of Mesopotamia. On the northeastern fringe of the desert the strongest tribe was the Lakhm. By the fifth century the Lakhm were Nestorian Christians, as were many of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia. The Lakhm continued to serve as allies of the Sassanids until the Muslim conquest of Mesopotamia in the 630s. In appreciation for its services the Sassanids permitted the Lakhmid tribe to build for itself the city of al-Hira, on the west bank of the Euphrates in central Mesopotamia, and outside of Hira the Lakhmids set up a Nestorian Christian monastery.

### **Polytheistic religion in pre-Islamic Arabia**

In Muslim eyes, the period before Muhammad is *al-jahiliyya*, "the time of ignorance." A few tribes on the fringes of the civilized world - such as the Lakhm, Tanukh and Ghassan - had been Christianized, and by the early seventh century many of the other bedouin tribesmen had heard at least second-hand reports about both Christianity and Judaism. For the tribesmen religious practices and beliefs were a welter of the old and the new, with God standing shoulder-to-shoulder among the gods. A Meccan chronicler, al-Azraqi, reports that in the pre-Islamic Ka'ba at Mecca, alongside the idols of the three goddesses, "there was a picture of Abraham as an old man and performing divination by the shaking of arrows, and a picture of Jesus son of Mary and his mother, and a picture of angels."<sup>11</sup>

Most of the tribes, however, were still nominally polytheistic and continued their sacrifices to the old gods. Some of these gods were represented in images - small statues or figurines - but others were aniconic. Many of the gods were local, each the master (*dhu*) of a particular oasis or mountain. The Nabataeans of Petra, before their conversion to Christianity, had paid cult especially to Dhushara, or "Master of the Shara" (the Shara was the crescent of sandstone mountains that almost enclosed Petra), and at the oasis of Dedan the chief god was Dhu Ghaba.<sup>12</sup> A tribe or even a clan might have its own patron god or goddess, but other deities were worshiped by all of the pagan tribes.<sup>13</sup> For the pagan Nabataeans the second most popular

deity had been the goddess al-‘Uzza, equated with Venus and Aphrodite, and al-‘Uzza was also one of the three goddesses at the Ka‘ba in Mecca. At the time of their festivals, fixed in the lunar calendar, the tribes observed a truce so that those who wished could safely make a pilgrimage (*hajj*) to the traditional sanctuary where the idols were kept.

The senior god in the pre-Islamic pantheon of Arabia was Allāh, or “the god.” The old Arabic word *ilāh* was cognate with the Hebrew word *eloah* (the singular of *elohim*) and meant, simply, “a god.” For the head of their pantheon the Arabians prefixed the definite article *al* to the word *ilāh* and used the resultant *al-ilāh*, “the god,” as a proper name. Over time the short vowel *i* was elided, and so the god’s name became *allāh* (the Arabic script does not differentiate between upper-case and lower-case letters). In the time of the Assyrian empire Allah may have played among Arabic speakers a role similar to that played by El among the Northwest Semitic speakers of the Levant. Allah was a celestial and aniconic god, with no shrine of his own,<sup>14</sup> but most Arabians regarded him as the father of the three goddesses worshiped at Mecca. By the seventh century some Arabians had begun to regard him as God, synonymous with what they knew of the Judaeans’ Adonai and the Christians’ God the Father.

In keeping with their polytheistic understanding of the world, the early Arabians supposed that a host of spirits - the *jinn* - populated the desert and could either help or hurt people who entered their haunts. All of the *jinn* were supposed to have been created from smokeless fire. Helpful *jinn* or “genies” are familiar to everyone who has heard the story of Aladdin’s Lamp, but other *jinn* were imagined as baleful spirits, usually winged although some could take the form of dogs or snakes.

Not much is known about the religious rituals of pagan Arabia. As elsewhere, worshipers sought the gods’ help through sacrifice, although neither in the Quran nor in Ibn al-Kalbi’s *Book of Idols* is much attention given to this subject. The slaughter of a large animal was regarded as a sacrifice to one or more of the gods, although in effect it was a time for community feasting. As summarized by Robert Hoyland, “among the pastoral tribes, animal sacrifice was a very commonly practised form of offering. It was principally domestic beasts that were selected, especially camel, sheep and oxen.”<sup>15</sup> First-born animals were favorite gifts to the gods.

Although the inscriptions and other pre-Islamic sources make occasional references to priests in Arabia, it is clear that priests and priesthood did not play much of a role in religion. Sacrifices could be performed by any man who wished the gods’ favor, and although sacrifices at specified holy places were deemed most effective, the typical god was pleased to receive a sacrificial offering anywhere. In divination too the individual could pose a question to the god, without a priest or priestess serving as intermediary. In the most common form of divination, the person seeking an oracle was blindfolded and then drew one of the many arrows in a quiver, each of the arrows having been inscribed with a command.

The bedouin of pre-Islamic Arabia seem to have had few concerns about the Afterlife. Although a tribe did venerate and even worship its ancestor, the ordinary dead were not the recipients of cult. Heaven and Hell were not yet familiar concepts to the bedouin, and after

death a person was supposed to continue a quasi-existence in the grave. The dead were in no position to help their survivors, but “appear rather as beings deprived of protection, needing the charity of the living.”<sup>16</sup>

## **Judaism and Christianity in the Yemen and on the Arabian frontiers**

As we have seen, the Himyarite kingdom along the southwestern coast of the Arabian peninsula, in what is today Yemen, had become Judaeen by the beginning of the fifth century. Somewhat earlier, Christianity had been declared the religion of the Aksumite kingdom in Ethiopia, just across the Bab al-Mandab straits from Yemen, and evidently the Jewish tradition of the Falashas in Ethiopia had begun still earlier. On the Arabian side of the straits, by the beginning of the sixth century the small city of Najrān had been Christianized (Najrān lay just to the east of Himyar and is now on the border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen). Christianity’s roots in southwest Arabia may have preceded its establishment in Ethiopia. A Christian myth transmitted by Eusebius credited St. Bartholomew with bringing the gospel to Saba.<sup>17</sup> In another Christian tradition, miracles worked by the missionary Theophilus (who had been dispatched to the area by Emperor Constantius) converted the Himyarite king and for a time Himyar was Christian.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, the tradition explained, the Christians were persecuted by Judaeans and were virtually exterminated when the last of the Judaeen kings of Himyar, Dhu Nawas, attacked Najran and burned hundreds (or thousands) of Christians in a great pit. That atrocity is thought to have occurred ca. 520. In retaliation for the atrocity, the Christian king of Ethiopia invaded Himyar ca. 525, killed Dhu Nawas, and put an end to the Himyarite dynasty.<sup>19</sup> Despite the Himyarite kingdom’s demise, Judaism remained the dominant religion of the region for a very long time, even after Yemen was conquered by Muslim armies. At the same time, the city of Najran was Christian and became tributary to Muhammad and the Muslims.

While paganism in the Sabaean southwest had shriveled by Late Antiquity, among Arabic speakers it was still the norm. There were, nevertheless, exceptions along the peninsula’s frontiers. As indicated above, by the early seventh century a number of bedouin tribes on the fringes of the Fertile Crescent had been converted to Christianity. The Lakhm in the northeastern desert and the Ghassan in the northwest were Christians, the former belonging to the Nestorian and the latter to the Monophysite communion. Already by the middle of the fourth century the Tanukh had declared themselves adherents of the Nicene creed.

That the Christian faith of the bedouin tribes was profound or well-informed is not likely. At Hira, as we have seen, the Lakhm set up a monastery and the northwestern tribes constructed small churches, but these were few in number. Because Arabian society was tribal, and because loyalty to the tribe was imperative for all individuals, the conversion to Christianity seems often to have been a tribal affair. We may suppose that when tribesmen came in close contact with Christianity they began an extended debate, some leaders declaring that only by joining the new religion could the tribesmen avoid the fires of Hell, while others believed that abandoning the old gods would be disastrous. Once the decision to convert had been made, however, most of the tribesmen must have accepted the decision, whatever personal misgivings or fears they may have harbored.

We have a first-hand account of the Christianizing of large crowds of Arabic bedouin in the second quarter of the fifth century. The holy man responsible for the conversion was Simeon- or Symeon - Stylites, the most renowned of Syria's "pillar saints." From his youth until his death in 459 Simeon stayed atop his fifty-foot pillar in the Syrian desert, some forty miles east of Antioch, and great crowds came out to the desert to see and to receive a blessing from the anchorite monk. One distinguished visitor to Simeon's pillar was Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus (a city in northern Syria), and Theodoret later described what he saw at the pillar's base:

[Even the bedouin] in many thousands, enslaved to the darkness of impiety, were enlightened by the station upon the pillar... They arrived in companies, 200 in one, 300 in another, occasionally a thousand. They renounced with their shouts their traditional errors; they broke up their venerated idols in the presence of that great light; and they foreswore the ecstatic rites of Aphrodite, the demon whose service they had long accepted. They enjoyed divine religious initiation and received their law instead spoken by that holy tongue (of Symeon). Bidding farewell to ancestral customs, they renounced also the diet of the wild ass or the camel. And I myself was witness to these things and heard them, as they renounced their ancestral impiety and submitted to evangelic instruction. Once even I was in greatest danger: for he himself (Symeon) told them to approach to receive a priestly blessing from me, declaring they would draw the greatest benefits therefrom. But, in a most savage way, they gathered at a run, and some snatched at me from in front, some from behind, others at my sides; and those a little removed, following on top of the others and reaching out with their hands, seized my beard, or took hold of my cloak. I would have suffocated under this enthusiastic onrush of theirs if, by his shouts, he (Symeon) had not put them all to flight.<sup>20</sup>

If their enthusiasm continued and the bedouin received the sacrament of baptism from a Christian bishop or priest, they will indeed have become Christians, but would obviously have had a very superficial understanding of Christian doctrine.

By the early seventh century Christians had translated their Bible into many tongues, but it is not likely that any translation had yet been produced in Arabic, Thamūdīc, or any of the other North Arabian languages.<sup>21</sup> The Ethiopic (Ge'ez) version of the Bible served very well in Ethiopia itself and may have been intelligible to a few of the Sabaean-speaking Christians of southwest Arabia. Although Arabians who also knew one of the "civilized" languages (Ge'ez, Coptic, Greek or Syriac) had access to the scriptures, for people who spoke only Arabic none of the available versions was understandable. Among those excluded from the Christian gospel would have been most of the population in the Hijaz, both the bedouin and the inhabitants of the oasis towns.

### **Judaism in the towns of the northern Hijaz**

In contrast to Christianity, Judaism was well established among the settled population of the Hijaz, and it is even possible that most people who lived in the towns and oases had become Judaeans.<sup>22</sup> We are especially well informed about the situation at Yathrib: the three tribes that lived in the town - the Qurayza, the Qaynuqa, and the Nadir - were all Judaeans, as were several

unrelated clans.<sup>23</sup> Also Judaeans were tribes at Tema, just to the east of the Hijaz, and at the Khaybar oasis, half way between Tema and Yathrib. There is also evidence for Judaeans - and most likely for Judaeans tribes - in pre-Islamic times at Dedan, Hegra, and most other settlements along the main trade routes of northwestern Arabia.<sup>24</sup> As for the southwestern coast of the peninsula, we have seen in the preceding chapter how well established Judaism was in Yemen. Caravans proceeding from Mecca, whether headed south to the Himyarite kingdom or north to the oases towns of the Hijaz, were certain to come into close contact with Judaism.

Muhammad referred to Judaeans and to Christians as “people of the book” (*ahl al-kitāb*). What the Judaeans “book” was can hardly be doubted: Judaeans worship in the Hijaz in pre-Islamic times was centered on the Tanakh or at least on some part of the Tanakh. We can also be quite certain that the scriptures used by Judaeans Arabians could not have been in the Arabic language: not only is there no such evidence for either the scriptures or any other book in the Arabic language prior to the Quran, but Muhammad’s role as God’s prophet to the Arabians presupposes that God’s word was not available in Arabic until Muhammad recited what were regarded as divine revelations.<sup>25</sup> We must therefore assume that the Judaeans of the Hijaz had obtained either Hebrew texts or Aramaic targums of the Tanakh. Those tribes and individuals who converted to Judaism did not thereby give up their Arabian identity. Judaeans in pre-Islamic Arabia seem to have borne Arabic names: some of these were Arabic transliterations or translations of names from the Hebrew Bible, but most of the names were traditional among Arabic pagans.<sup>26</sup> One of the “suspended poets” - as-Samaw’al bnu ‘Adiyā - is identified as Judaeans by later sources, but in both language and content his poetry is of a piece with the rest of the pre-Islamic poetry of Arabic speakers.

Arabic Judaeans had some exposure to Aramaic or Hebrew because they must regularly have heard (even though they may not have understood) a Sabbath reading from either the Hebrew Bible or an Aramaic targum, a reading which would then have been orally translated into Arabic for them. If Judaism in pre-Islamic Arabia was already rabbinic, the rabbis would have given at least minimal instruction in Hebrew and Aramaic. Some scholars believe that as a result of linguistic influences in matters of religion the Arabic proselytes to Judaism may have spoken among themselves a somewhat Aramaicized dialect of Arabic. On arriving at Yathrib Muhammad is supposed to have ordered his secretary, Zaid, to learn the *kitāb al-yahūd*. If this “Judaeans book” was a language or dialect it may have been similar to the Arabic of the Hijaz bedouin, although sufficiently distinctive that pagan Arabic speakers could not easily understand it. It is more likely, however, that the *kitāb al-yahūd* was not a language but a script. That is, like the Judaeans of Yemen in medieval and modern times, the Judaeans of the northern Hijaz may have used Hebrew letters to write their Arabic dialect.<sup>27</sup>

The character of Arabic Judaism is very obscure. In part that is because Judaism shared with Arabic paganism several of the characteristics that distinguished Judaeans in the Greco-Roman world. Circumcision, for example, was a common practice among Arabians, whether Judaeans or pagan.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, because of the dry climate the taboo on eating pork or “swine-flesh” had all along been generally observed by Arabians, regardless of their religious identity.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the Arabic Judaeans’ observance of the Sabbath set them apart from the pagan tribes. The main reason for the obscurity of Arabic Judaism is the absence of

documentary evidence and the near absence of literary evidence for it. Muslim tradition makes it clear that many Arabians and entire Arabian tribes were Judaeans before Muhammad's time, but gives us very little information about them.

A conspicuous characteristic of Judaism in Arabia, as elsewhere, was prayer. Prayer had never been of much importance in Arabian paganism, and their daily devotions set the Judaeans at Yathrib and the other towns markedly apart from their pagan neighbors. The Arabic word *salat*, "prayer," was evidently a loan-word from Aramaic, the word having been borrowed along with the practice itself.<sup>30</sup> Judaeans, especially if they followed the Talmud of the rabbis, were obliged to offer liturgical prayers to Adonai thrice daily: just before sunrise, at mid-day, and after sunset. The texts of the prayers were specified, and each of the three daily recitations took some time. Also specified were the postures and attitudes to be assumed while praying. Standing erect for the *Amidah* prayer, and kneeling or prostrating themselves for others, devout Judaeans would implore God while facing Jerusalem. Although most Judaeans preferred to make their prayers in a synagogue or - like Daniel (Daniel 6:10) - in the privacy of their homes, when that was not possible they prayed in public. Christians, in contrast, avoided public prayers. Jesus was supposed to have criticized the making of long prayers on street corners: one should pray in private, after entering a closed room and shutting the door (Matthew 6:5-6).

When did Judaism first appear in the Hijaz? We have seen that in Yemen a noticeable shift to Judaism seems to have occurred in the fourth century CE, although individual Sabaeans and Himyarites may have been Judaeans long before that. In the north, among the Arabic speakers living in settlements, some evidence suggests that Judaism had taken root considerably earlier than the fourth century. The Muslim and Talmudic traditions on this topic are without positive value, each having been inspired by some well known story: they explain the origins of the Judaeans of the Hijaz by reference to the destruction of the Second Temple, or to the destruction of the First Temple, or to the kingdom of David and Solomon, or to the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness under Moses, or to the aftermath of Noah's Flood. Negatively, however, the traditions show quite clearly that by the time of Muhammad nobody knew when or under what circumstances Judaism had first appeared in the Hijaz. In the case of the Judaeans of Yathrib, a survey of early aetiologies found that "Muslim traditionists could not think of any earlier settlers in Yathrib than the Jews."<sup>31</sup> We may therefore conclude that by ca. 600 Judaism was a very longstanding religious tradition in the settlements of the Hijaz. It may be pertinent that when, in the first century, the author of Acts characterizes the pilgrims who come to the Jerusalem temple for the Pentecost festival, he includes Arabians in the crowd (Acts 2:11). Perhaps the origins of Judaism in Arabia were related to the dramatic expansion of Judaism in Mesopotamia and in Egypt during the Hellenistic period.

How it happened that there were many Judaeans in Arabia was also a question addressed in the seventh and eighth century. As we have seen and is to be expected, the explanations invariably referred to an event rather than a process. In addition, the ideology of Judaism required that Judaeans anywhere and everywhere be identified as belonging to "the Jewish people" or nation, and to have been dispersed or scattered from the Land of Israel. The Judaeans of Arabia were accordingly purported to be the offspring of ancient Judaeans or Israelites who had migrated into the desert. One aetiology declared that they were descended from an army that Moses sent to the Hijaz, and another that at the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by

Nebuchadnezzar 80,000 children of Judaeans took refuge in the Arabian desert.<sup>32</sup> Although believers may accept such aetiologies (if God could bring several million Israelites through the bed of the Red Sea and then through the waterless Sinai peninsula, he could certainly bring a fraction of that number into any part of Arabia that he chose), it is difficult for a critical historian to imagine that under Moses or anyone else a mass migration into the Hijaz could have been accomplished, desired, or even contemplated. We must imagine instead that the Judaeans in Arabia arose in the same way that it arose elsewhere. In one or more settlements along the trade routes of western Arabia, that is, a small group of people must at some time have introduced the monotheistic worship of Adonai. The group will have been made up either of Judaeans immigrants - possibly a garrison of professional soldiers - or of natives who had proselytized after coming into contact with Judaism in the Levant, Egypt or Mesopotamia. The religion of these few immigrants or proselytes proved attractive in the Hijaz settlements, and eventually entire tribes at Tema, Yathrib and elsewhere proselytized to Judaism.

### **Musaylima and the monotheists of al-Yamama**

In addition to Christianity, Judaism and - after 622 - Islam, yet another form of God-worshiping seems to have been found in Arabia early in the seventh century. In the oasis town of al-Yamama, some three hundred miles east of Yathrib, a preacher named Musaylima bin Habib exhorted his countrymen to abandon their idols and to worship God "the Merciful" (*al-rahman*). Musaylima claimed to have been the recipient of revelations from God. Just as Muhammad was doing at Mecca and Yathrib, Musaylima uttered his prophecies in *saj'*, a form of rhymed prose traditionally used by Arabic seers.<sup>33</sup> Musaylima is reported to have described himself as a "messenger of God" to the Arabians. His ideas may have come from contact with either Judaism or Christianity, but it is also possible that he was inspired by what he had heard of Muhammad's activities in the Hijaz.

Eventually and inevitably the fledgling community led by Musaylima came into competition with the Muslims of the Hijaz. Not surprisingly, the followers of Muhammad regarded Musaylima as an imposter and a liar (how Musaylima's followers regarded Muhammad is not known). The monotheist community at al-Yamama came to an end in 633, during the so-called "Ridda Wars" that immediately followed Muhammad's death. The caliph Abu Bakr sent a Muslim army, led by Khalid al-Walid, to attack the community at al-Yamama. Musaylima and many of his followers were killed in the battle.<sup>34</sup>

### **Muhammad's early years at Mecca**

The mass conversion of Arabic pagans to the worship of God was the work of Muhammad ibn Abdullah (ca. 570-632).<sup>35</sup> Much of what is reported about Muhammad's life comes from traditions gathered by Ibn Ishaq in the eighth century and edited for publication by Ibn Hisham in the ninth.<sup>36</sup> Ibn Ishaq was a hagiographer rather than a critical scholar, but he does seem to have been industrious in tracking down both oral and written sources on his subject. Most of his information was late and unreliable: typically a story about the Prophet was inspired by two or three lines of the Quran that seemed to require an explanation, and so the story is nothing more than an aetiology for the lines. Historians have nevertheless isolated in Ibn Ishaq's

work some biographical material of value.

Muhammad was born at Mecca (Makkah), at the southern end of the Hijaz and just to the north of the Asir corridor. A small town in a desolate landscape, during much of the year Mecca had barely enough water for its several thousand inhabitants. These inhabitants were the Quraysh tribe, which had settled down at Mecca more than a century before Muhammad's birth. The Quraysh found Mecca attractive because it sat at the juncture of three trans-Arabian trade routes. One of these wound through the Hijaz and Asir to Saba, and another struck out to the northeast, across the desert to Iraq. A third, importantly, led some forty miles westward to a passable harbor at what was to become the flourishing port-city of Jidda.<sup>37</sup> From the harbor boats could cross the Red Sea to the ports of 'Aydhab and Suakin on the coast of what is today southernmost Egypt and Sudan. Because of its location at the hub of three trade routes, Mecca had also from very early days been a religious center, the focus of which was the Ka'ba. This was a small, cube-shaped building made of piled stones (the only stone building in Mecca), and by the early seventh century was the repository of a variety of religious artifacts and images, most of them pagan but a few Jewish or Christian. Most important of the sacred objects was a black stone, less than half a meter in diameter and probably of meteoric origin. Although the Quraysh depended especially on trade, they also profited from the festivals that took place every year at the Ka'ba, which housed images of the god Hubal and of three goddesses: al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt (who presided over gambling). Every year during the sacred months tribes from all over northwestern Arabia would come to Mecca to worship Hubal and the goddesses, and to enjoy a long holiday of gambling, drinking, poetry and merriment.

Orphaned in infancy, Muhammad was raised by his uncle, Abū Tālib, a man of some wealth and standing in the clan of the Banū Hāshim (not one of the most distinguished clans in the Quraysh tribe). Like the more privileged tribesmen Muhammad seems to have learned to read and write.<sup>38</sup> When he came of age, he displayed remarkable integrity, self-confidence, judgment, and other qualities of leadership. He soon came to the attention of Khadija, a wealthy widow whose camel caravans were reputed to have been longer than those of all the other Meccans put together.<sup>39</sup> Khadija needed a capable man who could act as her agent, and could be trusted to take charge of the caravans that she dispatched from Mecca to Damascus and other cities of Syria. She gave the responsibility to Muhammad, who despite his youth proved himself an excellent manager of goods and men. According to the traditionists, when Muhammad was about twenty-five years old (ca. 595) Khadija proposed marriage to him, although he was some fifteen years her junior. Until her death more than twenty years later Khadija was to be not only Muhammad's wife but also his most important supporter and champion, and as Khadija's husband Muhammad became one of the most influential men at Mecca.

### **Muhammad the worshiper of God**

Many Muslims suppose that neither Muhammad nor anyone else at Mecca believed in God until the angel Jibreel (Gabriel) appeared to Muhammad and made him God's prophet. In contrast, critical scholars have recognized that years before his "revelation" experience Muhammad was one of a small company of God-worshippers at Mecca.<sup>40</sup> In other words, Muhammad first became a monotheist, and some time later proclaimed himself a prophet of God.

A small number of Abyssinians (Ethiopians) lived at Mecca, and although they may have perforce joined the Quraysh in worship of the idols in the Ka'ba they are likely to have been Christian at heart.<sup>41</sup> But the trinitarian description of God presented by the Christians was evidently less attractive than the strictly monotheistic description that various Meccans had heard about from Judaeans.

The most outspoken monotheist at Mecca in pre-Islamic times was Zayd ibn 'Amr. Because of his condemnation of the idols Zayd was banished to the nearby Mt. Hirā, where Muhammad - still a young lad - encountered him. The encounter was recalled by Muhammad in what may be the only authentic story we have about Muhammad's youth.<sup>42</sup> The prophet's recollection appears in a long-unpublished manuscript of Ibn Hisham's edition of Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet. According to the manuscript, Muhammad regarded Zayd ibn 'Amr as something of a mentor:

He was the first to upbraid me for idolatry and forbade me to worship idols. I had come from al-Tā'if along with Zayd son of Hāritha when we passed Zayd son of 'Amr who was in the highland of Mecca. The Quraysh had made a public example of him for abandoning their religion, so that he went out from their midst. I sat down with him. I had a bag containing meat which we had sacrificed to our idols - Zayd b. Hāritha was carrying it - and I offered it to Zayd b. 'Amr. I was but a lad at the time and I said, "Eat some of this food, my uncle." He replied, "Surely it is part of those sacrifices of theirs which they offer to their idols." When I said that it was, he said, "Nephew mine, if you were to ask the daughters of 'Abd al-Muttalib they would tell you that I never eat of these sacrifices, and I have no desire to do so." Then he upbraided me for idolatry and spoke disparagingly of those who worship idols and sacrifice to them.<sup>43</sup>

What the adolescent Muhammad was told by the isolated monotheists of Mecca was greatly reinforced in his adult years. In his commercial dealings and in taking Khadija's caravans south to Saba or north through the Hijaz and into Syria Muhammad learned much about the world beyond Mecca. His travels northward acquainted him with the Judaeans of Yathrib, Khaybar and other stops along the route, and then with the Christians and Judaeans of the Levant. Leading caravans southward to Saba, he came in contact with the Christians of Najran and the Judaeans of Yemen. Although during his youth he knew a few persons at Mecca who worshiped God and reviled the idols in the Ka'ba, as an adult he saw that throughout the civilized world the old gods were long gone and almost everyone had turned to God. That Muhammad could have been unaffected by what he learned is most unlikely, and in the event he too became a God-worshiper.

The most vivid lesson that Muhammad learned from "the people of the Book" - Christians as well as Judaeans - was that Paradise awaited those who worshiped God, while those who did not were doomed to burn eternally in Hell. Yet he seems not to have renounced the idols until some time between 605 and 610. When he was about thirty-five years old, according to Ibn Ishaq's biography,<sup>44</sup> Muhammad helped the Quraysh repair the Ka'ba, and if that is correct he may at that point (ca. 605) still have been a nominal polytheist. But his condemnation of the gods and his worship of God must have come shortly thereafter: from a critical reading of Ibn

Ishaq one may infer that Muhammad worshiped God for about three years before beginning his public prophesy.<sup>45</sup>

It is difficult to label Muhammad and the small group of like-minded God-worshippers at Mecca at this stage of their belief. They were not yet Muslims, because Islam did not exist until Muhammad began to prophesy. They honored Jesus but because they did not regard him as God or the son of God they could hardly have been included among the very few Meccans who identified themselves as Christians.<sup>46</sup> They may have thought of themselves as Judaeans, although they did not keep the Sabbath, had neither a synagogue nor the Hebrew Bible, and about much of Judaism - especially Talmudic Judaism - they knew nothing. In retrospect, they may have considered themselves *hanifs*, worshipers of God before Muhammad received his commission to prophesy. Perhaps “monotheists” is the least misleading label, although even it must be used with some qualifications. After he had become a worshiper of God, and even for a short time after becoming his prophet, Muhammad still attributed some supernatural power to the goddesses of the Ka‘ba.<sup>47</sup>

Muhammad and the other God-worshippers at Mecca could not and did not keep their belief a secret from the rest of the tribe. They regarded their prayers - evidently, as in Judaism, three liturgical prayers daily - as the most important aspect of worshiping God, and the prayers attracted attention. The pagan Quraysh were wont to prostrate themselves, with foreheads touching the ground, when supplicating the idols in the Ka‘ba (the Ka‘ba was sometimes called a *masjid*, a mosque or “place of prostration”). The God-worshippers had learned from the Judaeans, however, that when praying to God one should face toward Jerusalem. When a typical Meccan saw a few of his townsmen praying to God, on their knees and with foreheads touching the ground but facing north toward Jerusalem, he was evidently displeased. According to a ninth-century writer, al-Wāqidī, the Quraysh made no objections to prayers that the monotheists made at the Ka‘ba at sunrise, but the prayers later in the day (and especially the *‘asr* prayers at sunset) were resented:

The Prophet used to go out to the Ka‘ba at the beginning of the day and perform the *duba* prayer. It was a prayer with which the Quraysh did not find any fault. When he afterwards prayed during the rest of the day, Ali and Zayd [Zayd ibn Haritha, Muhammad’s freedman] used to sit and keep guard on him. When it was the time of the *‘asr* the Prophet and his companions used to scatter in the ravines, one by one and in pairs.<sup>48</sup>

Why the Quraysh objected to the prayers of the God-worshippers is uncertain, but the most likely reason is that they recognized that God was incompatible with the gods of the Ka‘ba who were so important to the community’s livelihood.

## **Muhammad becomes a prophet of the Lord God**

His biographers tell us that at about the age of forty Muhammad was called to be a prophet (*nabī*) of God, or more precisely of “the Lord.” In the earliest suras of the Quran the deity is not yet called God (*allāh*) but instead is called Lord (*rabb*). The titles were

synonymous, however, and the deity for whom Muhammad prophesied was meant to be the Lord whom the Judaeans worshiped in their synagogues and whom Christians referred to as God the Father.

It was in the month of Ramadan ca. 610 that - so Muhammad believed - he had a "vision" of God. With that experience, he began to deliver his prophecies. In a sura dating from his early years as a prophet at Mecca Muhammad claims that on that night in Ramadan he twice saw either God or, as later Muslims interpreted this sura, the angel Gabriel.<sup>49</sup>

By the declining star, your compatriot is not in error, nor is he deceived!

He does not speak out of his own fancy. This is an inspired revelation. He is taught by one who is powerful and mighty.

He stood on the uppermost horizon; then, drawing near, he came down within two bows' length or even closer, and revealed to his servant that which he revealed.

His own heart did not deny his vision. How can you, then, question what he sees?

He beheld him once again at the sidra tree, beyond which no one may pass. (Near it is the Garden of Repose).

When that tree was covered with what covered it, his eyes did not wander, nor did they turn aside: for he saw some of his Lord's greatest signs.<sup>50</sup>

The context in which Muhammad experienced what he believed was a vision of God seems to have been a spiritual retreat on Mt. Hirā, not far from Mecca. In the month of Ramadan the few monotheists among the Quraysh practiced an annual ritual called *tahannuth*, about which very little is known. It seems, however, to have involved a retreat to Mt. Hirā, where the monotheists could devote themselves to prayer and to contemplation of God (another aspect of *tahannuth* was evidently the giving of alms to the poor).<sup>51</sup> Apparently it was during or immediately after the *tahannuth* in 610 or 611 that Muhammad experienced what he regarded initially as a vision of God, and later as a vision of Gabriel. What he actually experienced we can not know: a dream, a hallucination, an epileptic seizure, or some other psycho-physiological event have all been suggested.<sup>52</sup> The canonical traditions within Islam are not of much value as historical evidence: in addition to their supernatural elements, they conflate Muhammad's experience ca. 610 with what seems to be a considerably later claim that the entire Quran was on that occasion "sent down" to him.

### **Muslim traditions about Muhammad's vision**

Although they are not history, the canonical traditions do show us what was *believed* by early Muslims. In most of the traditions it is during his sleep that Muhammad sees the angel Gabriel and is ordered to prophesy in God's name. Ibn Ishaq reports that Muhammad began to have "true visions, resembling the brightness of daybreak, which were shown to him in his sleep."<sup>53</sup> Various stories included in Ibn Ishaq's biography and in the Hadith describe the epiphany to Muhammad as occurring in a dream. In these stories it is Gabriel rather than God whom Muhammad sees, and the burden of Gabriel's mission is to command Muhammad to begin prophesying to the Quraysh.

Perhaps the favorite tradition in Islam is not about dreams, but about a “Night Journey” that Muhammad made through the Seven Heavens. Greeted by a host of angels Muhammad converses with Jesus and John the Baptist in the Second Heaven, with Moses in the Fourth, with Abraham in the Seventh, and with many other prophets along the way.<sup>54</sup> This “Night Journey” story was evidently elaborated on the basis of the opening lines of Sura 17:1:

Glory be to Him, who made His servant go by night from the Sacred Mosque to the farther Mosque” [Dawood])

In the story the miraculous equid Burāq, “whose every stride carried it as far as its eye could see,” transports Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem Muhammad is carried to Heaven by the angel Gabriel. It is in Heaven that the epiphany takes place and that Muhammad is given the divine command to recite. Because this miracle story seems to have arisen as an aetiology for the first lines of Sura 17, it is hardly Muhammad’s own description of the epiphany.

The most frequently cited story about an epiphany in the environs of Mecca is that Muhammad’s prophesying began with Sura 96, called *al-‘alaq*, “the blood clot” (the name reflects the belief, widespread in antiquity, that the generation of a human embryo begins when a man’s semen causes a woman’s uterine blood to clot).<sup>55</sup> In this story the angel Gabriel appears to Muhammad during a night in Ramadan, while he is asleep under a brocaded quilt in one of Mt. Hira’s caves.<sup>56</sup> The angel commands, “Recite!” (*iqrā’*), and lays hold of the quilt covering Muhammad. Fearful, Muhammad asks what he should recite, and the angel tightens the quilt around Muhammad’s neck while repeating the command, “Recite!” Again Muhammad asks what he should recite, and Gabriel then utters the words of Quran 96:

Recite in the name of your Lord who created - created man from clots of blood.  
Recite! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, who by the pen taught man what he did not know (Quran 96, 1-5, Dawood).

As told by Ibn Ishaq, Muhammad reported that after Gabriel had gone away, “I awoke from my sleep and it was as though these words were written on my heart.” Although some Muslims declared that Sura 96 was Muhammad’s first prophecy, others said that the first was Sura 74. Muhammad’s friend Jabir ibn Abdullah is cited as the authority for the story about Sura 74, and the story seems to be an aetiology that sets the stage for that sura. As the traditionists tell it, Muhammad gave Jabir the following report:

I sojourned to Hira and when I had finished my sojourn, I descended to the bottom of the wadi. I heard a voice calling me, and I looked all round me and could see no one. Then I looked above my head, and there He was sitting upon the Throne. I was burdened thereby and went to Khadija, saying “cover me with a mantle,” which she did. Then there came down to me the words: “O you wrapped in a mantle, arise and deliver your warning. Magnify your Lord; keep your garments free from stain and shun idolatry. And do not expect increase for yourself, but be patient in the Lord’s (cause).”<sup>57</sup>

These “words that came down” to Muhammad were the words of Quran 74: 1-7 (this sura graphically describes the terrors of Hell, guarded by nineteen keepers).

## **Muhammad begins to prophesy**

Whatever his visionary experience may have been, it persuaded Muhammad that he was called by God to prophesy (that is, “to say in the name of the Lord”) to the Quraysh and other Arabian tribes that they must worship God and put aside their idols. At this point Muhammad may therefore fairly be called a prophet of God. His career or standing as a prophet in Mecca, however, was starkly different from what it was to become in Yathrib (Medina), and the two periods need to be clearly differentiated. In his years as a prophet at Mecca (610-622) Muhammad was the courageous leader of a small and beleaguered group of monotheists. He was often frustrated and his own life was sometimes in danger. He was undoubtedly considered a prophet by his followers, but a prophet only in the sense that God had called him to convert the Arabians from idolatry and polytheism to the worship of God, and that God would inspire him to say what needed to be said. Although Muhammad believed himself to be divinely inspired, it had not yet occurred either to him or to his followers that he was in possession of a complete text of God’s words to humankind, a text that made obsolete the pronouncements of all earlier prophets. That belief would come later, and would become paramount at Medina and in altogether different circumstances. At Mecca, Muhammad saw himself only as the most recent prophet of a long line that went back past Jesus and the Hebrew prophets to Abraham and Adam.

Although the entire Quran was eventually described by Muhammad as revealed to him on one fateful night, he in fact recited one verse (*ayah*) at a time over twenty-two years. At Yathrib (Medina), in the mid 620s, he hinted that new revelations were being given to him as the occasion required.<sup>58</sup> From the years at Mecca, the first twelve years after his “vision” on Mt. Hira, relatively few recitations are preserved. All of the Quran can be recited in a single day. It consists of some six thousand verses (according to the most common enumeration the Quran contains 6236 *ayat*). By far the greater part of the Quran dates from the last ten years of Muhammad’s life: the years at Yathrib/Medina. Before moving to Yathrib he labored for God at Mecca, but only a few hundred *ayat* of the Quran date from those twelve years at Mecca. We must conclude either that few of the recitations made by Muhammad during his Mecca years were preserved, or that during his career as a prophet among the Quraysh Muhammad delivered on average no more than a few dozen *ayat* a year (during the ten years at Yathrib/Medina, in contrast, he delivered on average fifty *ayat* each month).

The recitations at Mecca differed from those at Medina not only in quantity but also in quality. Those at Medina contain a good deal of law, because at Medina legislation was required for the Muslims. At Mecca there was not yet a need or even a place for it. The earliest recitations probably presented themselves as the words of Muhammad rather than of God. They may have been, that is, eloquently phrased creeds, manifestos, or brief statements of Muhammad’s faith. Muhammad delivered his early recitations in *saj’* (prose rhymed in long ā). The utterances of an Arabic seer (*kahin*) had traditionally been phrased in *saj’*, which made them memorable.<sup>59</sup> Unlike the long legislative suras from Muhammad’s years at Medina, the early Meccan recitations were succinct declarations of faith in God, denunciations of the old gods,

promises of Heaven and warnings about Hell. The language of Muhammad's prophecies was powerful, matching the Hebrew prophetic books in rhetoric and diction. We may note here the assessment by Alfred Guillaume, an accomplished Arabist:

The Qurān is one of the world's classics which cannot be translated without grave loss. It has a rhythm of peculiar beauty and a cadence that charms the ear. Many Christian Arabs speak of its style with warm admiration, and most Arabists acknowledge its excellence. When it is read aloud or recited it has an almost hypnotic effect...<sup>60</sup>

Although many of Muhammad's early recitations may not have been preserved,<sup>61</sup> among the earliest that were preserved would be most of the short suras that the editors of the Quran placed at the end of the book. As they now stand, many of these suras are introduced by the imperative verb "Say!" and are therefore the words of God. Without the imperative, they are not the words of God but are Muhammad's words about God. So, for example, the sura *al-ikhhlās* expresses Muhammad's own faith in the oneness of God, along with a ringing indictment of what he saw as the fundamental error of Christianity:

Say: "God is One, the Eternal God. He begot none, nor was He begotten. None is equal to him." (Quran 112, Dawood)

In the sura titled "The Unbelievers" Muhammad firmly rejects the idolatry practiced by the Quraysh:

Say: 'Unbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have mine.' (Quran 109, Dawood)

The "I" in this sura is of course not God but Muhammad. And even before Muhammad's death his prediction that the unbelievers would never worship God was proved wrong. The sura titled "Al-Lahab," in which the introductory imperative is lacking, does not pretend to be a revelation at all, but instead expresses Muhammad's prayer that Al-Lahab - a wealthy kinsman of Muhammad but also an outspoken defender of the Meccan idols - will come to grief:

May the hands of Abu-Lahab perish! May he himself perish! Nothing shall his wealth and gains avail him. He shall be burnt in a flaming fire, and his wife, laden with firewood, shall have a rope of fibre round her neck. (Quran 111, Dawood)

Originally Muhammad may also have spoken in his own voice when proclaiming his trust in God:

Say: 'I seek refuge in the Lord of men, the King of men, the God of men, from the mischief of the slinking prompter who whispers in the hearts of men; from jinn and men.' (Quran 114, Dawood)

It is likely that all of these short and striking sayings were regarded by Muhammad's first

followers simply as his own prophetic declarations, inspired because God himself had commissioned Muhammad to prophesy. Because for his followers Muhammad was a *nabī*, these eloquent declarations would have been memorized and often repeated. But at the beginning of Muhammad's prophetic career they would not yet have been regarded as the very words of God.

### **Muhammad's own belief in his calling**

Did Muhammad sincerely believe that one night in Ramadan he had seen God, or some other supernatural figure, and that he was therefore divinely inspired to prophesy? Very likely he did, just as it is very likely that Paul sincerely believed that he had seen the risen Jesus. It may very well be that while asleep on Mt. Hira, or on his return from his *tahannuth* retreat on the mountain, Muhammad had a dream in which a figure whom he variously identified as God or the angel Gabriel commanded him to prophesy. And it is therefore probable that he began his public prophecy in order to carry out the command that the figure in the dream had given him.

If we are to gauge the sincerity of Muhammad's declaration of his vision "on the uppermost horizon" and "again at the Sidra tree" a pertinent consideration must be that for him (unlike most modern readers) Heaven and Hell were so real that he is not likely to have knowingly invented his prophetic commission. The next twelve years of his life were difficult and even dangerous, with little reward to show for his efforts, and yet he persisted. He was ultimately emboldened to treat Judaism, or what he knew of it, as only a preface to his own prophecy, and - like Paul - he banked his eternity on what he thought had happened to him. It is also pertinent that those closest to Muhammad - his wives, his fathers-in-law, and Ali - accepted him as God's prophet and maintained that belief so long as they lived.

That Muhammad could have believed that God had directly commissioned him to prophesy should not surprise us. The Muhammad known from the late 620s and early 630s was the most eminent figure in all of northwestern Arabia, the absolute leader of thousands and finally of tens of thousands of Muslims. As such, he had a wide range of temporal concerns: not only religious, but also economic, social, political and military. In 610, in contrast, Muhammad had no such secular responsibilities and his concerns seem to have been almost entirely spiritual. He was focused on the Hereafter, and specifically on the torments of Hell that awaited those who did not worship God. In such a frame of mind, he may very well have regarded a dream as a divine commandment to speak to the Quraysh the great truths about God, Heaven and Hell. Individuals in ancient as in modern times have believed themselves, some times in response to a dream, chosen by God to do what needs to be done.

### **Muhammad's earliest followers**

Khadija is said to have been the first person to accept Muhammad as a prophet. In one of the stories told by Ibn Ishaq, the divine vision comes to Muhammad while he was lagging behind Khadija on their return from Mt. Hira. After receiving the revelation Muhammad catches up with Khadija and tells her what has happened. She accepts him as the Prophet of God, and then goes to tell the news to her cousin, Waraqa ibn Nawfal. Learned in the sacred books of the Judaeans and Christians, Waraqa reassures her:

If you have spoken to me the truth, Khadija, there has come to him (i.e. Muhammad) the greatest *Namus*, who came to Moses aforetime, and lo, he is the prophet of this people. Bid him be of good heart.<sup>62</sup>

Shiite tradition holds that the first of the Quraysh males to accept Muhammad as an apostle (*rasul*) of God was 'Alī, the son of Abū Tālib and therefore Muhammad's cousin. But at this time 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib was still a child, and his acceptance of Muhammad's claims would have caused no more surprise than the credulity of Khadija or of Zayd, Muhammad's freedman. Undoubtedly other relatives, dependants and close friends of Muhammad were also among his early converts (his uncle, Abu Talib, seems to have supported his nephew while reserving judgement on whether or not he was a prophet of God).

Two important Quraysh tribesmen who accepted Muhammad as a prophet of God were Abū Bakr and 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, both of whom were mature and influential men and both of whom would eventually rule as califs. If we may judge from their subsequent words and actions we can hardly doubt that both men believed that Muhammad had indeed been chosen by God to convert the Quraysh and other Arabians to monotheism. To signify his commitment to Muhammad and his trust in Muhammad's vocation Abu Bakr gave Muhammad his six-year old daughter, Aisha, to be his second wife (the marriage was consummated when Aisha was nine, apparently after the flight to Yathrib).<sup>63</sup> Another important convert alongside Abu Bakr and Uthman was Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqās, who would one day become famous as the victor over the Sassanids at Qadisiya.

What calls for explanation is that some of Muhammad's contemporaries, however few they may have been, did believe Muhammad's claims to have been visited by God himself. Although the believers tended to belong to the lower class at Mecca, they did include three or four of the Quraysh tribe's most talented men. Here we may begin with the probability that most Arabic monotheists were ready and perhaps even eager to believe. Very few people today would credit a person who claimed to have received a divine revelation. In Christianity prophecy came to an end ca. 200 CE, when the catholic Church decided - against the Montanists - that the apostles Paul and John were the last to receive revelations, and that the Holy Ghost was no longer inspiring prophecies. The Muslims decided immediately after Muhammad's death that he was "the seal of the prophets," and that no more true prophecies would ever be heard. Judaism had closed the door to prophecy when written texts began to circulate in the third century BC. After ca. 250 BC, the only way a Judaeon could have his words accepted as a prophecy was to compose a pseudepigraphon, which many Judaeans proceeded to do. For a very long time, then, these three scriptural religions have had all the prophecy that they needed.

In the southern Hijaz ca. 610 things were very different. Although a few of the tribesmen believed in God, and in his Judgement Day, they did not know what they had to do to ensure that they would spend eternity in Heaven rather than in Hell. It is unlikely that Musaylima had yet begun to prophesy at al-Yamama, and in any case Musaylima lived too far to the east to have come to the attention of the Quraysh and other Arabians near Mecca. No book, whether sacred or secular, had yet been written in the Arabic language. The "people of the book" - the Judaeans

and Christians - had God's instructions but disagreed about which were valid and which were not. What was needed was a clear message from God, and when Muhammad provided such a message in majestic Arabic *saj'* people who were disgusted with the idols thanked God for it. Perhaps some of the monotheists who practiced *tahannuth* were among the first to accept Muhammad as a prophet, but then began a trickle of conversions from polytheism. In transitional times (and some nominal polytheists must long have had doubts about the worship of idols) men and women wavering between alternatives would have been relieved to find and follow a charismatic and capable leader. This was especially the case when the leader had no doubt about what he was doing, and was eloquent enough that listeners could believe that he was a prophet inspired by God himself.

A small sect of God-worshippers clustered around Muhammad. The sect met regularly at the house of al-Arqam, a young but wealthy member of one of the most respected Quraysh clans, and it is said to have numbered thirty-nine members at about this time (ca. 614, according to Watt's chronology).<sup>64</sup> Muhammad was the founder and leader of this little group, and as such encountered insults and much hostility from the majority of Meccans. The presence in the group of a few prominent men, however, and the duty of each clan collectively to avenge an attack on any of its members, protected Muhammad and his followers.

It may have been at this point, when Muhammad had become the formal leader of a small but tightly-knit monotheist sect, that he began to present his prophecies no longer as his own words but as the words of God. Although mostly warnings to the idolaters, the prophecies were evidently delivered to a group that would welcome them and find strength in them. When Muhammad himself appears in his prophecies, he is grammatically a third person. The first-person voice is that of God himself. This was not entirely unprecedented. The writers of the Hebrew Tanakh had occasionally assumed the person of God in their declarations. Thus the code of laws at Exodus 20-24 begins with "Elohim spoke all these words," and Elohim then spells out his commands in detail: "You must have no other god besides me," "you must give me your firstborn sons," and a hundred more.<sup>65</sup> Most often, however, the writers of the Tanakh made God speak through a human voice: even the Deuteronomist had been content to put his own words into the mouth of Moses rather than of Adonai. Muhammad's later prophecies at Mecca were therefore bold, even by Judaeo standards.

How Muhammad delivered his early prophecies is not known, but a few traditions pertain to his demeanor during slightly later prophecies. In the *Sahih*, a ninth-century compilation made by Al-Bukhari, the first of the compilation's ninety-three books is titled, "Revelation," and it contains six hadiths (traditions) pertaining to the circumstances in which the revelations came to Muhammad. Although the traditions can hardly be taken at face value, they are the only evidence we have about Muhammad's physical state and appearance when delivering his prophecies. One of the six hadiths is said to have been first reported by Aisha. Aisha was one of Muhammad's youngest wives and is not likely to have begun living with him until after the flight to Yathrib.<sup>66</sup>

Narrated 'Aisha (the mother of the faithful believers): Al-Harith bin Hisham asked Allah's Apostle "O Allah's Apostle! How is the Divine Inspiration revealed to you?"

Allah's Apostle replied, "Sometimes it is (revealed) like the ringing of a bell, this form of Inspiration is the hardest of all and then this state passes off after I have grasped what is inspired. Sometimes the Angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me and I grasp whatever he says." 'Aisha added: Verily I saw the Prophet being inspired Divinely on a very cold day and noticed the sweat dropping from his forehead (as the Inspiration was over).<sup>67</sup>

Another tradition stresses the physical agitation of Muhammad during prophecy:

Allah's Apostle used to bear the revelation with great trouble and used to move his lips (quickly) with the Inspiration.<sup>68</sup>

## God against the gods

One of the epithets that Muhammad began applying to his *rabb* ("Lord") was *al-rahman*, "the Merciful." This name was also favored, as we have seen, by Musaylima at al-Yamama in eastern Arabia.<sup>69</sup> The monotheist Himyarites and others in the Sabaean southwest likewise called God "the Merciful." In appropriating the term *al-rahman*, Muhammad was therefore describing his Lord in terms that were familiar to many inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula.

In addition to the epithet "the Merciful," Muhammad now used the name *allāh* for God. Allah, as we have seen, was the senior god in the pantheon of Arabic pagans. But in Muhammad's prophecies the pantheon was gone, as were whatever myths had attached to Allah in centuries past. In Arabic paganism *allāh* had been etymologically a term of respect ("the god") as well as a proper name, and so was exactly suited to express the monotheism that Muhammad proclaimed. As presented by Muhammad, Allah was none other than the Arabic version of God, who was worshiped by the Judaeans of the northern Hijaz and - less singlemindedly - by the Christians of the Levant. God was the omnipotent deity who had created heaven and earth, wiped out most of life with Noah's Flood, revealed himself to Abraham, and now demanded on pain of eternal Hellfire that all humankind worship him.

Muhammad's prophecies - and so also, we must assume, his informal discussions - soon became confrontational, overtly opposed to the traditional polytheism of Mecca, and repeatedly warning of the Day of Judgment. In his preaching Muhammad took aim at the denizens of the Ka'ba: God was in Heaven, and the idols or images that the Arabian tribes had worshiped since time immemorial were nothing more than human artifacts. The Ka'ba, Muhammad declared, had originally been a shrine to Allah: it had been built by Abraham and Ishmael, both of whom were devout worshipers of God, but over time the tribes had forgotten God and instead worshiped a multitude of gods that they had themselves invented. When Muhammad first recited the early Sura 53 he recognized the three goddesses of the Ka'ba as *gharaniq*: angels or intermediaries between God and humankind. These "Satanic verses" were soon replaced by much harsher lines:

Have you thought on Al-Lāt and Al-'Uzzā, and on Manāt, the third other? Are you to have the sons and He the daughters? This is indeed an unfair distinction! They are but names which you and your fathers have invented: God has vested no authority in them. The unbelievers follow but vain conjectures and the whims of their own souls, although

the guidance of their Lord has long since come to them.<sup>70</sup>

### **The flight to Abyssinia and its implications**

At some point during Muhammad's prophesying in Mecca a part of his group left the city, crossed the Red Sea into Africa, and took up residence in Abyssinia (Ethiopia, as it was called in Greek).<sup>71</sup> The Quraysh had long had commercial links to Abyssinia, and a handful of Abyssinians lived in Mecca. Muhammad and his followers therefore knew something about the country's religious climate. Because the king (the *negus*, or *nagashi*) of Abyssinia was a Christian, and because Christianity was the established religion in his realm, the immigrants expected that they would fare much better in Abyssinia than they were faring in Mecca. This expectation seems to have been fulfilled. The immigrants were allowed to keep their religion, the Negus offering them full protection without attempting to convert them to Christianity. Eventually the community of immigrants disappeared from Abyssinia, some of them dying there, some assimilating to either the native Christians or Falashas, and most of them returning to Arabia (one group returned to Mecca before 622, and a later group joined the Muslims at Yathrib).

How many of Muhammad's followers participated in the exodus to Abyssinia is uncertain. Although one source lists eighty-three men, along with their wives and children, as fleeing Mecca in this "first *hijrah*," another source reports that the refugees numbered only eleven men and four women,<sup>72</sup> and the smaller figure is perhaps closer to the reality. Any departure, however, must have left the little sect in Mecca noticeably depleted. In Ibn Ishaq's list of those who departed, the first mentioned are the future calif, 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, and his wife Ruqayya, the daughter of Muhammad.<sup>73</sup>

The date of the exodus to Abyssinia is also uncertain. The date is related to the "Satanic verses" of Sura 53, and Muhammad's subsequent abrogation of these verses (renouncing them, and replacing them with other verses). The Quraysh, according to Ibn Ishaq, were angered by Muhammad's abrogation of the "Satanic verses" and his substitution of verses ridiculing the Ka'ba goddesses. When in their anger the polytheists persecuted the sect, Muhammad encouraged some of his more vulnerable followers to flee for safety to Abyssinia. Montgomery Watt accepted this narrative and suggested a date ca. 615 for the exodus.<sup>74</sup>

The Abyssinian exodus indicates that ca. 615, or possibly a year or two later, a number of Muhammad's followers were willing to take leave of him in order to practice their new religion in a safer place. In making that decision they must have supposed that they already had the religion they needed for their salvation. This would have included above all a belief in God, a contempt for idols, and the assurance that worship of God would secure for them an eternity in Heaven. Also included were the prophecies that Muhammad had already recited, but these must have been few and brief: all of the early Meccan suras of the Quran can be recited in fifteen minutes. It appears that when Sura 53 was first recited Muhammad's prophecies were indeed a matter for discussion among all of the Quraysh, and so must have been highly prized by his followers. But the concept of the Quran as a complete text of God's will that was now revealed to Muhammad, and was being recited piecemeal by him, had evidently not yet been formulated. So it was possible for several dozen followers of Muhammad to "hive off" from the main group at Mecca,

and with their belief in God, Heaven, and Hell, and fortified by the few prophecies of Muhammad that they had memorized, they settled among the Christians of Abyssinia.

## **The Day of Judgement**

The most powerful incentive to accept Islam was not Allah himself, beyond the capacity of humans to describe, but something far easier to imagine and visualize: the resurrection of all the dead at the End of Time, and their entrance into an eternity of reward or punishment. Heaven and Hell, which had made their appearance in Judaism in Hellenistic times, and had become central in New Covenant Christianity, were given still more prominence by Muhammad. His understanding of the End of Time owed something to Christianity. Although this is not explicit in the Quran, Muhammad supposed that Jesus would return from Heaven to rule the earth and would then die. After his death would come the Day of Judgement.

Time and again Muhammad warned of the terrible punishment that awaited idolaters, and announced the heavenly delights in store for those who worshiped God. The most vivid descriptions are found in the later suras, dating from his years at Medina.

When the Trumpet sounds a single blast; when earth with all its mountains is raised high and with one mighty crash is shattered into dust - on that day the Dread Event will come to pass. Frail and tottering, the sky will be rent asunder on that day, and the angels will stand on all its sides with eight of them carrying the throne of your Lord above their heads. On that day you shall be utterly exposed, and all your secrets shall be brought to light. (Sura 69 ["The inevitable"]: 13-18, Dawood)

The righteous, in contrast, will be placed in a lofty garden, with clusters of fruit within their reach, and be told, "Eat and drink to your heart's content. Here is your reward for what you did in days gone by." But the unbelievers - the infidels - will wish that they were still dead:

We shall say, "Lay hold of him and bind him. Burn him in the fire of Hell, then fasten him with a chain seventy cubits long. For he did not believe in God, the Most High, nor did he care to feed the destitute." (Sura 69: 30-34, Dawood)

Another sura graphically describes "that which is coming." On the Day of Judgment the earth will shake, the mountains will crumble, and all who have lived will be judged by God. The blessed

shall recline on jewelled couches face to face, and there shall wait on them immortal youths with bowls and ewers and a cup of purest wine (that will neither pain their heads nor take away their reason); with fruits of their own choice and flesh of fowls that they relish. And theirs shall be the dark-eyed houris, chaste as virgin pearls: a guerdon for their deeds. (Quran 56:15-24, Dawood)

The houris have been created for Paradise, to be virginal and loving companions for those on the right hand. "As for those on the left hand (wretched shall be those on the left hand!), they shall

dwell amidst scorching winds and seething water: in the shade of pitch-black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing.”<sup>75</sup> In the “Pilgrimage” sura the fate of the infidels is even more frightening:

Garments of fire have been prepared for the unbelievers. Scalding water shall be poured upon their heads, melting their skins and that which is in their bellies. They shall be lashed with rods of iron.... As for those that have faith and do good works, God will admit them to gardens watered by running streams. They shall be decked with bracelets of gold and of pearls, and arrayed in garments of silk. (Quran 22:19-23 Dawood)

In pre-Islamic Arabia few pagan tribesmen had worried much about what happens to a person at death, and the typical tribesman had indiscriminately consigned all the dead to a shadowy Afterlife. Muhammad’s prophecies drew a very different picture: when Judgement Day suddenly comes and God raises the dead from their graves, he will usher into Paradise all those who accepted him and renounced the idols, and he will throw the idolaters into the furnace. Fear of God and of Hellfire, which for centuries had pervaded the civilized lands of western Eurasia and North Africa, was finally being urged upon the Arabians of the Hijaz, and in powerful and figurative language. But still the Arabic tribesmen were not moved.

### **Muhammad’s limited success as a prophet in the southern Hijaz**

Although Muhammad spent most of his efforts preaching to the Quraysh of Mecca, he believed that he was the prophet of God to all of the pagan tribes: that is, to all of the bedouin tribes that spoke the Arabic language and worshiped the old gods. Ibn Ishaq’s biography tells how Muhammad traveled to many settlements and encampments in order to bring his message to other Arabic tribes. Fairs and markets provided opportunities to address a crowd and Muhammad therefore visited these gatherings, usually after a promise of protection from the local shaykhs or from other men of high standing.<sup>76</sup> The tribes were indifferent and often hostile to Muhammad’s message, and he was repeatedly turned away with insults and threats of violence. We may nevertheless suppose that occasionally a few individuals were sufficiently impressed by his preaching to follow him back to Mecca and to join the little community of Muslims. Possibly Musaylima’s prophetic career at al-Yamama was inspired by Muhammad’s travels to the east.

It is important to remember, however, that the Muslims were a tiny minority in Mecca, although a passage in Ibn Ishaq’s biography may suggest that the prophet had more success:

people began to accept Islam, both men and women, in large numbers until the fame of it spread throughout Mecca, and it began to be talked about. (Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 117).<sup>77</sup>

Such evidence as we have suggests that throughout the twelve years of Muhammad’s prophesying at Mecca (610-622) the number of Muslims never exceeded a few hundred men, women and children. These were undoubtedly “large numbers” when compared to the handful of God-worshippers in the city prior to Muhammad’s prophesying, but the numbers were small when compared to the city’s population. If the Quraysh could field an army of 3200 men at the Battle of Uhud, the tribe’s overall population may have been well over 10,000. Even at the end of Muhammad’s twelve-year career as a prophet at Mecca, the Muslims were apparently no more

than four or five per cent of the city's population. And of all the Arabic tribesmen in the Hijaz those who had elected to follow Muhammad could scarcely have been more than one per cent.<sup>78</sup>

The most outspoken of Muhammad's enemies was Amr ibn Hishām, known in Muslim histories as Abū Jahl ("father of ignorance). Many of the Quraysh denounced Muhammad because they feared that abandonment of the idols in the Ka'ba would greatly diminish their livelihood (Mecca depended heavily on the annual hajj by the bedouin tribes). Other polytheists, however, were apparently quite devoted to their gods, or at least held them in affection and resented Muhammad's attacks on the ancestral religion. The pagans arranged a boycott of the prophet's clan (the Banū Hāshim), which lasted two years. Abū Tālib, Muhammad's elderly but still influential uncle, had not himself abandoned paganism, but protected his nephew from the increasingly hostile pagans. Shortly before 620 both Khadija and Abū Tālib died, and the position of Muhammad and the Muslims at Mecca became more precarious.

At this point, when he was about fifty years old, Muhammad was the leader of a small and endangered sect. His authority over the group was firm, because its members were persuaded - as was Muhammad himself - that God had commissioned him to be his prophet to the pagan Arabic tribes. The group was too small to defend itself, numbering only a few hundred adults, but it was large enough to cause much turmoil in Mecca. In an attempt to find a safe haven Muhammad betook himself to the Tā'if oasis, eighty miles to the southeast of Mecca, in order to ask the leaders of the Thaḳīf tribe to give him and his followers protection. But that mission too was a failure.<sup>79</sup>

### **The flight (*hijrah*) to Yathrib/Medina**

In the twelfth month (Dhu al-Hijja) of every year Arabic pagans made a *hajj* to Mecca, to make their circumambulation of the Ka'ba and to enjoy a long holiday, and this annual event had brought Muhammad's message about God, Heaven and Hell to the attention of tribes from the northern Hijaz. Unlike the Quraysh, whose livelihood depended on the throng of pilgrims who came to worship the idols in the Ka'ba, other tribes had no vested interest in idolatry, and some tribesmen were firmly persuaded by Muhammad's exhortations. Most receptive to his message were pilgrims from Yathrib. In 620 six members of the Banū Aws and the Banū Khazraj - bedouin tribes who pastured their animals in the vicinity of Yathrib - became Muslims, and the next year twelve more were converted.<sup>80</sup> In the third year the number swelled to seventy-five. Such readiness to embrace Islam was in sharp contrast to the hostility of Muhammad's own Quraysh tribe, and the converts from Yathrib urged Muhammad that for his safety and for the welfare of their city he and all the Muslims should come to Yathrib.

Muhammad accepted the invitation, although he did not leave Mecca immediately. As told by Ibn Ishaq,<sup>81</sup> Muhammad first instructed his followers to make their way north. When all the rest were safely at Yathrib, still remaining at Mecca were Muhammad, Abū Bakr and 'Alī, and the three knew that the Quraysh were plotting to kill Muhammad before he could leave. While 'Alī slept as a decoy in Muhammad's bed, Muhammad and Abū Bakr escaped through a window and thus made their getaway to Yathrib. Three days later 'Alī left, apparently without difficulty.

According to Muslim tradition the *hijrah* (“departure”) of Muhammad from Mecca took place on the first day of Muharram (July 16, 622 CE).<sup>82</sup> After a dangerous journey through the Hijaz, Muhammad reached Yathrib. According to Muslim tradition, one of the first things that Muhammad did at Yathrib was to oversee the building of a *masjid* (“mosque,” literally a “place of prostration”) at which his followers could make their daily prayers to God.<sup>83</sup> Years after the death of Muhammad, when ‘Umar was asked when it was that Islam was established in Arabia, he identified the *hijrah* to Yathrib/Medina as the turning-point. Ever since, that event has marked the beginning of the Islamic Era.

### **Muhammad as leader of the Muslim *ummah*: the Battle at the Wells of Badr**

Muhammad’s religion had little appeal for the Judaeans of Yathrib: the Banū Qurayza, Banū Nadīr and Banū Qaynuqā. These settled tribes were already worshiping God and looking forward to resurrection and Paradise, and they did not recognize Muhammad as a prophet. But among the two pagan bedouin tribes - the Banū Aws and the Banū Khazraj - Islam won many converts.<sup>84</sup> It was in the first or second year at Yathrib that Friday became the special day for Muslims to congregate. Because most of the inhabitants of Yathrib were Judaeans and observed the Sabbath, Friday had long been the city’s traditional market-day. Many of the bedouin came to town on market-day, and Friday therefore was the day on which Muslims flocked to Yathrib’s mosque to pray and to listen to the prophet.

Muhammad’s followers at Yathrib were collectively called an *ummah*, a “community.” Although its members may not initially have called themselves “Muslims” we may for the sake of convenience use that term.<sup>85</sup> At Yathrib the Muslim *ummah* was from the beginning an alternative to the tribe: like a tribesman, a Muslim was obligated to come to the defense of a fellow Muslim who was in danger, and to avenge a Muslim killed by unbelievers. Initially, the community was evidently limited to those followers who had emigrated from Mecca, and the local bedouin who converted to Islam were called “helpers” by the emigrants.

How the emigrants first supported themselves in Yathrib is not clear, but part of their livelihood certainly came from raids or razzias. These were directed upon the caravans of the Quraysh that passed by Yathrib on the way to or from Palestine and Syria. Muhammad was the organizer of these razzias, although apparently he did not often accompany them in person. The raids were small-scale affairs, whose objective was to capture a few camels and their cargo, and then to distribute the booty to the entire *ummah*. The raids seem to have been mostly unsuccessful, and no blood was shed until January of 624. That was the “sacred month” of Dhu al-hijja, when raids had traditionally been suspended by all the Arabian tribes. Muhammad, however, claimed to have received from God a revelation that Muslims need not observe the traditional truce. The prophet then sent a dozen Muslim raiders far to the south, and indeed south of Mecca. Between Mecca and Taif, the raiders surprised a small caravan, killing one of the guards, wounding or capturing the other three, and driving the caravan back to Yathrib.<sup>86</sup>

Soon after this small success, Muhammad plotted to raid an enormous Quraysh caravan, supposedly numbering a thousand camels, that was making its way from Syria to Mecca. Learning of his plan, the Quraysh sent a large company of armed men from Mecca to escort the

caravan back through the Hijaz, and ordered the caravan to avoid the road through Yathrib and to follow instead the coast road, some seventy miles to the west of the city. At the beginning of spring in 624 a battle was fought at the Wells of Badr, a watering place along the coast road.<sup>87</sup> This battle launched Islam, and in Muslim lore the stories about the Battle at the Wells of Badr are voluminous. In Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad the battle occupies one of the longest chapters.<sup>88</sup> Evidently some three hundred Muslim men set out on the expedition from Yathrib, most of them being from the Aws and Khazraj tribes.<sup>89</sup> Stationing themselves in front of the wells, the Muslims dared the Quraysh to fight their way to the water that they desperately needed. While Muhammad and Abu Bakr prayed to God in a hut behind the lines, the battle went in the Muslims' favor: fifty of the Quraysh were slain (the Muslims lost only fourteen), the rest were routed, and their caravan was seized.<sup>90</sup> One of the Quraysh dead was Abu Jahl, who had been Muhammad's most persistent enemy at Mecca. The Muslims' great victory is alluded to in several suras, and is the main subject of Sura 8 ("the Spoils"). God is of course credited with giving victory to the Muslims, and the success greatly increased Muhammad's fame and authority at Yathrib.

### **The turn against Judaism and the exaltation of Muhammad and the Quran**

In the aftermath of Badr, Muhammad publicly made a break with the Judaeans of Yathrib and more broadly with Judaism. The victory brought him many more converts from the pagan bedouin tribes, and so strengthened his hand for a confrontation with the Judaeans. When he had agreed to come to Yathrib, he seems to have known little about Judaism and to have regarded his prophecies as generally compatible with it. Had he believed otherwise, he could hardly have imagined that Yathrib would be a safe haven for his followers. But after taking up residence in Yathrib Muhammad found that the city's Judaeans gave him more difficulty than support, because the differences between Judaism and embryonic Islam outweighed what they had in common. This was especially true if - as is likely - the Judaeans of the Hijaz were by the 620s coming under the influence of the Talmud.

Most important for the break was Muhammad's role as a prophet. At Mecca he and his followers may have supposed that what was essential about their tiny community was its abandonment of idolatry and its worship of God, all of which had been commanded by God in Muhammad's prophecy. At Yathrib, however, the most distinctive aspect of their community was the prophecy itself, or the belief that Muhammad - like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and "the twelve" - was a prophet who had been commissioned by God. The world, it turned out, was full of people who denounced idolatry and who believed in God, Heaven and Hell. But most people who feared Hell and worshiped God refused to believe that Muhammad had seen God and had been called to be his prophet.

At Yathrib Muhammad's prophetic role, far from being reduced, was greatly expanded. The expansion came as a result of Muhammad's confrontation with the city's Judaeans.<sup>91</sup> The Judaeans had their Torah, or the entire set of instructions that they believed God had given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The sacred books, carefully housed in a synagogue's Torah shrine, were at the very center of Judaeans worship. In Muslim eyes Judaeans and Christians were both included as "People of the Book," but the Christians' Bible was a far less conspicuous book than was the

Judaeans' Torah, whether in the form of Hebrew scrolls or of Aramaic *targumim*. According to the Book of Jubilees (which in the first century CE had been one of the most popular Hebrew books, and which in Ge'ez translation remained a favorite in Ethiopia), at the beginning of time the whole of the Torah had been inscribed on heavenly tablets. The language of the heavenly tablets was of course Hebrew, which had been the language used by Adonai when he created the world. It was from these heavenly tablets that the revelation was made to Moses.<sup>92</sup>

When Muhammad and his followers arrived at Yathrib they did not yet have anything comparable to the Judaeans' Torah. Within a few years, however, they had the Quran: not yet all of it, but a good part of it, as Muhammad had begun to recite the long, legislative suras that now stand at the beginning of the Quran. During his years at Yathrib/Medina Muhammad delivered to his Muslims ten times as much prophecy as he had recited in all of his years at Mecca. Many of these later prophecies were no longer in *saj'* but they were still in lofty language and were delivered by Muhammad in what observers considered to be a prophetic trance. What Muhammad said during the trance was carefully written down by those around him, on whatever writing surface was available. Permanent copies of the new revelations were then made, and the words were recited at worship.

The legislative suras (unlike the prophecies that had praised the Lord, denounced idolatry, or warned of Hell) were incompatible with Judaism, whether Talmudic or non-Talmudic. At Exodus 20-24 God speaks directly in Hebrew, instructing the Israelites how they are to conduct themselves. In the Quran he speaks directly in Arabic, with a quite different set of instructions. Thus Muhammad's role as a prophet, which had secured for him a small following in Mecca and was now at Yathrib attracting great numbers of bedouin, made it impossible for him to coexist with the Judaeans of the city. It was at Yathrib during the first two years after the Hijra that Islam became irrevocably opposed to Judaism.

At the same time, the stature of Muhammad in his community rose immeasurably. The Judaeans looked upon "Moses and the prophets" as the revealers of their sacred texts. Although in his years at Yathrib/Medina he continued to be called a prophet (*nabī*) and an apostle (*rasul*) of God, in his new circumstances Muhammad assumed the role not only of all the Hebrew prophets together but also of Moses, the Law-giver. The Judaeans of Yathrib claimed that on Mt. Sinai God had in Hebrew revealed to Moses the entire Torah. Muhammad and the Muslims claimed that God was now in Arabic revealing to Muhammad a complete text of the divine precepts. The Judaeans had learned from their rabbis that Yom Kippur was the day on which Moses had come down from Mt. Sinai, carrying the Ten Commandments and having committed to memory all that God had told him on the mountaintop.<sup>93</sup> Muhammad told a similar story: on the "night of destiny" in the month of Ramadan the Quran had been "sent down" to him.

At Yathrib Muhammad began to refer to his prophecies collectively as *al-qur'ān*, "the recitation," and to describe the Quran as "this book (*kitāb*)." Richard Bell, a translator of the Quran and a pioneer in its critical investigation (he attempted to put all of the suras into chronological order), suggested that at Yathrib Muhammad himself collected his previous recitations, revising some of them, grouping all of them into suras, and so creating at least the outlines of a book.<sup>94</sup> In the longest sura of all, "The Cow," Muhammad describes the Quran (the

reference comes in the context of instructions about fasting) as God's guidance for mankind:

In the month of Ramadan *al-qur'ān* was revealed, a book of guidance for mankind with proofs of guidance distinguishing right from wrong. Therefore whoever of you is present in that month let him fast. (Quran 2.185 Dawood, modified)

This sura is introduced by the Arabic letters, *alif, lām, mīm*, the significance of which is not clear. In almost all of the *muqatta'at* suras - the suras introduced by these or other disjoined Arabic letters - reference is made to the Quran. The exceptions are Suras 29, 30 and 68, but even in these suras Muslim scholars find indirect references to the Quran. And it is not only the *muqatta'at* suras that refer to the Quran. For example, in Sura 97, titled *qadr* ("Fate" or "Power"), God celebrates the night in which the revelation was given to Muhammad. Although this sura is not prefaced by a set of disjoined Arabic letters, it obviously refers to the Quran:

We revealed this on the Night of Qadr. Would that you knew what the Night of Qadr is like!

Better is the Night of Qadr than a thousand months.

On that night the angels and the Spirit by their Lord's leave come down with each decree.

That night is peace, till breaks the dawn. (Quran 97 Dawood)<sup>95</sup>

In all of the suras delivered at Yathrib/Medina the speaker - the "We" - is clearly God. Muhammad himself is often referred to, in the third person, as "Our servant."

Although he insisted that what he said in his prophetic trances was "sent down" to him by God himself, Muhammad seems to have been ambiguous about the process of revelation. At times, as we have seen, he referred to a single revelation, which had occurred one night in Ramadan many years before he left Mecca. On this understanding, a single revelation was being proclaimed piecemeal to the Arabians, as Muhammad recited new lines of the Quran each time he entered his prophetic trance. At other times, Muhammad indicated that at every new recitation he was visited by the angel Gabriel. This was an ambiguity that Muhammad never resolved and that became a contentious problem for commentators on the Quran.<sup>96</sup> Most Muslims came to believe that every new prophecy was brought to Muhammad by Gabriel. Ibn Ishaq, for example, tells a story about one of the many occasions on which Gabriel, "as he was wont," came to Muhammad. On this particular occasion the Prophet was in the company of Khadija. Because Khadija could not see the angel she doubted the Prophet, and tested both the Prophet and his visitor by beginning to disrobe. With perfect propriety Gabriel immediately left the room, so the Prophet told her, and thus was Khadija persuaded that her husband's visitor was indeed an angel and not a demon.<sup>97</sup>

In retrospect we may speculate that it might have been possible for Muhammad and his followers, immediately after their arrival at Yathrib, to have joined themselves to the city's Judaeans. The Judaeans, for example, might have accepted most of Muhammad's brief Meccan prophecies as an Arabic epilogue to the Hebrew prophecies (there was little in these prophecies that was incompatible with Judaism). In turn, the Muslims might have asked the Judaeans to translate their Tanakh into Arabic, so that the new arrivals could learn more about God and his commandments, and could read what had been said by all the prophets who had preceded

Muhammad. For all sorts of reasons, of course, that did not happen. Instead of welcoming Muhammad as God's apostle to Arabic pagans, the Judaeans of Yathrib declared that he was not God's prophet at all. The Judaeans' opposition may have surprised Muhammad and certainly was a mortal threat to his position as leader of his community. Far from giving up his role as prophet, Muhammad kept it and added to it the role of Moses. In the sharpest break with Judaism he instructed his Muslims that the Judaeans' Torah was in error, a distortion from the pure message that God had once given to Abraham and that God was now giving in Arabic. Instead of seeing the Tanakh (to say nothing of the Talmud) as complementary to his own prophecies, Muhammad saw it as a competing and ultimately incompatible scripture. The Tanakh was not translated into Arabic, and Muhammad discouraged his followers even from inquiring of the Judaeans what was in their sacred text.<sup>98</sup>

So it was that the lines were drawn. Those at Yathrib who believed that Muhammad was God's prophet also believed that whatever God wanted them to know was contained in the Arabic Quran that Muhammad was gradually revealing: what had been said and written by the earlier prophets either agreed with the Quran or was wrong. The Yathrib tribesmen who adhered to the earlier prophets were Judaeans. Those who accepted Muhammad called themselves Muslims, and their religion was Islam.<sup>99</sup>

Immediately after the victory at the Wells of Badr in 624 Muhammad and the Muslims made an attack on the Banu Qaynuka, the smallest of the city's three Judaeans tribes. After a "siege" of fifteen days the Qaynuka surrendered, and agreed to leave Yathrib. The tribe first moved to a nearby oasis whose occupants were Judaeans, and then moved on to Syria. In addition to expelling the Qaynuka, Muhammad ordered that the *qiblah* for Muslims be changed (the *qiblah* is the direction in which a person should face when praying). At Mecca Muhammad had taken over from Judaism the practice of daily prayers to God, and like the Judaeans the first Muslims had faced Jerusalem when praying. Now, after the victory at Badr and the expulsion of the Qaynuka, Muhammad ordered that instead of turning toward Jerusalem and the site of the ruined temple, the Muslim at prayer was to face Mecca, where stood "the Holy Mosque," the Ka'ba that Abraham and Ishmael had built.<sup>100</sup>

### **The "Medina Compact"**

Although Yathrib was in some senses a city, it was not a political community and had none of the governmental institutions that had regularly characterized Greek and Roman cities. As the leader of the rapidly growing Muslim community in Yathrib/Medina, and de facto the city's most powerful leader, Muhammad established a "constitution" or an agreement for all of the city's inhabitants, whether Muslim, Judaeans or pagan. The objective of the agreement was to bring peace to the warring factions of Medina (for a long time the two bedouin tribes had feuded, and had drawn in as allies the Judaeans tribes and clans). As described by Ibn Ishaq, the Medina Compact consisted of forty-seven terms. The Compact assumed Muslim hostility against the Quraysh tribe at Mecca, and bound all the inhabitants of Yathrib to come to the assistance of the Muslims in any conflict with the Quraysh. It also made Muhammad and God the city's final authority: "Whenever there is anything about which you differ, it is to be referred to God and Muhammad."<sup>101</sup>

The date of this Medina Compact is uncertain. Some historians, following Ibn Ishaq, place it before the battle at Badr. Parts of it may be so early, but much of it seems to have followed the battle, and some of it by several years. The Compact makes arrangements for several Judaeen clans at Yathrib, but it nowhere mentions the three Judaeen tribes.<sup>102</sup> Perhaps the original Compact included those three tribes, and terms referring to them were excised after the three tribes' expulsion or liquidation. But it is also possible that Ibn Ishaq's version of the Compact dates no earlier than 627, when the last of the tribes was annihilated.

### **Continued violence in the name of God: Uhud and after**

In issuing his command to change the *qiblah* from Jerusalem to Mecca Muhammad indicated not only his disapproval of Judaism but also his intention to return in force to Mecca, to convert the Quraysh to Islam, and to purify the Ka'ba of its idolatrous rites. That project, however, was not yet feasible. In 625, stung by their defeat at Badr in the preceding year, the Quraysh of Mecca decided to rid the Hijaz once and for all of Muhammad and his Muslims. For this project the Quraysh raised at Mecca an army reputed to have numbered 3200 men. With so formidable a force they proceeded to Yathrib, where they confronted the Muslims at Mt. Uhud. This time the Quraysh fared better in the battle, slaying seventy-five of the Muslims while losing only twenty-seven of their own men. Muhammad himself lost a tooth at Uhud, and during the battle a rumor briefly spread that the Prophet had been killed. Although the Quraysh may have regarded the battle as a victory, they had failed in their strategic objective. As Montgomery Watt pointed out, the goal of their expedition was to eliminate the Muslims from Yathrib, so that caravans could once again proceed from Mecca to Syria and back without danger. In this main objective the Quraysh obviously were unsuccessful.<sup>103</sup> The battle was nevertheless something of a setback for the Muslims, and the "Imrans" sura chides them for their cowardice in the battle and assures them that the Muslim dead have entered Paradise as God's martyrs (Quran 3:120-148).

Perhaps to maintain his authority as a prophet and to unify his followers, Muhammad ordered a second Judaeen tribe - the Banū Nadīr - to leave Yathrib. Packing all of their moveable belongings on camels, the Nadir departed for the Khaybar oasis, a hundred miles to the north. Their date palms and other properties were divided among the prophet's followers. With the departure of the Nadir we may now call the city they left behind "Medina" rather than "Yathrib" (for Muslims Yathrib was now the *madinat rasul allah*, "the city of the Apostle of God").

In 627 the Nadir, now refugees at the Khaybar oasis, entered into alliance with the Quraysh. The two tribes converged on Medina, but Muhammad - foreseeing such an attack - had ordered the people of Medina to dig trenches all around the city. The aggressors had therefore to settle down outside the city for a long siege. After the two sides had for twenty days faced each other across the trenches, the dispirited Quraysh withdrew from the siege and the Nadir followed suit. In this so-called "Battle of the Trenches" casualties were light on both sides, the actual fighting being limited to the shooting of arrows. The losers in the battle were the Banu Qurayza tribesmen of Medina. This was the last Judaeen tribe in the city, and its sympathies during the battle were perceived to be (and undoubtedly were) on the side of the besiegers. When the latter had withdrawn from Medina, Muhammad ordered that all the men of the Qurayza tribe be taken

into custody. Another trench was dug, this one in the city's marketplace, and all the adult males of the tribe - more than seven hundred in number - were there beheaded. The women and children were enslaved. After 627 everyone in Medina acclaimed Muhammad as God's one and only prophet, or as "the Prophet." Ibn Ishaq reports that it was at Medina that a muezzin first called the Muslims to prayer by asserting, "Allah Akbar. I bear witness that there is no God but Allah. I bear witness that Muhammad is the apostle of God. Come to prayer."<sup>104</sup>

Judaeans were not the only people at Medina to suffer violence at the hands of Muhammad and his followers. When most of the bedouin near Medina - the Aws and Khazraj - had accepted Islam, Muhammad's prophecies began to command the extermination of those pagans who remained. Such extremism would have been suicidal for Muhammad at Mecca, where the Muslims had been badly outnumbered by pagans, but at Medina the Muslims were able to take the offensive. Suras 8 ("Spoils") and 9 ("Repentance") contain some of the strongest verses commanding battle against the idolaters. At Quran 8:39, for example, the Muslim is ordered, "Make war on them until idolatry shall cease and God's religion shall reign supreme." Even more emphatic is the so-called "sword verse":

When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. God is forgiving and merciful. (Quran 9:5, Dawood)

In the pre-state society of ancient Arabia, violence and bloodshed were common. Throughout most of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires courts and law codes provided for the administration of justice, but in the early seventh century the Arabians - and especially the bedouin - had no such luxuries: a bedouin tribesman was accustomed to taking the law into his own hands and exacting vengeance for real or perceived injuries. In Israel and in Judah during the First Temple period Yahweh had also given orders to his worshipers to slay idolaters, but that instruction was somewhat tempered by the Decalogue commandment, "Thou shalt not kill!" In the Judaeon Diaspora and in New Covenant Christianity the order to kill idolaters was set aside completely. Muhammad's prophecies instructed the faithful not to kill a fellow believer, and not to kill anyone else except for a just cause,<sup>105</sup> but in Muslim eyes idolatry was clearly a just cause.

Finally, some of the early Muslim violence had economic rather than religious objectives. Raids on Byzantine (Roman) territory had been conducted by Arabic tribes since the third century, and the Muslims - now more numerous than any Arabic tribe - likewise depended on raiding. Raids in 628 and 629 were conducted against several Christian and Judaeon towns and villages in the Levant, and provided the prophet and his followers with booty.

### **The triumphs at Khaybar, Mecca and Hunayn**

During the holy months of 628 Muhammad joined with the pagans in making a pilgrimage to Mecca. Because of his well-known denunciation of the pagan gods the Quraysh refused to allow him to make the circumambulation, the *'umra*, of the Ka'ba. But his proposal of a military truce between the Quraysh and the Muslims was an offer they could not refuse (by this time the

Muslims seem to have numbered considerably more fighting men than did the Quraysh). At Hudaibiyya, not far from Mecca, oaths were sworn and an armistice proclaimed. With concerns about the Quraysh resolved, Muhammad led his men to the Khaybar oasis, from which he initially expelled not only the Nadir but all other Judaeans. The Judaeans approached him as suppliants, however, and persuaded him that in the cultivation of date palms and in the other forms of agriculture at the oasis they were far more experienced than the Muslims: if they were allowed to return to Khaybar, they would submit half of their profits to Muhammad. This arrangement inaugurated the Muslim tradition of conferring the status of *dhimmi* (“protected one”) on those Judaeans and Christians who submitted to Muslim arms, and who in return for their protected status paid an annual tax (*jizya*). While idolaters were given only two choices - Islam or the sword - the “people of the book” had three: Islam, the sword, or payment of the *jizya* (see Quran 9:29). Overwhelmingly, they chose the third.

The next year - 629 - Muhammad once more came as a pilgrim to Mecca, and this time he was permitted to join in making the *‘umra*. He used the opportunity of the pagan festival to win more converts to monotheism, and two of the Quraysh converts - Khālid ibn al-Walīd and ‘Amr ibn al-‘As - were to become renowned Muslim generals. The days of paganism at Mecca and in the Hijaz were clearly numbered, and they came virtually to an end in 630. Declaring that the truce of Hudaibiyya had been broken by allies of the Quraysh, Muhammad brought thousands of Muslim troops from Medina to Mecca in January of 630.<sup>106</sup> Pausing outside the town, he announced his intention to dedicate the Ka‘ba to the worship of God and he demanded the capitulation of the Quraysh. On Muhammad’s promise to spare their lives, the Quraysh surrendered and turned the sacred building over to him. The Muslims smashed the idols and performed purification ceremonies to render the Ka‘ba acceptable to God. Henceforth, the old structure was sacred to him, and the annual *hajj* to Mecca would be a Muslim ritual.

Although the taking of Mecca was not quite without violence (four of the Quraysh who resisted the Muslims were killed), it was essentially peaceful. In the aftermath, however, the Muslims were compelled to fight the bloodiest battle of their short history. As word got out that Muhammad had smashed the old gods, two of the strongest pagan tribes of the southern Hijaz - the Hawazin and the Thaqif - vowed to wreak vengeance on the Muslims. In February of 630, at a place called the Hunayn valley, the Muslims faced a coalition of bedouin tribes. Although they outnumbered their opponents, the Muslims seem to have panicked early in the battle. In the end, however, they rallied and were victorious. Muhammad revealed that the tide was turned when God sent divine and invisible warriors to assist the Muslims (Quran 9:26-27). However the battle was won, Hunayn was decisive for the future of Islam and Arabia. The gods were gone and would not return.

### **The Muslim *ummah* at Mecca, and the “Five Pillars of Islam”**

As the Arabic tribes recognized that the days of polytheism were over, and made their peace with God and his Prophet, Muhammad established a new community - a new Umma - to replace the very loose pagan community to which the tribes had hitherto belonged. The spiritual base of the new community, as of the old, was of course at Mecca because it was there that Arabians traditionally congregated to worship. Unlike the Medina compact of the 620s, which

included Judaeans and pagans as well as Muslims, the Umma established in 630 was exclusively for Muslims. The terms seem to have been those of “the Five Pillars of Islam,” although they were not yet called by that name.<sup>107</sup>

The first requirement was the *shahadah*: everyone who joined the Umma declared that there was no god but God (Allah), and that Muhammad was the Prophet of God. The second requirement - *salat*, "prayer" - stipulated the most important part of Muslim worship, the daily liturgical prayers to God.<sup>108</sup> Thirdly, the Muslim swore to pay annually an alms-tax, the *zakat*, to be assessed by men chosen by Muhammad. Fasting (*shawm*) during the month of Ramadan was the fourth requirement, because according to Muhammad it was in Ramadan that God - or Gabriel - had appeared to him. Finally, the Muslim was obligated to make the yearly *hajj* to Mecca, and there to worship God in the company of the entire Muslim Umma.

### **Muhammad's last years**

Muhammad followed up the victory at Hunayn with an expedition south to the Tā'if oasis, home of the Thaqif, and demanded that the tribe destroy its idol of the goddess al-Lat. The next year, 631, the prophet led a much more ambitious campaign. This was a venture into Byzantine territory near the Gulf of Aqaba, some three hundred miles to the north of Medina. The raiders first reached the oasis town of Tabuk, and then proceeded to the largely Christian city of Ayla (Eilat, modern Aqaba), which was undefended. Like the Judaeans at the Khaybar oasis, the Christians of Ayla purchased peace by agreeing to pay an annual poll-tax, or *jizya*, with which Muhammad and his Muslims were satisfied. The expedition was therefore a success, and in Sura 9 of the Quran Muhammad chided the malingerers, those Muslims who out of fear chose to stay at Medina with the women while he and his stalwarts risked their lives for the revenue on which Medina increasingly depended.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps it was in the aftermath of the Ayla expedition that the town of Najrān, the Christian community in northern Yemen (and some three hundred miles south of Mecca), placed itself under the protection of Muhammad and his Muslims. In return, these Sabaean Christians too, like their fellows at Ayla, undertook to pay the Muslims an annual tax (*jizya*).<sup>110</sup>

The Aqaba campaign was Muhammad's last. He made the *hajj* to Mecca in 632, but soon after returning to Medina he fell sick, and when too weak to lead the Muslims in their daily prayers he asked Abu Bakr to take his place. He died in Aisha's apartment, at the age of 62 or 63, and was given a simple burial. The material possessions he left behind were a few jugs and mats, a white mule, and a small piece of land. His legacy was twofold. Politically and militarily he had united the tribes of the Hijaz, creating a proto-state that had an enormous imperial potential. The other half of his legacy, and the precondition for a centralized Hijaz, was Islam.

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1. On the domestication of the camel see Richard Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 36 ff. Bulliet shows that camels were domesticated in Somalia and elsewhere in the horn of Africa long before 1100 BC, but only as a food animal. At the end of the second millennium Arabic-speaking tribes began using camels as riding and pack animals. See also Juris Zarins, "The Camel in Ancient Arabia: a Further Note," *Antiquity* 52 (1978), pp. 44-46. On horseback riding see my *Early Riders: The Beginnings of Mounted Warfare in Asia and Europe* (London: Routledge, 2004).
  2. See Donner 1981, pp. 20-28 (at p. 21 Donner provides a map showing the location of several dozen tribes on the eve of Islam); see also Hoyland 2001, pp. 113-17.
  3. Because pigs have no sweat-glands, they cool themselves by wallowing in mud and therefore require a moist climate, with at least 12 inches of rain annually. It was utterly impossible for bedouin in the Hijaz to keep pigs healthy. See Brian Hesse's article, "Pigs," in *OEANE* vol. 4 (1997), pp. 347-48.
  4. On this topic see Hoyland 2001, pp. 198-228.
  5. See Hoyland 2001, pp. 201-03.
  6. According to Ibn Ishaq, for example, because of their hostility to Muhammad the Quraysh tribe hung a written "contract" on the wall of the Ka'ba, calling for the rest of the tribe to boycott the Banu Hashim clan, to which Muhammad belonged. See Peters 1994, p. 177.
  7. For a different view see Shahīd 1989, pp. 422-30, and most recently Shahīd 2006, p. 11, note 7, and pp. 23-24. Professor Irfan Shahīd, for many years a distinguished Arabist at Georgetown University, has argued that an Arabic translation of one or more of the Gospels had been made before Muhammad began to prophesy.
  8. According to Tayib 1983, p. 111, "Every Arab schoolboy is taught that this name (which in everyday language means 'suspended') was applied to these poems because there was a custom in pre-Islamic Arabia for the prize-winning poems in poetical competitions held at the fair of 'Ukāz to be written down and hung up in the Ka'bah. This tale is certainly a fable, invented in order to explain the commonest sense of the word." No such custom, el Tayib observes, is mentioned anywhere in the Hadith literature on Muhammad's life, nor is the aetiology attested until ca. 900.
  9. For a succinct presentation see Ball 2000, pp. 96 ff. The comprehensive study of the Roman and Byzantine emperors' alliances with Ghassanid and other Arabian tribes is Irfan Shahid's multi-volume *Byzantium and the Arabs* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984-2002).
  10. The *Sarakenoi* were an Arabic tribe whom the Romans confronted in the province of Arabia Petraea during the second century (Ptolemy, *Geog.* 6.7), and in the third and fourth century the Romans extended the name to all of the Arabic-speaking bedouin tribes.
  11. As translated at Peters 1994, p. 141.

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12. Hoyland 2001, pp. 141-42.
  13. Much information on the *jahiliyya* comes from the *Book of Idols*, written ca. 800 by Ibn al-Kalbi.
  14. Henninger 1999, p. 118, suggests that for the pre-Islamic bedouin Allah was the provider of rain, and so necessarily a sky-god.
  15. Hoyland 2001, p. 165.
  16. Henninger 1999, p. 116.
  17. Eusebius *HE* 5.10 refers to India, but it is generally agreed that the myth originally referred to Himyarite Saba.
  18. On the mission of Theophilus Indus to southwestern Arabia see Shahīd 1984, pp. 86-106.
  19. See Peters 1994, pp. 48-55. Irfan Shahīd's *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971), presented a Syriac manuscript, which Shahīd discovered, dealing with the martyrdom.
  20. Theodoret's *Hist. Relig.* 26 (*PG* 82.1476), translated by Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, p. 2.
  21. Shahīd's argument that an Arabic translation of at least one Gospel had been made by the early seventh century is difficult to accept. If Ethiopian Christians living in Mecca had in their possession a written Gospel, it was evidently a Gospel written in Ethiopic, as Quran 16.103 suggests and as Shahīd himself concludes: "What emerges from the Qur'anic verses and the tradition is that there was in Makka an Ethiopic Bible and Ethiopians who could read it" (Shahīd 2006, p. 16).
  22. On this topic Hoyland's otherwise very helpful book has little to say. I have profited from reading Paul Gauthier's paper, "Arabian Jewry before the Rise of Islam," written at Vanderbilt University for Honors Seminar 181W (sec. 32) in 2005.
  23. The known Judaeans at Yathrib are listed by Newby 1988, p. 53; cf. Peters 1994, p. 192.
  24. For a complete list see Newby 1988, p. 40.
  25. Newby 1988, p. 22, suggests that in pre-Islamic Arabia "the Jews were probably acting as other Jews did in the Diaspora and preparing 'Targums' in Arabic." But it is unlikely that any such translations existed in the seventh century. Peters 1994, p. 290, n. 13, refers to "the near-unanimity of scholars on the point" and cites the scholarship concluding that the Judaeans' and Christians' Bibles were not translated into Arabic until long after the publication of the Quran. Quran 46:12 indicates quite clearly that although "the Book of Moses" was a predecessor, only in the Quran does God speak in Arabic (see also 26:195).

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26. Newby 1988, p. 74; Gil 1999, p. 151.

27. For arguments that the Arabic Judaeans had their own language or dialect see Newby 1988, pp. 21-22, and p. 66. For arguments that the *kitāb al-yahūd*, which Zaid learned in only two weeks, was merely a script see Adang 1996, pp. 6-7. The conclusions reached by Benjamin Hary on this question seem sound: “There is some evidence that the Jews in the Arabian peninsula used some sort of Jewish Arabic dialect called *al-Yahūdiyya*. This dialect was similar to the dominant Arabic dialect, but included some Hebrew and Aramaic lexemes, especially in the domain of religious and cultural vocabulary” (Hary 1995, p. 75). At p. 76 Hary suggests that the Judaeans of Arabia wrote their *al-Yahūdiyya* dialect with Hebrew characters.

28. Rubin 1999, p. 286: “That circumcision was common among the Arabs since pre-Islamic times is a well-established fact.” See also Retsö 2003, p. 487 and pp. 606-07.

29. Of the several passages in the Quran that prohibit the consumption of pork see, for example, Sura 5:3: “You are forbidden carrion, blood, and the flesh of swine; also any flesh dedicated to any other than Allah” (Dawood tr.). The first three taboos seem to have been traditional in pre-Islamic Arabia.

30. Peters 1994, pp. 114-15, and p. 285, n. 21.

31. Gil 1999, p. 146. For some of the ancient accounts see Newby 1988, pp. 14-19.

32. Gil 1999, p. 149.

33. See Peters 1994, p. 293, n. 46. For a detailed study of the competition between Muhammad’s Muslims and the followers of Musaylima see Kister 2002.

34. For the battle and Musaylima’s death see Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 377. See also, at pp. 648-49, Ibn Ishaq’s account of how “the arch-liar” Musaylima had earlier tried to negotiate with Muhammad.

35. This section leans heavily on Peters 1994, pp. 133 ff.

36. The original work of Ibn Ishaq - perhaps an enormous mass of notes (see Schoeler 2002) - has been lost. What is preserved is the abridgment of this material made by Ibn Hisham (who died in 833). A translation of the abridgement from Arabic into English was produced by Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq’s “Sirat Rasul Allah”* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955). Guillaume’s translation of Ibn Hisham’s abridgment of Ibn Ishaq’s information will be cited, in the notes below, as Ibn Ishaq 1955. The prefatory material that Ibn Hisham omitted from his abridgment has been tentatively reconstructed in Newby 1989. For discussion of Ibn Ishaq as an authority on Muhammad’s life see Peters 1994, pp. 263-64.

37. See the map at Potts 1999, p. 56.

38. Many Muslims suppose that even in middle age Muhammad was illiterate, but both

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probability and what little evidence we have indicates that he was able to read and write. For texts mentioning reading and writing in pre-Islamic Mecca see Peters 1994, pp. 177 and 181 (here we find Muhammad writing a letter).

39. For stories about Khadija see Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 82-83.

40. On the subject of pre-Islamic monotheism at Mecca, focusing on Quran 53:33-54, see Gibb 1999.

41. For Ethiopian Christians at Mecca before Muhammad's prophetic career see Shahīd 2006, pp. 14-16. Shahīd finds in the Hadith that Muhammad was acquainted with several of these Ethiopians and that "the Prophet's very own wetnurse Baraka, more often known by her tecnonymic, Umm al-Aymān, was an Ethiopian woman."

42. See Guillaume 1956, p. 26: "The only authentic story of Muhammad's early years is contained in an unpublished manuscript of his first biographer, Ibn Ishāq."

43. Translation by Guillaume 1956, p. 26; for recent discussion and references see Rubin 1999, pp. 282-86, with nn. 70-76.

44. Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 84-87.

45. After he told of the angel Gabriel's appearance to Muhammad (Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 105-06) and of Muhammad's report of the miracle to Khadija, Ibn Ishaq states that "three years elapsed from the time that the Apostle concealed his state until God commanded him to publish his religion, according to information that has reached me. Then God said, 'Proclaim what you have been ordered and turn aside from the polytheists.'" (Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 117; see Peters 1994, pp. 152 ff.). Like other Muslims, Ibn Ishaq held that Muhammad's belief in and worship of God was not learned from other monotheists (whether at Mecca or from the Judaeans of the northern Hijaz and Yemen) but began suddenly with God's miraculous revelation to him. A reasonable reconstruction would be that Muhammad's conversion to monotheism was the result of his contact with the handful of monotheists in Mecca and with the large monotheist communities in northern and southern Arabia, and that three years elapsed between his conversion and the beginning of his public prophecy.

46. According to Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 107, one of Khadija's male cousins was a Christian: "her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal ... had become a Christian and read the Scriptures and learned from those that follow the Torah and the Gospel." If a Christian in pre-Islamic Mecca had a copy of the Torah and Gospels, it was very likely written in the Ge'ez language of Abyssinia.

47. Tabari's *Annals* inform us that the so-called "Satanic Verses," which originally stood immediately after Quran 53:19-20, described the three goddesses as *gharānīq*, whose "intercession is to be hoped for." The term *gharānīq* may have meant "Numidian cranes," or "high-flying cranes," implying that the goddesses soared in the heavens and came close to God. See Peters 1994, pp. 160-61 and Watt 1999, p. 309. Guillaume 1956, p. 35 translates Tabari's *gharānīq* as "exalted virgins" but notes that "the exact meaning of the word is not known."

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48. As translated at Peters 1994, p. 165.

49. According to Peters 1994, p. 143, there is abundant evidence that Muhammad “did not identify Gabriel as the agent of revelation until his Medina days.”

50. Quran 53:1-17, tr. Dawood. The Revealer to whom the sura refers seems to be God himself, although Muslim commentaries on this sura identify the Revealer as the angel Gabriel. The references to the goddesses of the Ka‘ba at lines 19-20 indicate that most or all of Sura 53 dates from Muhammad’s years at Mecca.

51. On *tahannuth* see Peters 1994, pp. 128-29.

52. Rodinson 1971, pp. 75-83, discusses this at length.

53. Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 105. The authority cited here by Ibn Ishaq is Aisha, who eventually was Muhammad’s favorite wife. But at the time of the events in question Aisha was not yet born.

54. For the story see Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 181-87. For discussion see Peters 1994, pp. 144-47.

55. For more detailed references to the development of an embryo from a clot of blood see Sura 22:5, 23:14, and 75:38. In the latter passage Muhammad chides the skeptic who doubts that God can raise a man from the dead. Such a man should consider the miracle of birth: “Was he not a drop of ejaculated semen? He became a clot of blood; then God formed and moulded him” (Dawood). Although Galen supposed that both males and females emit semen during intercourse, and that an embryo comes from the union of these male and female “seeds,” most of the ancients supposed that a human fetus is formed from the combination of male semen with the uterine blood of a female. The flowing of blood during menstruation, and the cessation or “clotting” of menstrual bleeding after conception, encouraged this view. For the role of a woman’s blood in conception see, for example, Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 1.19-20. That women and other female mammals ovulate, just as birds and reptiles do, was not suggested until the 17<sup>th</sup> century and not confirmed until the 19<sup>th</sup>. Some Muslim translations of the word *‘alaq* have changed accordingly: instead of “clot of blood” the word has been taken to mean “lump of flesh” or “biomass.” For a close examination of early Muslim views on embryology see Baffioni 2008.

56. Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 106.

57. Peters 1994, p. 149.

58. Although Muhammad apparently did not claim to see a divine vision with each recitation, he did - at least in his years at Medina - occasionally claim that new revelations were coming to him. So, for example, at 8:41 we read that God made a specific revelation - this one about the portion of booty that should be given to charity - “on the day of victory” at the wells of Badr in 624: “Know that one-fifth of your spoils shall belong to God, the Apostle, the Apostle’s kinfolk, the orphans, the destitute, and the traveller in need: if you truly believe in God and what We revealed to Our servant on the day of victory, the day when the two armies met” (Dawood).

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59. Gibb 1999, p. 304 translates *saj'* as "cooing," and says that it was "used in Arabia for oracular utterances, proverbial sayings and the like. One obvious advantage of this style is that it facilitated memorizing." See also Peters 1994, p. 295, n. 6. The services of a *kahin* (a word cognate with the Hebrew *kohen*, "priest") were traditionally sought out in order to find lost camels, to determine the auspices for a raid, and especially for the interpretation of dreams. Evidently the *kahin* took some time to prepare his answers to these interrogations, and after working himself into a trance would deliver the answers in rhymed *saj'*.
60. Guillaume 1956, pp. 73-74. But see also the caution of Rodinson 1971, pp. 92-95.
61. Peters 1994, pp. 290-91 (note 23) summarizes some of the scholars who concluded that "Muhammad's very earliest revelations were in fact lost."
62. Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 106-07; see Peters 1994, pp. 150-51.
63. Peters 1994, pp. 178-79.
64. Rodinson 1971, pp. 116-17; Watt 1961, pp. 56-57.
65. Exodus 20:3 and 22:29 (OSB).
66. Peters 1994, p. 179.
67. Sahih of al-Bukhari, Vol. 1, Book 1, No. 2 (translator, M. Muhsin Khan).
68. Sahih of al-Bukhari 1.1.4 (Muhsin Khan)
69. Later Muslim tradition made Musaylima out to be an imitator of Muhammad, who "stole" much of Muhammad's beliefs and style. But see Peters 1994, p. 159: "It is easier to assume that *al-Rahman* had a genuine and long-standing cult in al-Yamama, in the vicinity of modern Riyadh, a cult to which Muhammad too may have been drawn."
70. Quran 53:19-23, tr. Dawood. On the "Satanic" verses that these lines replaced, see Watt 1999, p. 309. Ibn Ishaq states that in the original sura Muhammad, hoping to win over the Quraysh, followed the names of the three goddesses with the words, "These are the exalted Gharaniq, whose intercession is approved." The *gharaniq* were evidently high-flying Abyssinian cranes. When accosted by strict monotheists, Muhammad regretted the sentence and called it a Satanic contribution to his prophecy. For the full story see Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 165-66.
71. On this episode see Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 146-55; Watt 1961, pp. 65-70.
72. Peters 1994, p. 173.
73. Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 146. For their return to Mecca see Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 167.
74. Watt 1961, pp. 65-66. Rodinson 1971, pp. 111-15, and Peters 1994, pp. 173-76, accept the sequence but offer no date (except to put the departure for Abyssinia before the deaths of Khadija

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and Abu Talib). Armstrong 2006 apparently says nothing about the Abyssinian affair.

75. Quran 56:41-44 (Dawood).

76. For traditions about Muhammad's appearances at these gatherings see Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 194-197.

77. As in Peters 1994, p. 152.

78. Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 114-16, names the first eight males who accepted Muhammad and Islam, and on pp. 116-17 Ibn Ishaq lists another thirty men and women who came to Islam somewhat later. For each of the converts, the biographer provides a genealogy reaching back five or six generations.

79. For the flight to Abyssinia see Peters 1994, pp. 173-75. For Muhammad's abortive appeal to the Thaqīf tribe see Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 192-94.

80. Hashim, patriarch of the Hashimite clan to which Muhammad belonged, had married a Khazraj wife. Muhammad therefore had distant ties to the Khazraj of Yathrib. See Guillaume 1956, pp. 12 and 24.

81. Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 221-25.

82. Peters 1994, pp. 187-88.

83. Peters 1994, pp. 194-95.

84. Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 239; see Rodinson 1971, pp. 156-58.

85. See Watt 1961, p. 117: "Though it is convenient to speak of Muhammad's religion from the first as Islam, this name may not in fact have been given to it until late in the Medinan period."

86. On this and the other early raids see Watt 1961, pp. 102-112.

87. On this battle, minor in military terms but immensely consequential for Islam, see Rodinson 1971, pp. 165-70.

88. Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 289-314.

89. The Muslim force is said to have included 86 emigrants from Mecca and 238 "helpers" from the Aws and Khazraj.

90. See Watt 1961, pp. 122-23. The Muslim dead included six emigrants and eight helpers.

91. On this see Peters 1994, pp. 204-07.

92. For references to the heavenly tablets on which the Torah is inscribed see Jubilees 3:31;

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5:13-15; 5:30-31; 6:17; 15:25-26; 16:29; 28:6; 32:10-11; 32:15; 32:28; 33:10; 49:7-8; 50:13.

93. Yom Kippur, on the tenth day of Tishri, was for the Judaeans of Yathrib simply *'ashūrā* ("the tenth") in Arabized Aramaic; see Rodinson 1971, p. 159.

94. Bell 1937; Rodinson 1971, p. 241, found Bell's analysis convincing.

95. Peters 1994, p. 205, with n. 48, concludes that Sura 97 "must be a Medina *sura*."

96. Peters 1994, pp. 206-07.

97. Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 107.

98. Adang 1996, pp. 7-8.

99. The word *muslim* meant "one who submits" and denoted a person who had "submitted" to God, perhaps prostrating himself in prayer. The abstract noun *islām* denoted submission to God. For the name in the Quran see Sura 22:77-78: "You that are true believers, kneel and prostrate yourselves. Worship your Lord and do good works, so that you may triumph. Fight for the cause of God with the devotion due to Him. He has chosen you, and laid on you no burdens in the observance of your faith, the faith of Abraham your father. In this, as in former scriptures, He has given you the name of Muslims" (Dawood).

100. On the change in the *qiblah* see Quran 2:144-49.

101. For "the Medina compact" see Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 231-33.

102. For discussion of the date of the Compact see Watt 1961, pp. 93-94. Parts of the Compact suggest a date as late as the autumn of 628 (see Peters 1994, p. 201).

103. Watt 1961, p. 140. On pp. 135-43 Watt provides a detailed narrative and analysis of the battle on Mt. Uhud.

104. Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 236.

105. Quran 6:151.

106. On this climactic event see Peters 1994, pp. 235-38.

107. Peters 1994, pp. 242-43.

108. Originally these seem to have been three (see Peters 1994, p. 165), but were very soon increased to five.

109. Peters 1994, pp. 239-42.

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110. Donner 1981, p. 76.