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CHAPTER 1

The Quran and the Birth of a Community of Believers

> Read! In the Name of your Lord who created:
> He created man from a clinging form.
> Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One
> who taught by the pen,
> who taught man what he did not know.
>
> —QURAN 96:1–5

Khadija bint Khuwaylid wrapped her husband in a blanket. Muhammad, trembling with fear, told her what had happened to him: he had been in the cave of Hira, near Mecca, praying and meditating. An angel came to him and said, "Read!"; Muhammad responded that he did not know how to read. The angel squeezed him tightly in his arms, then let him go and again ordered, "Read!"; Muhammad repeated that he did not know how to read. A second and then a third time the angel took Muhammad in his arms and held him so tightly he thought he would die, then pronounced to him the words of the first revelation made to the prophet Muhammad, the first five verses of the 96th sura (or chapter) of the Quran, cited above. Muhammad asked his wife what was happening

to him: was he being deceived by evil spirits, *jinn*? "Rejoice," said Khadija, "God would not humiliate you. You are among the righteous: you give to the poor, you speak truth, you help those in need." She gave him confidence and faith; she thus became the first Muslim. She took Muhammad to see her cousin, a Christian named Waraqa, who listened carefully as Muhammad related what had happened to him. This, affirmed Waraqa, was the same message that Moses had received. Muhammad was a new prophet. But Waraqa warned Muhammad that like other prophets before him, he would be opposed by his people who would persecute him and his followers, and who in the end would expel him from his home.

Quran and Hadiths

This story is found in the *Sahih Muslim*, one of the principal collections of hadiths (traditions of the prophet). Scholar Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj composed this collection in the mid-ninth century. His work is part of the teeming intellectual activity of the Abbasid era (which we will examine in chapter 3). Muslim cites his sources, which are above all oral: each hadith is preceded by an *isnad*, a chain of transmission meant to guarantee its authenticity. In the case of this hadith, the prophet is said to have narrated it to his wife Aisha, who told it to a certain Urwa ibn al-Zubayr, who divulged it to Muhammad bin Muslim, who told it to Aqil bin Khalid bin Aqil, then to al-Laith bin Sad, who conveyed it to Abdullah bin Yusuf al-Tunaysi, who finally told it to Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, who wrote it down. A chain of seven intermediaries between the prophet and the compiler over the course of two centuries. Aisha is one of the most important of these transmitters since she was the wife with whom Muhammad was married the longest and to whom he is said to have confided the most. She in turn related a number of traditions to her niece Amra. The long list of hadith transmitters comprises many thousands of people, including over eight thousand women.[1]

This chain of transmission illustrates the vitality of oral tradition in Arab society during the first two Muslim centuries. The living memory of Muhammad and his companions was preserved and transmitted by his

followers, and subsequently by generations of the faithful. The veracity of the hadith is guaranteed by the fidelity of the transmission and the probity of the witnesses. Indeed, Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj and other ninth-century scholars who founded the *ilm al-hadith* (science of tradition) acknowledged the difficulty of their enterprise. Among the thousands of traditions that were being told and retold, how could they distinguish between the authentic and the spurious? The other principal source for the life of the Prophet, the *Sirat rasul Allah* (Life of the Messenger of God), is closely related to the hadiths. Composed by Ibn Ishaq (704–767), it survives only in the version reworked by Ibn Hisham (who died in 833, two centuries after the prophet). While these sources probably preserve narrative elements that correspond to the era of Muhammad, other elements were clearly added later, as the Abbasid scholars already recognized.

How, then, can we understand who Muhammad was and how the first community of Muslims was formed? As English historian Edward Gibbon remarked in 1788, we have to contemplate his shadow through a cloud of incense to reconstruct the life of the man using the narrations that pious Muslims have created over the centuries. Indeed, the obstacle is the same for those who try to write the biographies of other great religious figures: it is difficult, often impossible, to separate historical facts from pious legends, biography from hagiography. Various scholars lament that it is impossible to write a biography of Muhammad.[2]

The details around when and how the Muslim holy book was compiled are debated by specialists, but recent studies tend to confirm some aspects of the Muslim traditions about the origins of the Quran. Some suras were probably written down during Muhammad's lifetime. Uthman, the third caliph (644–656), is said to have had the first full text of the Quran written down. This version was compiled about twenty years after the prophet's death, at a time when many of his companions were still alive. Some scholars argue that it was only during the Umayyad era, at the beginning of the eighth century, that the definitive text of the Quran was established. The Quran presents itself as divine: God speaks in the first person plural ("we," although sometimes "I" or "he"); he frequently addresses Muhammad as "you" (singular) and the faithful as "you" plural (often "O you who believe!"). Since this is the word of God

to his Arab listeners proffered through the voice of the prophet Muhammad, there is no need to relate the prophet's life. His name occurs four times in the Quran, which calls him "Messenger of God" (*rasul Allah*) and mentions his preaching in Mecca, the hostility of the city's elite provoked by his teaching, his flight to Medina, some of his marriages, and the political and military combats he undertakes as head of the fledgling Muslim community. Many of these events, simply alluded to in the Quran, can be understood only by the light of later sources, hadiths and *Sira*.

Let us return to the story of the first revelation of the Quran, preserved in the passage quoted above. Nothing in the Quran explains the context of this revelation: it mentions neither the cave of Hira, nor an angel, nor the prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, this first revelation is found not at the beginning of the Quran, but in the 96th of its 114 suras, since the Quran is not arranged chronologically. There is nothing there about Muhammad's reaction to this revelation, nor the role played by Khadija, the first Muslim (whose name does not appear in the Quran). So to understand this episode we have to look not only at the Quran, but at hadith and *Sira*. While most of the ninth-century hadith scholars agree about this episode, about a hundred different versions of it were in circulation, with generally minor differences of emphasis. On a wide variety of subjects, we find many discordant or contradictory narrations among the thousands of hadiths circulating in the ninth-century Abbasid Caliphate. Some of the hadiths no doubt relate true deeds and words of the prophet and his companions. Some reflect conflicts dating from the time of Muhammad. Others are pious legends accumulated during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, produced by societies quite different from that of seventh-century Arabia. It was difficult for the Abbasid scholars of the ninth century to sort the authentic from the spurious; it is almost impossible to do so in the twenty-first century.

The Quran, then, consists of a series of revelations that, according to Muslim tradition, Muhammad received and transmitted to those around him over a period of twenty-two years: the first revelation took place around the year 610; the last revelation not long before the prophet's death, which is traditionally dated 632. According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad was born around 570 in the Hashimite clan of the Quraysh,

the powerful tribe that controlled Mecca and its sanctuary, the Kaaba. Muhammad was an orphan, brought up by his uncle Abu Talib. Some traditions affirm that he was a shepherd, others a merchant; it is possible he was both. Khadija, widow and businesswoman, hired the young Muhammad to work for her and ended up proposing marriage to him around 595 (she was forty years old and he twenty-five). After the first revelation in 610, Muhammad preached in Mecca, but in 619 both Khadija and Abu Talib died, and under increasing persecution Muhammad and his followers left Mecca in 622, making the *hijra* (hegira) or exodus to the town of Yathrib, which was renamed Madinat al-Nabi, City of the Prophet, or simply Medina.

Specialists of the Quran distinguish between the revelations made in Mecca before 622 and those made in Medina afterward. The Quran consists of 6,236 verses (*ayat*) divided into 114 suras varying in length from 3 to 286 verses; some suras contain elements from various periods of revelation. Whether or not one judges that the Quran faithfully reflects the words that Muhammad transmitted to his people, it is the only important document from the first century of Islam and the best source for understanding the life of Muhammad and his companions in Mecca and Medina. The Quran is a complex text often difficult to understand and interpret, as the Quran itself warns: "Some of its verses are definite in meaning—these are the cornerstone of the Scripture—and others are ambiguous. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down a specific meaning of their own: only God knows the true meaning" (Q 3:7).

The suras that were revealed earliest, according to Muslim tradition, exhort the Meccans to recognize God and the benefits he accords to humanity. It is he who created humans, who sends rain, who makes crops grow, who watches over humankind, who guides ships safely to port. Humans should turn to him, show him their gratitude, worship him only, without associating other supposed divinities with him. To associate inferior divinities with the sole and unique God is the crime of *shirk*, which God denounces in the Quran. Those who practice shirk are *mushrikun*, "associators," a word often translated at "pagans." Yet this translation is misleading: for the pre-Muslim Meccans, Allah was the

creator and supreme God. The mushrikun were not pagans or polytheists in the sense that the ancient Greeks or Romans were; their error and affront was to associate other lesser deities with God, to think that these lesser deities could be efficacious intercessors. While Abbasid historical works imagined that these Meccan mushrikun or *kafirun* (unbelievers) had idols in their homes and had placed hundreds of idols in the Kaaba, the Quran says nothing of the sort.[3]

Allah, through the revelation of the Quran, proposes a new pact with the Meccans. They are enjoined to recognize the sole God and to put themselves under his protection. This is the sense of the word *islam*, often translated as "submission," which comes from the root SLM, which also give the word *salam*, peace. The Quran asks them not to change their "religion" or to convert to a religion called "Islam," but to put themselves under the protection of their Lord (*rabb*), a word that occurs repeatedly in the Quran. There were also many Jews and Christians living in seventh-century Arabia. For them, Allah was the One God of the Torah and Gospels. The Quran is full of exhortations to the *mu'minun* (believers, plural of *mu'min*), who include the "people of the book," Jews and Christians who had received the prior revelations of the Torah (through Moses) and Gospel (through Jesus). When the infidels refuse to believe, God tells Muhammad,

> Say, "Disbelievers:
> I do not worship what you worship
> you do not worship what I worship,
> I will never worship what you worship,
> you will never worship what I worship
> you have your religion and I have mine." (Q 109:1–6)

Quranic Prophets

The Quran tells of prophets who came before Muhammad. Their stories all follow roughly the same model: the prophet announces a warning from God, exhorts his people to worship God only, to be humble and kind to others, to avoid injustice and immorality. God is merciful, ready

to accept penance and to reward those who are faithful to him. But he will punish those who do not heed his warnings. Sura 7 relates a series of such warnings from the prophets Noah, Hud, and Salih: each time, the people refuse to heed their prophet and are struck with a terrible punishment. The Quran narrates the lives and preaching of these prophets (all of them, with the exceptions of Hud and Salih, from biblical tradition) more succinctly and simply than the Bible, sometimes merely alluding to these stories, which suggests that those listening to Muhammad's revelations were already familiar with them. Above all, these stories emphasize the unity, coherence, and simplicity of the divine message and at the same time show the constant hostility provoked by message and messenger. God consoles Muhammad: before you, all these other prophets were rejected by their people. God threatens the Meccans: if you do not listen to your prophet, you also will be struck by God's wrath.

The Quran tells the story of Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic), who one night saw a star and declared, "This is my Lord [*rabb*]. But when it set he said, I do not like things that set" (Q 6:76). Then he spotted the moon and took it for his Lord until the moment when the sun rose, to which he offered his allegiance. But when the sun went down, Abraham proclaimed, "My people, I disown all that you worship beside God. I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists [*mushrikun*]" (Q 6:78–79). Abraham asks his father and his people why they worship idols: they respond that they are respecting the tradition of their ancestors and that they refuse to abandon their gods. During the night, Abraham destroys the idols. Outraged, the people condemn Abraham to be burned alive, but God orders, "Fire, be cool and safe for Abraham" (Q 21:69). God gives a son to Abraham and tests him by asking him to sacrifice his son (Q 37:100–111). The Quran does not give the name of the son. Is it Isaac, mentioned just before in the Quran, in accordance with Genesis 22? Or is it his eldest son Ishmael? The majority of exegetes in the first centuries of Islam agreed that it was Isaac, but since the tenth century until today the majority favors Ishmael, for reasons we will see in later chapters.

Abraham is a central figure in the Quran, the subject of 245 verses in twenty-five suras: only Moses is mentioned more often. Rather than give a continuous narration of his life, the Quran comes back to him repeatedly, each time giving bits and pieces of stories that Muhammad's listeners must have known already. And God in the Quran says to Muhammad, "Messengers before you were also ridiculed, but those who mocked them were overwhelmed in the end by the very thing they had mocked" (Q 21:41). Each time, the narration of the story of a prophet (Noah, Moses, or here Abraham) helps explain to Muhammad and his listeners that the opposition that Muhammad is encountering is normal and that God is indeed on his side.

Abraham is the prototype of the Quranic prophet, a model for Muhammad. Is Muhammad following the example of Abraham, or does the Quran present Abraham in a way that corresponds to Muhammad? No doubt a bit of both. The Quran describes Abraham as *hanif*, a word that probably means "faithful to God." The only other person the Quran calls hanif is Muhammad, which emphasizes the close connection between the two prophets. Abraham, destroyer of idols, founds a religious community, the *millat Ibrahim* (mentioned eight times in the Quran). Muhammad is a new smasher of idols like Abraham. This also allows the Quran to position Muhammad and his message in the biblical tradition of the Jews and Christians: "People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham when the Torah and the Gospels were not revealed until after his time? Do you not understand? . . . Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, he was upright and devoted to God (*hanif muslim*), never an idolater (*mushrik*)" (Q 3:65–67).

The Quranic story of Abraham takes up many of the details from Genesis. Other elements correspond to postbiblical Jewish tradition. This led some scholars, such as Abraham Geiger in the nineteenth century, to speak of borrowing or of Jewish influence on the Quranic text. Yet certain of these Jewish traditions were written down after the Quran: rather than quibbling about who borrowed from whom, we can see how these traditions are born in an exegetical milieu that transcends confessional boundaries.[4]

Jesus is also one of the main prophets of the Quran. God revealed to him *al-Injil* (the Gospel, always in the singular in the Quran), just as he had revealed the Torah to Moses. The story of Mary and her son is dispersed across various suras. Mary's pregnant mother consecrates her future daughter to God's service (Q 3:35). The angels tell her: "Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure: He has truly chosen you above all women" (Q 3:42). The young girl withdraws to a sanctuary to live a life of prayer and contemplation. Each time that her guardian Zachary comes to see her, he is amazed to find food next to her: she explains that God sends it to her. It is there that the Spirit of God, in the form of a beautiful man (which Muslim tradition often identifies as the angel Gabriel) comes to her and announces "the gift of a pure son." She asks "How can I have a son when no man has touched me?" (Q 19:20). Pregnant, she retreats to the desert; she cries out, saying that she would prefer to die than to undergo the pain of childbirth. God's voice soothes her: He provides a spring of cool water and a palm tree from which dates fall to nourish her. She gives birth and presents Jesus to her family, who chide her for having had a child outside of wedlock: "Mary! You have done something terrible!" It is the newborn baby who responds: "I am a servant of God. He has granted me the Scripture; made me a prophet; made me blessed wherever I may be. He commanded me to pray, to give alms as long as I live, to cherish my mother. He did not make me domineering or graceless. Peace was on me the day I was born, and will be on me the day I die and the day I am raised to life again" (Q 19:30–33).

Jesus is a prophet, born miraculously without a father. In Arabic names, a man is normally identified as the son of his father: for example, Ahmed ibn Yusuf, Ahmed son of Yusuf. The Quran identifies this prophet as Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus, son of Mary): he is the son of his mother, without a father. He was conceived by the spirit of God or the word of God, but is not the son of God: "It would not befit God to have a child. He is far above that" (Q 19:35). The child Jesus made a bird out of clay, breathed on it, and (with God's permission) the bird took flight. This story is not in any of the four canonical Gospels, but it is found in apocryphal Christian texts more or less contemporary with the Quran.

This suggests once again that these postbiblical stories, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, draw from common traditions.

The Quran says that God revealed to Jesus a book, the Gospel. He is *al-masih*, the Messiah, which in the Quran seems to be an honorific title. The Quran gives contradictory information about his death. We have seen that the newborn Jesus speaks of the day of his death and "the day I am raised to life again" (Q 19:33), which seems an allusion to the Christian doctrine of Christ's resurrection.

The Quran says that the Jews claim to have killed Jesus, but in fact they neither killed him nor crucified him (Q 4:156–59). Does this mean that Jesus was not crucified? Or simply that it was not the Jews who did it? What does it mean that it seemed to them (*shubbiha lahum*) that he had been crucified? Later exegetes affirm that Jesus was not crucified but that someone else (Judas, according to some commentators) was crucified in his stead. Another Quranic passage shows both Jesus's importance and a certain ambivalence toward him: he "gives knowledge of the Hour: do not doubt it" (Q 43:61). This suggests that Jesus announced the end of time, or that for the Quran (as for many Christians), Jesus will return to earth at the end of time to play an important role in the last judgment.

The Satanic Verses

Let's return to Mecca and Muhammad. We have seen that the Meccan suras present Muhammad as a prophet sent to his people to affirm the unity of God and to enjoin his people to make a pact with him, a pact marked by their worship of him and by social solidarity. These suras also show that a significant part of the Quraysh tribe was hostile to his message. They relate their criticism, their mockery, their accusations, their demands that the prophet produce miracles. Some affirm that Muhammad is a sorcerer (Q 10:1) or a poet (Q 37:36). In response, God orders Muhammad to show them "clear signs" of his power and benevolence.

The incident that Muslim tradition calls "the story of the cranes" and European Orientalists refer to as "the Satanic verses" occurred in the

fifth year of Muhammad's prophetic mission. As for most events in the prophet's life, different traditions exist about this incident. According to the historian Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), Muhammad was revealing to the Meccans the sura of the star (Q 53) and, when he got to verses 19–20, "consider al-Lat and al-Uzza, and the third one, Manat," Satan whispered in his ear, "These are the high-flying cranes and their intercession is to be hoped for." Muhammad, thinking that these verses came from God, transmitted them. The idolaters were delighted by this and prostrated themselves at the end of the revelation alongside the Muslims. Only later did Gabriel come to Muhammad and tell him that these verses came from the devil, not God, and that he should replace them with the following verse: "These are nothing but names you have invented yourselves, you and your forefathers. God has sent no authority for them" (Q 53:23). For Tabari, Muhammad was tricked by the devil because he wanted to rally the Meccans to his cause, but subsequently realized that he could not.

From Mecca to Medina

Muhammad and his followers were persecuted because they rejected the traditional religion of Mecca. This provoked a first emigration (hijra), which the Quran does not mention. According to Ibn Hisham, Muhammad sent a group of his followers to the Christian king of Abyssinia (in Ethiopia), who welcomed them as refugees. In 619, as we have seen, both his wife Khadija and his uncle and protector Abu Talib died. Muhammad needed other protectors, other allies. Ibn Hisham relates that in 620 he met members of the Khazraj tribe of Yathrib, an oasis town about 340 kilometers north of Mecca. For over a century, the Khazraj had been in conflict with the rival Banu Aws tribe; Muhammad was invited to come with his companions and act as mediator between the rival factions. The Quran affirms that the Meccans expelled Muhammad from their city (Q 47:13).

The great emigration, or hijra (often called hegira in English), took place in 622: Muhammad and his companions left Mecca and settled in Yathrib (Medina). This event marks year 1 of the Muslim calendar, the

beginning of a new era. Muhammad, a prophet spurned, insulted, and threatened by his people, became the chief of an important federation between his exiled Meccan companions (*muhajirun*) and the Medinans, whom Muslim tradition calls the *ansar* ("helpers"). The Medinan suras, revealed between the hijra (622) and the prophet's death (632), are different from the Meccan suras: longer, more complex, full of practical details about the organization of communal life in Medina. The spiritual message is still there, but the practical concerns of managing a human community now occupy an important part of the revelations.

Among the spiritual duties of the believers (*al-mu'minun*) is prayer (*sala*, a word that occurs eighty-two times in the Quran). The Quran asks the faithful to remember God, to pray, to prostrate themselves before him. It establishes the rules concerning the fast during the month of Ramadan (Q 2:183–87). The *zakat* or *sadaqa*, tithe to aid the needy, will later become an obligatory tax; the Quran defines how it may be used: "for the poor, the needy, those who administer them, those whose hearts need winning over, to free slaves and help those in debt, for God's cause, and for travelers in need" (Q 9:60).

We also find in the Medinan suras a number of passages that give rules or recommendations concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, the sharing of booty after a battle, and many other practical concerns. These revelations offer solutions to a whole series of legal and social issues. This Quranic legislation must of course be understood in its context, that of an Arab society of the seventh century, in which membership in a tribe, organized in clans, remained a key element in each individual's legal and social status.

Let us look at the example of Quranic regulations concerning slavery.[5] Ransoming and liberating captives was one of the legitimate uses of the zakat. Various passages of the Quran affirm that the freeing of slaves is a pious act and a good way to obtain pardon from God. The Quran encourages the faithful to facilitate the emancipation of slaves who want to be free; it prohibits masters from forcing their slaves into prostitution (Q 24:33). It insists that in God's eyes the slave is equal to the free person. It enjoins masters to treat their slaves with justice and gentleness. Yet it recognizes the existence and legitimacy of slavery

and the slave's legal and social inferiority. It grants men the right to have sexual relations with their female slaves. The Quran thus does not abolish slavery but attempts to discourage it, to organize it, to temper it.

Let us turn to Quranic legislation concerning women, who are recognized as morally and spiritually equal to men, a clear advance in their rights compared to pre-Islamic societies. Yet the Quranic society (like biblical societies before it) is clearly patriarchal. In Genesis, God creates Adam first, then makes Eve from one of Adam's ribs. The Quran, in contrast, affirms, "O humanity! Be mindful of your Lord Who created you from a single soul [*nafs*], and from it He created its mate [*zawj*]" (Q 4:1). The word *nafs* (soul) is feminine in Arabic, and *zawj* (husband or spouse) is masculine. Most commentators and translators affirm that the "soul" is Adam and the "spouse/husband" is Eve. But the verse on the contrary affirms that the feminine is created first and the masculine follows.[6] The Quran proclaims equality between women and men: "The believers, both men and women, support each other" (Q 9:71); "I will not allow the deeds of any one of you to be lost, whether you are male or female, each is like the other" (Q 3:195). Even the language of the Quran plays close attention to the equality of men and women: "For men and women who are devoted to God, believing men and women, obedient men and women, truthful men and women, steadfast men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, chaste men and women, men and women who remember God often—God has prepared forgiveness and a rich reward" (Q 33:35). It seems that here, as for the issue of slavery, the Quran represents change and progress. It strictly prohibits infanticide, an apparently common practice in pre-Islamic Arabia in which unwanted daughters were left out to die. The Quran grants women the right to possess and inherit property, yet at the same time limits that right: her part is half that of her brother (Q 4:7–11).

Love within marriage is a gift from God (Q 30:21). The Quran frequently exhorts the faithful to show respect and affection between spouses. Polygamy, practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia as in many contemporary societies, is authorized but limited and discouraged. Q 4:3 establishes a limit of four wives, all of whom must be treated with justice

and equity; it affirms that it is better to marry only one woman. Q 65 establishes the rules of divorce, imposing a waiting period between the decision to divorce and the separation and obliging the husband to support his wife and treat her with respect during this time.

The Quran says that God furnished cloths to the "children of Adam" to hide their nudity, but "the garment of God-consciousness is the best of all garments" (Q 7:26). The faithful are exhorted to modesty and restraint:

> Tell believing men to lower their glances and guard their private parts: that is purer for them. God is well aware of everything they do. And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their headscarves fall to cover their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no sexual desire, or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness; they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms. Believers, all of you, turn to God so that you may prosper. (Q 24:30–31)

There is no question here of obliging women to cover their hair or their faces, or making them stay at home. As we have seen, Khadija was a business woman and Muhammad started out as her employee. Various hadiths tell of a Medinan woman named Um Waraqa. While versions of her story differ, it seems that Muhammad had a second mosque built in Medina and asked her to lead the prayer there.

The Coalition of Medina

In Medina, Muhammad was spiritual leader as well as political and military commander. He directed a fragile alliance divided along different fault lines: between Meccan muhajirun and Medinan ansar, between the Medinan tribes of Aws and Kazraj, and between those who accepted Muhammad as prophet and the allied Jewish clans who did not. The

"Constitution of Medina," probably concluded in the 620s, shows that there was a pact between these various groups, under the authority of Muhammad. The allied Jews, such as Jewish members of the Banu 'Awf tribe, were part of the *umma*, or community of the faithful and were treated as equals. The umma was thus not a community of "Muslims," but a large interconfessional pact between monotheists. When the Quran addresses "believers," it is in the broad sense of those who believe in the One God, creator of the universe, be they Christians, Jews, muhajirun, or ansar. For historians such as Fred Donner, Muhammad's religion was in fact an ecumenical movement.[7] Indeed, the Quran forcefully rejects the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity and criticizes both Jews and Christians for teaching that heaven is reserved for them alone (Q 2:111–12). The Quran's soteriology is inclusive: virtuous God-fearing women and men obtain salvation. The variety of languages and cultures is a treasure, a gift from God: among the benefits that God showers on mankind are "the diversity of your languages and colors" (Q 30:22) and that of "peoples and tribes" (Q 49:13).

"There is no compulsion in religion," the Quran affirms (Q 2:256). The variety of beliefs and rituals is also a divine gift: "We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about" (Q 5:48). God protects his sanctuaries from violence: "If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God's name is much invoked, would have been destroyed" (Q 22:40). This suggests that during the wars between Mecca and the Medina coalition, the latter intervened to protect Jewish and Christian sanctuaries (Q 2:190).[8] Various sources suggest that Medinan Jews participated in both defensive and offensive military activities alongside Muhammad and his companions.

While the "believers" to which the Quranic word is addressed may include Jews and Christians, the Medinan suras show a great ambivalence toward both groups. During the Meccan period, these "people of the book" were perceived above all as allies and examples in the fight to

reestablish the cult of the one true God and to fight idolatry. Now, in Medina, they were at times allies and at other times rivals. The passages about Jews need to be understood in the context of shifting relations between Muhammad and his followers on the one hand and various groups of Jews on the other. According to Muslim tradition, some Medinan Jews, such as Abdullah ibn Salam, a companion of the prophet, recognized Muhammad as prophet. The Jews mentioned in the convention of Medina remained Jews and did not recognize Muhammad as prophet, but were still considered part of the umma. Then there were some Jews who criticized or mocked Muhammad, whom the Quran sharply criticizes.[9] Finally, there were Jews living outside of Medina, some of whom were allied with the Meccan enemy. We must keep this in mind in order to understand the numerous and divergent Quranic passages referring to Jews: there is a variety of portrayal of Jews and Judaism corresponding to the diversity of attitudes of Arabian Jews to Muhammad and his movement. From the Quran's point of view, there are good Jews and bad Jews, and the Quran projects this dichotomy onto the Jewish past. None of these Quranic passages tell us anything about these Jews of Medina nor about how they practiced their religion or how much their practice may have resembled that of other contemporary Jews in other parts of the world. It was unclear, for example, whether they were aware of, or gave any authority to, the Talmud, which was not universally accepted among seventh-century Jews.[10]

The Quran affirms that Jewish and Christian believers "who believe in God and the Last Day and do good will have their rewards with their Lord" (Q 2:62). But other Jews reject their prophets and kill them; this theme recurs nine times in the Quran.[11] In certain cases, in particular in the Meccan suras, the point is to show how prophets are rejected by their people: these "bad Jews" are the prototype for the Meccans who refuse to heed Muhammad. But in some of the Medinan suras, the Jews referred to correspond to Medinan Jews who opposed Muhammad.

God provides Muhammad with arguments to convince the Jews who do not accept the Quran, arguments already developed in Christian anti-Jewish polemics: the idolatry practiced by those who worshiped the golden calf in the Sinai desert casts doubt on the monotheism of the Jews

(see Q 2:91). Their violent hostility to their own previous prophets explains their rejection of the new prophet from Mecca. No contemporary text mentions an expulsion of Jews from Medina, nor of an alliance with the Jews of Khaybar, a village about a hundred fifty kilometers from Medina. Abbasid scholars writing two centuries later are the first to mention the hostility of these Jews, which supposedly led Muhammad to expel them. Sura 5, traditionally considered one of the last revealed in Medina, shortly before Muhammad's death in 632, allows the faithful to share meals with Jews and to marry Jewish and Christian women, which suggests the continued presence of Jews in Medina up until at least the prophet's death (Q 5:5). The word "Jews" (*yahud*) occurs only four times in the Quran, which prefers the term "Children of Israel" (*Banu Israil*; forty occurrences), which highlights that in the tribal society of Arabia they were considered a tribe or ethnicity as much as a religion.[12]

In any case, it is in a context of conflict with Medinan Jews that historians situate an important change in the religious practice of Muhammad and his companions: the changing of the *qibla*, or direction of prayer. In the beginning, Muhammad and the believers turned toward Jerusalem when they prayed. But probably in 624, a new revelation told them to pray in the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca. This temple, cultic center of the Meccans, had been built by Abraham himself, along with his son Ishmael. It was thus the first and oldest temple in honor of the sole God, built long before King Solomon's temple in Jerusalem (Q 2:124–27, 142–50).

If the "hypocrites" endangered the fragile coalition from the inside, the principal enemies remained the infidels of Mecca. The change of qibla underlined the urgency of the fight against this enemy: the Medinans had to return Abraham's Kaaba to the cult of the true God. The Medinan suras mention battles between Muhammad's troops and the Meccan infidels, which historiography has identified as the battles of Badr (624, a victory for the coalition of Medina), Uhud (625, a defeat during which Muhammad was injured), and the Trench (627, a victory for the Medinans). Now in a position of force, Muhammad negotiated with Mecca the treaty of al-Hudaybiyya (628), which permitted believers to make the pilgrimage to the Kaaba. When, the following year, allies of the Quraysh broke the truce by attacking Medinans, Muhammad

(according to Ibn Hisham) amassed an army of ten thousand men and marched on Mecca, which surrendered. Muhammad saw "people embracing God's faith in crowds" (Q 110:2). Later tradition affirms that that day the faithful went to the Kaaba and destroyed the images and idols there, preserving only images of Jesus and Mary. In fact, there is no evidence that there were idols there to destroy.[13]

Apocalyptic Visions

The Quran often evokes the end of the world, echoing apocalyptic themes prevalent in Judaism, Christianity, and other traditions such as Zoroastrianism. Muhammad was a "warner" who alerted his people to the imminent end of the world. A majority of the suras (67 out of 114) mention the end of the world. Trumpets will blare, the dead will rise out of their tombs, the mountains will shake loose from their foundations and fly away like clouds, the sky will open, the stars fall down, the oceans will catch fire. All will be petrified with fear.

> When the sun is shrouded in darkness,
> when the stars are dimmed,
> when the mountains are set in motion,
> when pregnant camels are abandoned,
> when wild beasts are herded together,
> when the seas boil over,
> when souls are sorted into classes,
> when the baby girl buried alive is asked
> for what sin she was killed,
> when the records of deeds are spread open,
> when the sky is stripped away,
> when Hell is made to blaze
> and Paradise brought near:
> then every soul will know what it has brought about. (Q 81:1–14)

In these passages, the Quran terrifies its listeners with apocalyptic scenes. The destruction of the world we know is inexorable. And it will come soon, even if the Quran insists that God alone knows the hour of

the end. Was Muhammad a prophet of the end of time? If he was, he was not the only one. For some historians of Christianity, Jesus was an apocalyptic Jewish preacher who announced the imminent end of the world. In the seventh century, apocalyptic hopes and fears were common among Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. It is possible that Muhammad and his companions were awaiting the impending destruction of the world.

Death and Succession of the Prophet

The last days of the life of Muhammad, his death and the succession of Abu Bakr, the first caliph, are recounted in many hadiths and in the *Sira*.[14] The *Sira* tells how, a few days before his death, the prophet went to the cemetery and spoke to the dead who rested there: "Peace upon you, O people of the graves! Happy are you that you are so much better off than men here. Dissensions have come like waves of darkness one after the other, the last being worse than the first."[15] The speech that Ibn Hisham places in the prophet's mouth announces the conflicts that will divide the young community of faithful following Muhammad's death. Suffering from illness, Muhammad withdraws to Aisha's house. As she told it, he spoke aloud to the angel Gabriel, telling him that he was ready to meet his Lord. There, with his head resting on Aisha's lap, he died on 8 June 632, according to Muslim tradition. Umar ibn al-Khattab refused to believe that he had died. Moses disappeared on Mount Sinai for forty days, and people said he was dead, Umar affirmed; just like Moses, Muhammad will come back, and he will cut off the hands and feet of those who said he was dead. But Abu Bakr proclaimed, "O men, if anyone worships Muhammad, Muhammad is dead: if anyone worships God, God is alive, immortal."[16] As proof, he recited the following passage from the Quran: "Muhammad is only a messenger before whom many messengers have been and gone. If he died or was killed, would you revert to your old ways? If anyone did so, he would not harm God in the least. God will reward the grateful" (Q 3:144). Neither Umar nor the rest of the assembled crowd remembered hearing this verse of the Quran. But they could not deny the truth: their prophet was dead.

If Umar indeed did not believe Muhammad had died, he was probably not alone. The Quran had announced the imminent end of the world, and some of Muhammad's companions (and perhaps the prophet himself) expected the end to come while he was still alive. This may also help explain why Muhammad apparently had no clear plan of succession. Here traditions diverge: some say that during his final "farewell" pilgrimage in March 632, Muhammad delivered a sermon at Ghadir Khumm in which he clearly designated Ali as his successor. Others on the contrary say that he had chosen Abu Bakr to succeed him. The *Sira* relates that the Medinan ansar met and were about to choose someone from their ranks to succeed the prophet, but that Abu Bakr and Umar convinced them to swear allegiance to Abu Bakr. Those close to Ali took offense: it was he who should take the place of his cousin and father-in-law. Some sources say there was a struggle and that some of Umar's men attacked Ali's house, and that Fatima (Muhammad's daughter and Ali's wife) later died of her wounds from this attack. Other sources affirm Ali did not want to cause strife among the faithful and that he hence chose to swear allegiance to Abu Bakr.

During these negotiations, Muhammad's body lay on Aisha's bed. Only after two or three days, according to the different traditions, was he finally buried. Why? Simply because the struggles over succession did not leave time to organize his funeral? Or did Umar and others continue to doubt that he had really died? Did some hope that he would resurrect? Some hadiths affirm that his companions finally decided to bury him when his body showed unmistakable signs of decomposition. He supposedly died on Monday, and it was only Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday, during the night, that his companions decided to bury him. And where to bury him? Abu Bakr proclaimed that Muhammad had told him that a prophet should be buried on the very spot where he died. He ordered that Aisha's bed be moved aside and that his tomb be dug there.[17]

The prophet was dead. A new chapter in the formation of Islam and in the conflicts among the prophet's companions was opening.

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