

## Muhammad and Revelation

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### CHAPTER I

#### The Essentials

Any narrative about the Arabic Qur'an must begin in the seventh century, with the life of Muhammad ibn Abdullah, the Arab Prophet.<sup>1</sup> The Qur'an was revealed to this Arab merchant/trader through a celestial intermediary, the Archangel Gabriel, in his own language, Arabic. It was in Arabic, and solely in Arabic, that each of the Qur'an's 6,236 verses and 114 chapters was announced to Muhammad.<sup>2</sup> Biography and revelation are intertwined, so even to recount in English the story of the last prophet requires use of *Koran* translations; several are provided below.<sup>3</sup>

The sparsest outline of the life of Muhammad would include five dates: Born in 570 CE, he married in 595 CE, was called to prophesy in Mecca in 610 CE, then left Mecca for Yathrib/Medina in 622 CE, and after subduing his enemies, died in Medina in 632 CE at the age of sixty-two.

But the impress of the Qur'an in Muhammad's life demands more. It requires beginning with his early life. For the first forty years Muhammad was an orphan, raised by

his uncle, with his first cousin ‘Ali as a companion. He later became a merchant, traveling beyond Arabia but always returning to Mecca. He only became a messenger under duress. The message was not his own, nor did he seek it. The message sought him, filled him and transformed him, making his life a journey that none, including he, could have imagined.

## Before Revelation

Muhammad was a successful merchant but a reluctant messenger. His success at the business owned by his wife, Khadija, allowed him time to reflect. Like others in his community, he set aside time to go to a mountain, to a mountain cave. Between caravan trips that took him away from home to places near and far, he would stay at home but in a place apart. He would go to this mountain retreat often. Sometimes he would go there by himself or with his young cousin. He would sit quietly and ponder what life means.

What does it mean that he was born an orphan but found a new family among his close relatives? What does it mean that he had been an honest but poor merchant until a wealthy widow found him, employed him, trusted him, and then married him?

Although he felt gratitude for the gifts of family and wealth, he still lacked something. It was that lack that drove him to the mountain retreat, to find a space within himself and apart from others—except for his young

cousin ‘Ali—to ponder the mystery of human success and the lessons of human failure.

Like many of his tribe, he had acknowledged the power of the rock that marked his home town of Mecca. The Ka‘ba contained that rock, a rock ancient with history. It is linked to an early seeker of Truth, a prophet in his time, named Abraham. It was to this place that Abraham sent his concubine Hagar. It is here that Abraham, with divine guidance, made provision for a branch of his family, and its central role has been etched in the Qur’an:

*Our Lord [prayed Abraham] I have settled  
some of my children  
in a barren valley  
near Your Holy House,  
our Lord,  
that they may be constant in prayer,  
making the hearts of some incline to them  
and providing them with fruit,  
that they may give thanks.*

Q 14:37<sup>4</sup>

But the Holy House became a place that Abraham shared with others, with idols that represented local gods and tribal deities. These idols were said to possess a power that rivaled the God of Abraham. Some folk who came to Mecca cast doubt on the power of the idols, saying that after Abraham came other seekers of Truth, other prophets, each proclaiming a god not found in idols. Some opponents of the idols were the Jews. Their prophet was Moses. Other opponents were the Christians. Their

prophet was Jesus, though some of them went further, claiming that Jesus was more than a prophet. Muhammad also met some Arab opponents of idol worship. They claimed that there was an ancient Arab prophet, Salih by name, and that he too followed the way of Moses and Jesus, looking for the source of all life and all created forms, beyond idols of any shape or any place. It was Salih who said to his people what was later revealed to Muhammad:

*O my people, serve God.*

*You have no god except Him.*

*It is He who raised you from the earth  
and settled you in it.*

*Seek His forgiveness,  
then turn to Him in repentance.*

*My Lord is Near, Responsive.*

Q 11:61<sup>5</sup>

Muhammad meditated on these matters when he sat in the cave of Hira during the holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan was the time each year when blood feuds were suspended. It was a time when Meccans who had wealth and free time could retreat to the outskirts of their town, to the hills that enclosed it, and to the caves that offered shelter and repose.

## Revelation

Muhammad had been following the practice of retreat and meditation for over a decade. Then one night in

Ramadan 610 he felt a stirring inside him. He loved the nighttime in this special month; it drew him deep into himself and allowed him to resist those impulses that pulled him back to the world, to concerns with family or with business or travel. He was alert to repel those impulses. They clouded his vision, they denied him peace of mind, but above all, they blocked his search for the Truth. But this was a different stirring. It was deep, it was arresting. It overpowered him, and then it produced words, words that were not his. He listened:

“Recite!” And he was shown a piece of silk with words on it.

He did not know how to read. “What shall I recite?” he asked.

“Recite!” came the command, and again the brocade was thrust before him.

He stammered: “But what shall I recite?”

He became like the Prophet Jeremiah who was told by the Lord of Israel to speak when he was a child and he could not. Unlike Jeremiah, Muhammad could speak but he could not read. All those who accompanied him on caravan trips, whether to Egypt or Syria, to Yemen or Abyssinia, knew that he could read symbols but not words. It was they who handled the few documents of exchange that required reading or signing. When Muhammad had to sign, he would ask others to read aloud what was written, then he would sign by pressing the palm of his hand to the paper. Why then did this voice ask him to recite?

Even as he was thinking these thoughts, for the third time, the voice commanded him:

“Recite!”

“But what, what shall I recite?”

No sooner had he spoken than the words appeared:

*Recite in the name of your Lord who created*

*Created man from blood coagulated*

*Recite for your Lord is Most Generous*

*Who taught by the pen*

*Taught what they did not know unto men*

Q 96:1–5<sup>6</sup>

These words became part of him. He recited them without reading them. But why did they invoke the Lord as *His* Lord? And why did they rhyme? “Created” rhymed with “coagulated” in the first two lines, and then “pen” with “men” in the fourth and fifth lines. Since Muhammad could not read the words, he was puzzled, dismayed. Had it been his secret impulses that had produced these verses? Had he become a man possessed, an ecstatic poet such as his clansmen distrusted, even despised? Was his pursuit of the Truth forfeited by a single moment of self-deceit?

Scarcely had he absorbed the experience when his whole body began to tremble. Then the voice spoke again. It addressed him by name: “O Muhammad!” “Muhammad,” it continued, “you cannot protect yourself from the Evil One. Only the One who hears all and knows all can protect you. Invoke God but before you mention God by His loftiest name, say ‘I seek refuge from Satan, the Accursed, in the name of the One who hears all and knows all.’ Before you repeat the words I have just given you from

Your Lord, say: ‘In the name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate!’” and the silence descended.

He waited for more counsel. He needed advice. What was he to do? Where should he go? How was he to make sense of all this? But nothing more came. In a flash, he got up and bolted down the mountain, running toward Mecca, toward home, toward Khadija, his beloved wife. Halfway down the voice returned. Now it was a booming voice with a face, a man’s face. The face appeared to come from beyond the horizon. The celestial form announced: “O Muhammad, you are the apostle of God, and I am Gabriel.” He tried to look away but wherever he looked, there was the face; there was the man, staring at him.

He could not move. He was frozen on that spot. For the longest time he stood there, until finally his wife, Khadija, sent scouts to look for him. They found him. They brought him home. As soon as they left he collapsed into his wife’s lap. He told her what had happened on this strangest of days atop Mount Hira. “O son of my uncle,” she exclaimed, addressing him with the same name that she had when she had proposed marriage to him some fifteen years earlier, “O son of my uncle, be at ease and rejoice. In the name of the One who enfolds the soul of Khadija, I can dare to hope that you have been chosen to be the prophet for this people.”

A prophet for his people?! How could a mere merchant attuned to meditative silence become a messenger who must proclaim the message, often against his own deep wishes and even more, against the preferences and practices of his people? Every prophet, after all, is also a

rebel. Muhammad had never seen himself in this role. Nothing in his life had prepared him for the period of trial that now beset him. His wife and also his young cousin came to view him in a different light. He was still their close companion, but now they saw him as one separate, apart, more respected than loved, though always cared for, his words and wishes heeded. Yet others were less kind, even rude, often taunting him for his “poetic” outbursts, his “pretended” inspiration.

And so Muhammad had to wrestle with a double doubt. Could he be worthy of this high calling? And if he were, then why did this voice that came to him not come more often and more insistently? He had long periods when there would be no inner voice. Whenever he did hear that voice, he would repeat what he heard so that others could remember the exact words. Above all, he depended on his beloved and trusting wife, Khadija. She became the first Muslim, a woman to honor all women and to make them companion believers with men. And after her came his young cousin, that boy ‘Ali, who was so quick and constant in his affection for Muhammad.

## The Night Journey

The most difficult time happened in 617. He had received many communications from beyond. Although the fear of being a possessed seer or ecstatic poet had passed, he lived every hour in the shadow of that protective phrase known as the *basmala*: “In the Name of God,

Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate.” Each time the voice spoke, he repeated these words to make sure that it was indeed the Lord of Life who was speaking to him, not the Accursed one, Satan slinking into his mind, whispering in the garb of God.

Yet even the *basmala* could not overcome the hostility of some in his town. The most trying experience came in the middle of a night during that year 617. Many of his clansmen and fellow Arabs had come to accept his new status as an apostle among them. Yet the more popular he became, the louder were his detractors. One day he had suffered more abuse than even he could bear. At night, in despair he had called out to the voice, and to the Lord of Life. He had begged for some sign that he might endure and, if God willed, that he might prevail against his adversaries. What happened next was both vivid and unspeakable. In the words of a poet:

He came to me, wrapped in the cloak of night,  
Approaching with steps of caution and fright.  
Then what happened, happened; to say more fails.  
Imagine the best; ask not for details.<sup>7</sup>

Details cannot convey what did happen on that night. And though some have argued about whether it was a physical or a “mere” dreamlike experience, the impact was beyond dispute.<sup>8</sup> It reminded Muhammad of that first night, the night of Ramadan when Gabriel had come to him as a voice, as a face, as a presence that could not be denied. Later it had been revealed to him that that first night was to be the Great Sign containing even as it

unfolded all that followed. It was the Night of Destiny, revealed in the Noble Qur'an:

*We have sent it down in the Night of Destiny  
What will unmask for you the Night of Destiny?  
The single Night of Destiny  
Is better than a thousand months.  
In it angels and the spirit alight,  
On every errand by God made right  
Peace reigns until dawn's early light.*

Q 97<sup>9</sup>

Seven years later the Night Journey followed that Night of Destiny. Both nights were shrouded in mystery, yet they contain and define the life of Muhammad more vividly than did any daytime event. It seemed as though a mere instant separated one from the other, or was it perhaps time itself that had been transformed by the Unseen? While the Night of Destiny had brought the majesty of heaven to earth and to an unsuspecting messenger, the Night Journey propelled him to another place and finally to a celestial destination. The Night Journey took Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem to the highest throne of heaven. The same voice announced what was to happen. It was the now familiar voice, the voice of Gabriel. It beckoned Muhammad to ascend to the Source of all Truth and Life, the Touchstone of Peace and Justice:

*By the star when it sets,  
Your companion neither worries nor frets  
Nor does he ever speak with regrets.*

*It is only revelation that he begets,  
It is One mighty in power who projects,  
And propels him upward to what perfects,  
Far beyond the horizon where the sun sets,  
Nearer and nearer to the source he trajects,  
So close that a mere bowline between them intersects.*

Q 53:1–9<sup>10</sup>

With these words from the Star chapter, Muhammad was transported on a winged horse to the rock where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Ishmael. It was a great rock in an ancient city, Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the abode of prophets, from Abraham to David to Jesus. And it now hosted another prophet, the Arab prophet, the Prophet Muhammad. Dazzled, he was transported from that rock up to heaven. Heaven had levels. At the first level many angels and the prophet Adam greeted him. At the second level of heaven it was other prophets, Jesus and John the Baptist, who hailed him. At the third level he met still other prophets, Joseph and Solomon, and at the fourth level he encountered Moses along with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Now his glorious steed seemed to fade. Yet he continued to progress upward. “It is One mighty in power who projects.” Arriving at the fifth level, he met the prophets Ishmael and Isaac, then the prophets Elijah and Noah at the sixth, until finally at the seventh level he was dazzled by yet another chorus of angels. In their midst was the greatest of prophets, the Prophet Abraham. Abraham greeted Muhammad warmly before sending him on to the Divine Throne.

At last, no more than a bowline seemed to intersect between Muhammad and the Glorious and Exalted One. Gabriel spoke on His behalf. He offered Muhammad and his community protection if they would but pray fifty times per day. Muhammad nodded and retreated. But as he began to return to earth Moses reminded him that fifty prayers were too many for his Arab followers. Muhammad returned. He requested a reduced protocol of piety. Gabriel became his arbiter. Twenty-five prayers? Ten prayers? Finally, Muhammad was granted a divine reprieve: from that day until the Day of Resurrection, incumbent on him and all his followers was the daily recital of five prayers. A mere five times of prayerful remembrance had to punctuate each day with thoughts and desires directed solely to the Lofty One.

And then it was over. Muhammad descended by the same celestial route that he had ascended. He returned to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem from where he had begun his ascent, and in the twinkle of an eye he was back in Mecca. The next morning Muhammad awoke still stunned by the Night Journey yet comforted, his confidence restored.

## Last Years in Mecca

He needed confidence to face the many trials that were to beset him in Mecca. One trial was perhaps the most painful. It occurred right after the Night Journey. It was as though the Compassionate One had wanted to be certain

that Muhammad not take pride in his own role as messenger. Even though he was the one chosen to repeat God's message of what God was to all Arabs, and to all humankind, he was still a mortal, a mere man like other men.

In the very same Star chapter (Q 53) Muhammad was chided about those gods of the Ka'ba that his tribe had worshiped before the Lord of the Ka'ba had called them to look beyond these idols, and to reject their intercessory power.

*Have you then considered Lat and Uzza,  
And another, the third, Manat?  
Are the males for you and the females for Him?*

Were these rhetorical questions, or was this an invitation to reconsider the intercessory power of the three idols? Muhammad may have hesitated, but the divine answer came in the next sweep of revelation:

*This is indeed an unfair division!  
They are only names that you yourself have named,  
You and your father; God has not granted them a position.  
They follow but fancy and what their lower selves requisition  
It is only from their Lord that they find guidance and  
decision.  
Does man get whatever he hankers for?  
No, all that has gone before and all that comes after  
This life belongs only to the Lord of Life, to God!*  
Q 53:19–25<sup>11</sup>

Since that first revelation on Mount Hira some seven years previous, Muhammad had never felt so close to the

line of distinction between what came to him from Above and from Below. Very early he had heard words that sounded like a talisman, an amulet to ease his troubled soul. They were words that he repeated often when he felt the need for divine protection from other words, other whisperings that were not from Above but from Below:

*In the name of God Full of Compassion, Ever*

*Compassionate*

*Repeat: I seek protection with the Lord of Creation*

*the King of Creation*

*the God of Creation*

*From the malicious incantations*

*Of the Accursed, whispering insinuations*

*In the hearts of jinn and humankind both, fabrications.*

Q 114<sup>12</sup>

What were these staccato-like phrases if not a divine incantation? Muhammad felt their power, and their comfort, especially when he was confronted not just with disbelievers but also with rival messengers. One such was Musaylima, who claimed the power to counter ambivalent spirits (*jinn*) and, above all, the least ambivalent and most lethal of spirits, Satan. Musaylima identified himself as an apostle of the One beyond all comparison, even sometimes calling him the One Full of Compassion (*rahman*). And what was the “proof” of his prophecy? Rhymed prose utterances such as those Gabriel revealed to Muhammad.

But had either Musaylima or any other ever produced a message like the Qur’an? No, neither Musaylima nor any other so-called apostle could or did produce a book

like this Qur'an in Arabic. Muhammad's people, like Jonah's people, were warned, not just about the Day of Judgment but also about false prophets. It is in the Jonah chapter that the Lofty One declares to Muhammad:

*And this Qur'an is not something  
that could be manufactured without God;  
rather, it is a confirmation of what preceded it,  
and a clear explanation of the Book—  
there is no doubt in it—from the Lord of all creation.  
Do they perhaps say "He forged it"?  
Say, "Then bring a chapter like it,  
and call upon anyone other than God you can,  
if you are being truthful."*

Q 10:37–38<sup>13</sup>

Because the Lord of all creation had revealed His Word to Muhammad, the prophet felt sustained against both doubters and imitators. He had been given not just the five daily prayers but also the creed, the alms for the poor, the fast of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to the Lord of Ka'ba, all through this Book. The Book was an invitation, and it was also an opening of the Divine Abundance into the human domain, into the human heart. The Book itself announces the opening. The very first Sign is called the Opening chapter. It offers the gist, the fine gold dust, of All Revelations. It channels divine access through the Seven Portals of Hope, each of its seven verses marking a divine favor conferred on those who remember and those who recite these words. Collectively, the seven verses of the Opening chapter became

the gateway to spiritual health, for all believers, be they Jews, Christians, or Muslims:

*In the Name of God Full of Compassion, Ever*

*Compassionate*

*Praise to the Lord of all Creation*

*Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate*

*Master of the Day of Determination*

*You alone do we worship*

*And from You alone do we seek alleviation*

*Guide us to the path of True Direction,*

*The path of those whom You favor,*

*Not of those who cause You indignation,*

*Nor of those who took to the path of deviation.*

Q I<sup>14</sup>

Vouchsafed by these words, by the intermittent announcements of Gabriel, by the salutary Signs from the Unseen, Muhammad had begun his journey as a messenger of God. He had become a vehicle for the Unseen. At the same time, for his enemies he remained a rebel against his own people. He had reviled the Ka‘ba; he had defiled their native gods and traditions. By 618 his journey had just begun. The orphan merchant had become an inspired messenger. Who could have imagined then where this journey would take him during the next decade, for the rest of his life, for the sweep of human history?

From the time of his first revelations Muhammad had been buoyed with hope by his wife, Khadija, and also by his uncle, Abu Talib. Khadija became the first Muslim, and she comforted him from his first revelation until her

dying breath. Although Abu Talib did not become a Muslim, he still protected Muhammad. Not so another uncle, Abu Lahab, who confronted and tormented Muhammad. The raw opposition of this uncle dismayed him. Then there came to Muhammad as a further Sign from the Unseen that was also a counsel: to be a prophet he had to withstand such terrible men and women, for God would be his final protector.

*In the Name of God Full of Compassion, Ever*

*Compassionate*

*Abu Lahab and his power*

*Both will expire.*

*He will not be saved by wealth*

*Or the profits he may acquire.*

*He will be plunged*

*Into lahab, a burning fire!*

*And his wife—*

*That kindling-carrier*

*Will wear about her neck a halter of palm fibre!*

Q III<sup>15</sup>

Death would be the great leveler: burning fire, hell fire awaited those who disobeyed God and heckled His Prophet. Yet despite the divine promise, death awaited not only Muhammad's foes, like Abu Lahab and his wife, but also those who were closest to Muhammad, his most intimate and trusted supporters. In 619 he endured what became the year of tragedy, *annus horribilus*, for him. In that same year he lost Khadija, his wife, his confidante, his mainstay in all that he did. He also lost Abu Talib, his

uncle, his father by trust, his protector against hostile clansmen and other Meccan detractors. Without his protector at home and his shield beyond home, he became vulnerable to loneliness and to persecution.

## The Exodus to Medina

Threatened by Meccan opponents, Muhammad sought help in other oases towns, with tribes beyond his own. He began to think the unthinkable, that he could not survive except at a distance from his native town and his tribesmen.

Muhammad's main channel of communication to the outside was through the annual fairs held on the outskirts of Mecca. It was a time when even his bitterest opponents could not assail him. More than commerce took place there. News about events in Arabia and beyond circulated at these fairs. At one such fair in 620 he met representatives from a tribe to the north. They met again the next year. They responded to the Qur'an, they accepted Islam, some had even begun to pray publicly on Friday. These were people from Yathrib, later known as the city of the Prophet or *Madinat al-nabi*, and today simply as Medina.

What a contrast to his native town! In Mecca the opposition to him and to his message continued to grow month by month. Muhammad had sent a group to Abyssinia earlier. They included his precious daughter, Ruqayya, and her husband, 'Uthman. They remained there protected by a generous and wise Christian king,

but Muhammad needed another refuge within Arabia. The town to the north seemed like his best hope. He could go there but not without risking conflict with his neighbors and clansmen from Mecca. How could he take this step, even to save his own life? He could not take it except with help from the Unseen. The help came to him in a further Sign from God:

*In the Name of God Full of Compassion, ever  
Compassionate  
Permission to fight is given to those on whom war is made,  
because they are oppressed.  
And surely God is able to provide them victory  
(over their oppressors).  
Those who are driven from their homes without a just cause  
except that they say: Our Lord is God.  
And if God did not repel some people by others,  
Cloisters, and churches and synagogues, and mosques  
—in all of which God's name is remembered—  
All would have been pulled down.  
And surely God will help him who helps Him.  
Surely God is Strong and Mighty.*

Q 22: 39–40<sup>16</sup>

These precious verses provided the solace he sought, the command he needed, in order to flee with his closest supporters to the north, to Medina. There, with God's help, he could—and he did—begin a new life as the mediator of other groups' conflicts. At the same time, he continued to be the vessel of the Divine Word, the reciter of those blessed phrases that came from Beyond, from the

Archangel Gabriel. The year of his flight (*hijra*) was 622. The flight marked the beginning of a new moment, and also a new calendar; 622 became the first year for that community who accepted Muhammad, those who prayed with him, those who fought for his cause, those who, like him, waited for guidance from Beyond through Gabriel.

For Muhammad did not cease to be a reciter once he became a community advocate. He did not feel less the call of the Unseen. Now, though, he had to make choices as a military strategist. He had to defend his community against those who either betrayed or assaulted him. His enemies included some of the neighboring tribes, but all of them were connected to Mecca, either to his close relatives or to tribesmen. Among them were bitter foes, like his own uncle, Abu Lahab, whom God cursed through a revelation, along with his wife. Worst of all was the leader of the Makhzum clan of the Quraysh, Abu Jahl. Abu Jahl made a mockery of Muhammad and confronted his followers. Abu Jahl would single out converted slaves, and then have his hired thugs assault them. He would belittle in public or debar from markets other Meccan Muslims who may have been protected by family at home. He would also exclude them from caravan trips. He would harm them in any way he could.

## Initial Wars

Once Muhammad was established in Medina he had no choice but to fight the likes of Abu Jahl. God Himself had

declared: “*Permission to fight is given to those on whom war is made*” (Q 22.39). But it was always a defensive war, a reluctant recourse to violence when other stratagems had failed. The war Muhammad waged against Mecca was not a struggle for prestige or wealth; it was a war for the survival of God’s Word. It was at the same time a war for personal survival. His helpers from Medina joined the migrants from Mecca. They provided the migrants with food and shelter from their own resources, but they were all stretched to the limit. They began to raid the caravans of their Meccan foes. They raided only small caravans at first, and never attacked during those times when fighting, especially blood feuds, were prohibited. As someone who had guided many a successful caravan to its destiny, Muhammad knew the routes. He knew the seasons. He also knew the wells where Meccan traders would pass with their camels and their goods.

In December 623, over a year after the beleaguered Muslims had fled to Medina, Muhammad ordered a small detachment to spy on a caravan to the south. It was proceeding along the route to Yemen, at the oasis of Nakhlah that links Mecca to Taif. It was the last day of the Holy Month of Rajab. He had ordered his followers not to attack but they disobeyed. They killed some, took others captive, and brought the caravan back to Medina.

Muhammad was appalled. Not only had his followers disobeyed him; they had also desecrated a holy month. They had gone against God’s Word. Since their actions channeled his leadership, he was responsible. The prophet who had pledged to be a divine mediator had betrayed

his own prophecy. He was riven with distress. He prayed to God. He needed guidance from above. And when it came, it was like a fresh rain after the longest, driest drought of summer:

*They ask you about war in the holy month.*

*Tell them:*

*“To fight in that month is a great sin.*

*But a greater sin in the eyes of God is  
to hinder people from the way of God,*

*and not to believe in Him,*

*and to bar access to the Holy Mosque,*

*and to turn people out of its precincts.*

*And oppression is worse than killing.”*

He started to breathe a sigh of relief with these words, as the revelation continued:

*They will always seek war against you  
till they turn you away from your faith,  
if they can.*

*But those of you who turn back on their faith  
and die disbelieving*

*will have wasted their deeds  
in this world and the next.*

*They are inmates of Hell,  
and shall abide there forever.*

Q 2:217<sup>17</sup>

The Almighty had made possible what for men is impossible: a general rule of high value was replaced with a

general rule of higher value. Yes, killing is forbidden in the sacred month, but worse than killing is oppression, hindering people from the way of God. Empowered by this Sign, Muhammad accepted the actions of his followers at Nakhlah. Taking the spoils of war, he divided them among all members of the community.

More war would follow. The provocation to his former tribesmen and townsmen was clearer than the desert sky. Muhammad and his followers braced for the next outbreak in what was to become an enduring conflict with their Meccan kinsmen and opponents. During the next nine years Muhammad planned thirty-eight battles that were fought by his fellow believers. He himself led twenty-seven military campaigns. The merchant messenger had become not only a recognized prophet but also a successful military strategist.

Muhammad did not have to wait long for the first full-scale military campaign that he led. It came at the wells of Badr the following year, in 624. It was less than four months after the skirmish at Nakhlah. The Muslims chose to attack a caravan coming south from Palestine to Mecca. The Meccans learned of their attack, opposing them with a force that far outnumbered the Muslim band. Muhammad and his followers should have lost; indeed, they would have lost, except for the intervention of angels. Appearing on their side was a heavenly host, a band of divine emissaries such as they had never seen before. The celestial warriors preceded their desert protégés. They watched over them. They bolstered them. They gained them a victory as the Almighty attested in yet another Sign:

*God helped you during Badr  
at a time when you were helpless,  
So act in compliance with the laws of God:  
You may well be grateful.  
Remember when you said to the faithful:  
“Is it not sufficient that your Lord  
should send for your help  
3,000 angels from the heavens?”  
Indeed, if you are patient and take heed for yourselves,  
even though the enemy come rushing at you suddenly,  
your Lord will send 5,000 angels.  
And God did not do so  
but as good tidings for you,  
and to reassure your hearts—  
For victory comes from God alone,  
the Almighty, the All-knowing.*

Q 3:123–26<sup>18</sup>

The Battle of Badr struck fear into the hearts of the Meccans, but it also made some even more firmly resolved to defeat the upstart Muslims. Among the Meccan opponents was Hind ibn Utbah, the wife of the mighty Meccan warrior Abu Sufyan. She had lost both her uncle and her father in the Battle of Badr. She incited her husband, though he was both Muhammad’s cousin and his foster brother, to write verses against the Prophet and also against the religion of Islam. It was Abu Sufyan whose caravan the Muslims had tried to capture at the Battle of Badr. Although Muslims had won the battle, they lost the caravan. Soon after, Abu Sufyan, at his wife’s

insistence, began to plan for the next encounter. By 625 he had assembled a huge army of both foot soldiers and cavalry. He marched toward Medina. The Muslims countered by moving out of the city proper to engage their rivals on the slopes of a nearby mountain, Uhud.

Despite the superior numbers of the Meccans, it went well for the Muslims until some of Muhammad's followers broke ranks too early, perhaps anticipating another victory such as Badr. It was not to be. The Meccans counterattacked, and Khalid ibn al-Walid, one of the brilliant Meccan nobles, led his squadron to the unprotected rear of the Muslim formation. Catching them unawares, he began a great slaughter. The Prophet's uncle Hamzah was felled by a skilled Meccan javelin thrower, and Muhammad himself, though protected by twenty of his closest followers, was knocked off his horse. One of his teeth was broken, his face gashed, a lip bruised. Abu Sufyan had even dared to hope that Muhammad might die from his wounds. When he began to taunt the defeated Muslim troops, Muhammad sent his trusted lieutenant, 'Umar, to give him the riposte: "God is most high and most glorious," shouted 'Umar. "We are not equal: our dead are in paradise, yours in hell, and by God, you have not killed the Prophet. He is listening to us even as we speak!"<sup>19</sup>

Not only was Muhammad listening, but he also had resolved to learn the deeper lesson behind this bitter defeat. The defeat of Uhud became as important for Islam as the victory of Badr. The fate of Muslims always rests with God:

*He knows what lies between their hands and behind them.*

Q 2.255 (Ayat al-Kursi: the Throne verse)

In defeat as in victory the Muslims had to acknowledge that their fate is not theirs but God's to decide.

The aftermath of the Battle of Uhud also reinforced Muhammad's resolve to secure the loyalty of all his followers—both those who were Muslims and those who were non-Muslims yet bound to him by treaty. There followed some difficult, often bloody purges of tribes near Medina, then a major battle in 627—the Battle of the Trench. A mighty Meccan army was led again by Abu Sufyan, the architect of Uhud. Abu Sufyan had hoped to invade Medina, to defeat and destroy Muslims once and for all. Yet again, God had granted Muslims victory there, and God had granted them more than a military victory; fierce foes like Abu Sufyan and also the fiery Khalid ibn al-Walid had seen the truth of the Qur'an. They had embraced Islam and become Muslims.

## Final Years

After the Battle of the Trench, Muhammad never ceased trying to win the Meccans over to the religion of Islam. He undertook a peaceful pilgrimage. He contacted the Meccans and assured their leaders of his intention. Still, they doubted him. It took until 629, seven years after he had left Mecca, before he and his followers were allowed to reenter their native city. At last all Muslims—those

Meccans who had immigrated to Medina, those Medinans who had joined them, and other tribes who had become their allies, then also submitted to God—all were able to return to Mecca in a peaceful pilgrimage.

The year was 630. The month was January. The sight of the returning Meccans melted the hearts of many who had been their bitter enemies, even though others feared that Muhammad would take vengeance on them. Muhammad forgave all but his bitterest enemies. In his compassion he mirrored the Source of Compassion, and the Almighty granted Muslims Mecca as their reclaimed home, it became the center of their life and faith as Muslims.

As the tenth year of the *hijra* drew to a close, Muhammad experienced the fullness of time. It was the end of Safar, the beginning of First Rabi‘a in 632 CE, or 10 AH in the new, lunar calendar that had begun in 622 with Muhammad’s flight from his native town. He had just finished praying for the dead at the local cemetery when the pains began. They were fierce, intense, abdominal pains. They never stopped. They took his life, fulfilling yet another of God’s promises:

*Every soul must know the taste of death.*

*Then you will be sent back to Us.*

Q 29:57<sup>20</sup>

The life story of Muhammad was only the beginning of Islam. Muslim armies expanded across much of the civilized world surrounding the Mediterranean and Indian Oceans, and with their expansion the Arabic Qur’an

was not only used but also translated into Muslim languages. It is the story of that expanded process of translation, beyond Muslim languages into European languages, that provides the crucial antecedent to the *Koran* in English.