



INTRODUCTION TO PART I: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Islam today is a global religion with adherents from diverse nations, races, and cultures. The story of its origins, however, takes place among a specific group of people: the Arabs of the late antique Near East. The Arabs at the time lived in an area that stretched from modern-day Yemen in the south to the Taurus Mountains of modern-day Turkey in the north, from the Mediterranean Sea in the west, to the Tigris River in the east. They were in part nomadic, in part settled, and they lived among a number of other peoples in the region. Most of these other peoples spoke a dialect of Aramaic (the language of Christ) known as Syriac, although in large urban centers many spoke Greek. While a significant presence of Jews could be found in Yemen and in cities such

as Alexandria and Damascus, the great majority of people in the Near East at the time of Islam's emergence were Christians. Many of the Arabs themselves had become Christians, and some had begun to speak Syriac in addition to Arabic.

The notion of Arabs as a unified ethnic group developed only gradually. The Bible generally refers to "Arabs" in the same way it refers to "Ishmaelites." Both terms seem to be labels for nomads: Isaiah (13:20) speaks of Babylon becoming so desolate that not even an "Arab" would pitch his tent there; the author of Genesis has "Ishmaelites" on camels pass by Shechem and purchase Joseph from his brothers (Gen. 37:25).

Jewish and Christian works written after the Bible, but before Islam, often refer to certain groups of Arabic speakers by the name of their tribe. In some cases, however, all those who spoke some dialect of the Arabic language are described as “Hagarenes” or “Ishmaelites.” These latter terms reflect an association that Jews and Christians made between the Arabic speaking tribes, who were often tent-dwelling nomads living in the desert or its fringes, and the biblical story in which Abraham casts out Hagar and her son Ishmael into the desert wilderness (Gen. 21:14).

Greek-speaking Byzantine Christian authors tended to use the term “Saracens” (the term that would later become the standard label for Arabs in the Latin West) for Arabic speakers, a term derived from the Greek form of the name of one northern Arabian tribe. Some Christian authors (perhaps beginning with St. Jerome, d. 420) argued that the Arabic speakers themselves used this term in the hope of associating themselves with Sarah and thereby to hide their descent from Hagar. Others connected “Saracen” to the Greek word *scenitae*, meaning “tent-dwellers.” Both ideas reflect the idea of Arabs as nomads, children of the wilderness.

For its part, the Qur’an presents itself as a book for the Arabs: “We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur’an; haply [“that perhaps”] you will understand” (Q 12:2). Such verses suggest that the story of Islam’s emergence involves not only the appearance of a new religion but also the unification of the Arabic-speaking tribes and the rise of the idea that they all make up one people: they are all Arabs, the

descendants of Abraham through Ishmael (as the Jews are his descendants through Isaac).

This connection between Abraham, the Arabs, and Islam is expressed in the genealogy of Muhammad. Although the idea is not explicit in the Qur’an, Muslims consider Muhammad a descendant of Abraham through Ishmael; they also relate that Muhammad met Abraham during his ascent to heaven where he discovered that they look like each other. Thus Muhammad is presented as a “new Abraham.” This presentation presumably offered a way for early Muslims to conceive of and defend their religion in the context of the seventh-century Middle East. With their ethnic identity as Arabs, and their religious identity as descendants of Abraham, Muslims could enter into the religious debates already taking place between Christians and Jews and among various Christian sects.

Yet Muslims did not appear in the Middle East as religious missionaries who sought to make disciples of other nations. They appeared as conquerors who subjected other nations to their rule. In the 630s, Arab armies swept through the Near East. The mighty Persian Empire collapsed entirely in the face of their attacks. (The last Persian emperor was killed in 651.) The Byzantine Empire at last withstood the Islamic conquests, but only by establishing a final line of defense in the Taurus Mountains in the early 640s. In the meanwhile, the Byzantines had lost Syria, Palestine (including the holy city of Jerusalem), and Egypt to the Muslims.

Between the death of Muhammad (traditionally dated to 632) and the transfer of the

capital of the Islamic empire from Medina to Damascus in 661, Muslim armies conquered an area that stretched from modern-day Libya in the west to modern-day Afghanistan in the east. Thus Islam emerged as both a religion and a state. This state proclaimed to the world that a new prophet had appeared, a prophet who corrected the errors of Jews and Christians and who instructed his followers how to establish the law of God, or the sharia, on earth.

The present book begins with the story of this prophet, Muhammad the son of ‘Abdallah, who according to tradition was born in 570 in the western Arabian city of Mecca. In telling this story, I will rely on the oldest Islamic sources, above all the biography of the Prophet by Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), a native of Medina whose work is largely seen as the most ancient account of Muhammad’s life. I will also turn to traditions (Ar. *hadith*) about or by the Prophet preserved by Bukhari (d. 870)—the most famous compiler of such traditions—and to the biography of Muhammad in the monumental history of Abu Ja‘far al-Tabari (d. 923), a Persian scholar whose works on the Qur’an and Islamic history represent the fullness of classical Islamic tradition. When I refer in the following chapters to “the traditional biography” of the Prophet, or “the classical Islamic sources,” I mean above all the account of Muhammad’s life as recorded in these three works.

In speaking of Muhammad, I will also have reason to refer to the Qur’an, a scripture that, according to the prevailing Islamic belief, existed in heaven even before Muhammad was born. Once God called on Muhammad

to be his prophet (in 610), he began to send the angel Gabriel with passages of this heavenly book to Muhammad, and he continued to do so until Muhammad’s death (632). Muhammad proclaimed these revelations to his companions, but the collection and codification of the Qur’an was the work of his political successors, or caliphs.

In fact, the Qur’an shows signs of being a much older book than that of Ibn Ishaq, in part because much of Ibn Ishaq is a commentary on the Qur’an; that is, it is in large part made up of stories meant to explain otherwise-ambiguous Qur’anic passages. Yet the historical value of the Qur’an has often been questioned, since it is a book filled with pious admonitions and not with details on the people, places, and happenings of its historical context.

Thus the question before us—namely, how Islam emerged in its Arab context—is difficult to answer. In the first part of the present work, we will investigate how the first Islamic biographies present Islam’s emergence; we will do this by examining how they describe the life of Muhammad and the rule of the first four (or “rightly guided”) caliphs. In so doing we will identify reports that seem to be the product of storytellers and not the records of authentic historical events. Indeed, we must remember that Muhammad’s biography was first composed by scholars, beginning with Ibn Ishaq, who wrote over one hundred years after the Prophet had died, and who wrote with very particular motives.

The goal of these authors was not limited to producing a faithful account of earlier

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Death and Funerals

Bukhari named his collection of hadith (that are reports or statements attributed—accurately or not—to Muhammad) “The Valid” (Ar. sahih) because of his conviction that the hadith it contains relate the very words or deeds of the Prophet himself, perfectly preserved by a process of oral transmission. Yet the relevance of the hadith he includes for the context of the medieval Islamic world suggests that they may date from an period well after the life of the Prophet.

The hadith presented below reflect a number of different issues that concerned medieval Muslim scholars (who lived in the midst of both Jews and Christians): devotion to the God of Islam, the waywardness of other religions, and proper Islamic religious practices. A number of the hadith appear to have been written in order to explain ambiguous material in the Qur’an (a quality of many qur’anic commentaries). Other hadith reflect the impact of sectarian rivalry on the development of early Islamic traditions, a feature evident in the traditions in Ibn Ishaq’s biography of the Prophet.

Bukhari’s work is not distinctive because of its content. Similar (and often the same) traditions can be found in classical works of qur’anic exegesis or Muhammad’s biography. The distinction in Bukhari’s work is, first, his method of organizing traditions according to topic and, second, the manner in which he favors traditions from or about the Prophet himself (prophetic hadith) over those of learned Muslims from subsequent generations. In fact, he attributes to Muhammad the same hadith that are attributed only to companions or successors of Muhammad in early exegetical/biographical works.

The hadith cited below begin with the name of the companion (or wife, in the case of A’isha) of the Prophet who heard the words, or witnessed the action, presented in the hadith. They come from the twenty-third of the ninety-three books in Bukhari’s work, a book dedicated to the topic of funerals. However, the criteria for inclusion in this book are quite broad. Bukhari places here any hadith that mention a funeral, even incidentally or that relate to death and the afterlife.

Devotion to the God of Islam

Narrated Abu Dhar:

Allah’s Apostle said, “Someone came to me from my Lord and gave me the news (or good tidings) that if any of my followers dies worshipping none (in any way) along with Allah, he will enter Paradise.” I asked, “Even if he committed illegal sexual intercourse (adultery) and theft?” He replied, “Even if he committed illegal sexual intercourse (adultery) and theft.” (Bukhari, 2:329)

Narrated ‘Abdullah:

Allah’s Apostle said, “Anyone who dies worshipping others along with Allah will definitely enter the Fire.” I said, “Anyone who dies worshipping none along with Allah will definitely enter Paradise.” (Bukhari, 2:330)

Narrated Anas:

The Prophet said, “When a human being is laid in his grave and his companions return and he even hears their footsteps, two angels come to him and make him sit and ask him: ‘What did you use to say about this man, Muhammad?’ He will say: ‘I testify that he is Allah’s slave and His Apostle.’ Then it will be said to him, ‘Look at your place in the Hell-Fire. Allah has given you a place in Paradise instead of it.’” The Prophet added, “The dead person will see both his places. But a non-believer or a hypocrite will say to the angels, ‘I do not know, but I used to say what the people used to say!’ It will be said to him, ‘Neither did you know nor did you take the guidance (by reciting the Qur’an).’ Then he will be hit with an iron hammer between his two ears, and he will cry and that cry will be heard by whatever approaches him except human beings and jinns.” (Bukhari, 2:422)

Narrated Anas:

A young Jewish boy used to serve the Prophet and he became sick. So the Prophet went to visit him. He sat near his head and asked him to embrace Islam. The boy looked at his father, who was sitting there; the latter told him to obey Abu-l-Qasim [i.e., Muhammad] and the boy embraced Islam. The Prophet came out saying: “Praises be to Allah Who saved the boy from the Hell-fire.” (Bukhari, 2:438)

The Waywardness of Other Religions

Narrated Abu Huraira:

Allah’s Apostle said, “Every child is born with a true faith of Islam (i.e. to worship none but Allah Alone) but his parents convert him to Judaism, Christianity or Magainism [Zoroastrianism], as an animal delivers a perfect baby animal. Do you find it mutilated?” Then Abu Huraira recited the holy verses: “The pure Allah’s Islamic nature (true faith of Islam) (i.e. worshipping none but Allah) with which He has created human beings. No change let there be in the religion of Allah (i.e. joining none in worship with Allah). That is the straight religion (Islam) but most of men know not.” (Q 30:30) (Bukhari, 2:441)

The Waywardness of Other Religions as a Warning to Muslims

Narrated 'Urwa:

'A'isha said, "The Prophet in his fatal illness said, 'Allah cursed the Jews and the Christians because they took the graves of their Prophets as places for praying.'" 'A'isha added, "Had it not been for that the grave of the Prophet would have been made prominent but I am afraid it might be taken (as a) place for praying." (Bukhari, 2:414)

Narrated 'A'isha:

When the Prophet became ill, some of his wives talked about a church which they had seen in Ethiopia and it was called Mariya. Um Salma and Um Habiba [two wives of the Prophet] had been to Ethiopia, and both of them narrated its (the Church's) beauty and the pictures it contained. The Prophet raised his head and said, "Those are the people who, whenever a pious man dies amongst them, make a place of worship at his grave and then they make those pictures in it. Those are the worst creatures in the Sight of Allah." (Bukhari, 2:425)

On Proper Islamic Religious Practices

(Against wailing for the dead at funerals)

Narrated Anas bin Malik:

The Prophet passed by a woman who was sitting and weeping beside a grave and said to her, "Fear Allah and be patient." (Bukhari, 2:343)

Narrated Ibn 'Umar from his father:

The Prophet said, "The deceased is tortured in his grave for the wailing done over him." (Bukhari, 2:379)

(On respecting the dead of other religions)

Narrated 'Abdur Rahman bin Abi Laila:

Sahl bin Hunaif and Qais bin Sad were sitting in the city of Al-Qadisiya. A funeral procession passed in front of them and they stood up. They were told that funeral procession was of one of the inhabitants of the land, i.e. of a non-believer, under the protection of Muslims. They said, "A funeral procession passed in front of the Prophet and he stood up. When he was told that it was the coffin of a Jew, he said, "Is it not a living being (soul)?" (Bukhari, 2:399)

events. For example, both Sunnis and Shi'ites seem to shape their traditions on the political succession to Muhammad in a way that justifies their religious doctrine. All early Muslim scholars, meanwhile, sought to explain how references and allusions in the Qur'an can be understood in the context of Muhammad's life. They also sought to present his life in a way that responds to the disbelief of Jews and Christians.

These critical observations do not mean that the traditional Islamic biography of

the Prophet has no historical value. Certain reports might have an authentic core, even if they have been embellished for various reasons. However, it is difficult to know where to find that authentic core, since we do not have any ancient non-Muslim accounts of the Prophet's life with enough detail to offer grounds for comparison. Thus it is perhaps best to look at the traditional biography of the Prophet as the first record of Islamic self-understanding. From this perspective its value is considerable.