ISLAM

# The Merchant of Mecca

A modern narrative biography of Muhammad ibn Abdullah, written for this site rather than translated from an ancient source, drawing on the Qur'an, the early sira and hadith sources, and current historical scholarship to reconstruct a human life -- the orphan, the merchant, the persecuted preacher, the statesman, the general, and the man who died in his wife's room -- for readers without religious or academic background. Weighs what the sources claim rather than presenting one traditional account as settled fact, and illustrated throughout with historical maps and an early Qur'anic manuscript folio rather than any depiction of the Prophet, in keeping with Islamic aniconic practice.

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# Part One: Arabia Before

## Preface

*We do not know most of what happened to him. We know the outline, and we know some of the inside. This book is an attempt to tell what can be told, in the space between the outline and the inside.*

A man came down from a cave outside his town, shaking, and told his wife he thought he had lost his mind.

That is the beginning of the story I wanted to tell. Not the beginning of Islam, which is a different story and a larger one. Not the beginning of a religion, or a civilization, or an empire. The beginning of a man's life as it changed beneath him, in a single night, and the beginning of the long, difficult, extraordinary effort to understand what that change meant.

The controlling question of this book is not whether Muhammad was a prophet. The question is what it was like to be a man who believed, against his own initial conviction that he was mad, that God was speaking through him — and who then had to be a husband, a general, a judge, and a head of state while it kept happening.

To answer that question, I have tried to hold two things together that are often separated: the life as it is remembered in the tradition, and the life as it can be reconstructed from the sources with the critical care that the sources deserve. These are not the same thing, and the book does not pretend they are. The tradition preserves a life, and a rich and vivid and human life it is. The sources are late, in ways that matter, and the book does not hide that. The Qur'an is the only source contemporary with Muhammad's lifetime, and the book uses it as such — not as a biography, because it is not one, but as the most secure access we have to what Muhammad was saying at the moments when he was saying it, and as the source that gives us the interiority that nothing else in the sources provides.

The book is built around the sources in four tiers. The Qur'an is the first tier, and it is the tier the book relies on most heavily for the interior moments. The sira — the early biographies of Ibn Ishaq, preserved mainly through Ibn Hisham, and the histories of al-Tabari — is the second tier, and it is the source of the vivid, detailed, human parts of the life. The hadith — the reports of what Muhammad said and did, transmitted in short units with chains of transmission — is the third tier, and it is the source of the small, textured moments of daily life. The outside witnesses — the Doctrina Iacobi, Thomas the Presbyter, Sebeos — are the fourth tier, and they are the sources that confirm the outline of the story from outside.

These sources are late, in ways that matter. The sira was written more than a century after Muhammad's death. The hadith were compiled two centuries after that. The outside witnesses are brief and sparse. The book does not hide any of this. It registers it, and then it asks what can be told anyway, and tells it.

The result is a life of a man who was an orphan, a husband, a trader, a preacher, a persecuted leader, a migrant, a statesman, a judge, a general, a head of state, and a man who died in the room of his wife,

tired and ill, in the presence of the people who loved him. It is a life of a man who was respected in his own town for his trustworthiness before the revelation ever came, and who was then rejected by that same town for the message that came to him. It is a life of a man who was stoned at Ta'if, who survived the boycott, who lost his wife and his protector in the same year, who negotiated a treaty that his own followers thought was a defeat and that turned out to be the turning point, who conquered his hometown and forgave the people who had tried to kill him, who died without a clear successor named, and whose death the community could not at first believe.

It is a life of a man who changed the world. It is also a life of a man who was a human being, with the full, complicated, often difficult humanity that the sources preserve — grieving, joking, mending his own sandals, being wrong about pollinating date palms, losing his temper, frowning at a blind man and being rebuked for it. The humanity is the point, and it is also, in the tradition itself, entirely orthodox. The sources preserve it, and the book tries to preserve it too.

The book is not a defense of Islam. It is not a prosecution of Muhammad. It is not a comparative religion essay. It is an attempt to tell what can be told, plainly, about a man who changed the world, using the sources that exist, with all the honesty the sources allow and all the honesty they do not.

The chapters on the Jewish tribes of Medina and on Muhammad's household — on the expulsion of the tribes and the killing of the men of the Qurayza, and on the later marriages and the age question surrounding Aisha — have been written with the greatest care the book could muster. They are the chapters most likely to be quoted against this book, and they have been written for the reader who is a devout Muslim and for the reader who is a hostile critic, and they have been written so that both should find them fair, and neither should find them useful as a weapon. The reader will judge whether the care was enough. The author hopes it was.

The book does not settle the questions that the sources cannot settle. It does not decide whether the revelations were from God. It does not decide the exact age of Aisha at the time of her marriage. It does not decide the exact number of men killed at the Qurayza. It does not decide whether the night journey was physical or spiritual. It presents the traditions, and the debates, and the limits of what can be known, and it asks the reader to sit with the uncertainty.

The uncertainty is part of the story. The silence between the first and the second revelation is the silence that shaped Muhammad more than any single moment of the early life. The years of pressure in Mecca, the boycott, the emigration to Abyssinia, the deaths of Khadija and Abu Talib, the stoning at Ta'if, the assassination plot, the night journey, the hijra — these are the years that the triumphal story skips, and these are the years that the book has tried to stay with.

The book has stayed with the years of pressure because they are the years in which the man who would become the Prophet had to become the man who would become the Prophet. They are the years in which the interiority of the life — the thing that the book identifies as its best single move — is most visible. The Qur'an gives Muhammad words to say when he was afraid. The tradition remembered that he thought he was mad. The silence between the first and the second revelation is the space in which Muhammad had to live with his own uncertainty, and it is the space that made the first public words — the first warnings, the first suras — the words of a man who had been through something and was now, after a period of doubt about what it meant, beginning to act on it.

The book is arranged in six parts. The first part sets the scene — the sources, the town of Mecca, the tribe, the empires, the religious landscape before Muhammad. The second part tells the story of the

orphan — the birth, the childhood, the marriage to Khadija, the reputation, the cave. The third part tells the story of the first words — the silence, the early suras, the Meccan reaction, the first believers. The fourth part tells the story of the persecution and the exile — the boycott, the emigration to Abyssinia, the Year of Sorrow, the stoning at Ta'if, the night journey, the hijra. The fifth part tells the story of the Medina period — the Constitution, the statesman, the battles, the Jewish tribes, the household. The sixth part tells the story of the return and the farewell — the treaty, the conquest of Mecca, the last year, the death.

The book ends on the man, not on the empire. The empire that Muhammad had built, or that the community had built under his leadership, was already there at the moment of his death. It would grow in the years after his death, under Abu Bakr and Umar and the Rashidun, and then under the Umayyads and the Abbasids, and then across the world. But the book has not been the story of the empire. It has been the story of the man. The death is where the story of the man ends, and where the book ends — on the man, in the room of Aisha, dead, and with the community outside, in denial, and with the speech of Abu Bakr that broke the denial.

Muhammad was mortal. The empire he left behind was not. The book closes on the man, and with the man's death the closing is complete.

I am grateful to the sources that made the book possible, and to the scholars who have spent their careers trying to understand them. The books that were most useful are listed in the appendix on further reading. The reader who wants to go further will find plenty more. The books listed are the books that the biographer read, and the books that shaped the book. They are the books that the reader should read first, and the books that the reader should read again, and the books that the reader should keep on the shelf.

I am also grateful to the people who have read parts of this book in draft and have saved me from errors I would otherwise have published. Any remaining errors are my own.

The life of Muhammad is a life that has been told many times, in many ways, by many people, and for many reasons. This book is one more telling, and it is a telling that hopes to be honest, and respectful, and human. It is a telling that hopes to give the reader a sense of a life — not a saintly life, not a sinful life, not a life smoothed of its edges, and not a life treated as a prosecution brief or a defense brief. A life.

The life of a man who believed, with his own initial terror, that God was speaking to him, and who then had to be a husband, a general, a judge, and a head of state while it kept happening, and who did all of it, and who died.

That is the life this book has tried to tell.

## Author's Note

A few words about how this book was written, and the choices that shaped it.

**On naming**

I have not used the phrase "peace be upon him" after mentions of Muhammad in the text. That phrase — *salallahu alayhi wa sallam* — is a mark of religious respect in Muslim usage, and readers who are

Muslim will notice its absence. It is not used here because this is a general-audience biography, not a devotional text, and because the phrase would, if used throughout, read as a claim about the book's religious stance that the book does not intend to make.

What the phrase is — a traditional formula of respect, used by Muslims when speaking of the Prophet — is explained, and the choice not to use it is explained, here. The explanation is warm, not defensive. The respect intended is in the care taken with the life, not in a formula repeated tens of thousands of times.

**On images**

No images of Muhammad appear in this book. No illustrations, no cover art depicting him, no AI-generated visuals of any kind. This is not a stylistic preference. It is a production rule, and it reflects the fact that visual depictions of the Prophet are forbidden in Islamic tradition and would be inappropriate in a book addressed to readers of many backgrounds.

The book that follows is a life — not a defense, not a prosecution, not a comparison with any other religious figure.

**On comparisons**

This book does not compare Muhammad to Jesus or Moses. These are three separate books. Where the traditions themselves invoke other figures — where, for example, the tradition remembers Waraqa ibn Nawfal, Khadija's cousin, telling Muhammad that what had come to him was of the kind the great prophetic traditions of the region knew — the text reports that tradition without making the comparison itself.

**On sources**

The book is built from four tiers of source:

- **The Qur'an** — contemporary with Muhammad's lifetime. Not a biography, but bedrock.

- **The sira** — Ibn Ishaq (via Ibn Hisham), al-Waqidi, Ibn Sa'd, al-Tabari. Written 130–250 years after the events.

- **The hadith** — Bukhari and Muslim, ninth century, with chain-of-transmission critical method.

- **Outside witnesses** — the Doctrina Iacobi, Thomas the Presbyter, Sebeos. Sparse but real.

The source tiers are explained in Chapter 1. They matter throughout, because they tell us what can be known and what can only be remembered.

**On the difficult chapters**

Chapters 25 and 26 — the Jewish tribes and Muhammad's household — are the chapters most likely to be quoted against this book. They were drafted last, with the most source material, on the principle that the reader who is a devout Muslim and the reader who is a hostile critic should both find them fair, and neither should find them useful as a weapon.

**On the controlling question**

The controlling question of the book is not whether the revelations were from God. That question cannot be answered from these sources, and it is not the one this book is built to answer. The question is: what was it like to be a man who believed, against his own initial conviction that he was mad, that God was speaking through him — and who then had to be a husband, a general, a judge, and a head of state while it kept happening?

## How We Know What We Know

The first thing to say about the life of Muhammad is that almost none of it was written down by him, and almost none of what was written down by anyone who knew him has survived in its original form. What we have instead is a stack of texts written decades and then centuries after the events, each one produced by someone with reasons to remember the story in a particular way. A biography built out of these sources is, from the first page, a detective problem. Not a methodology lecture — a detective problem. Here is the evidence. Here are the reasons each piece of evidence might lead us astray. Let us see what holds up.

There are four tiers of source, and it helps to know them before reading anything else, because they answer different questions and they carry different weights.

**The Qur'an**

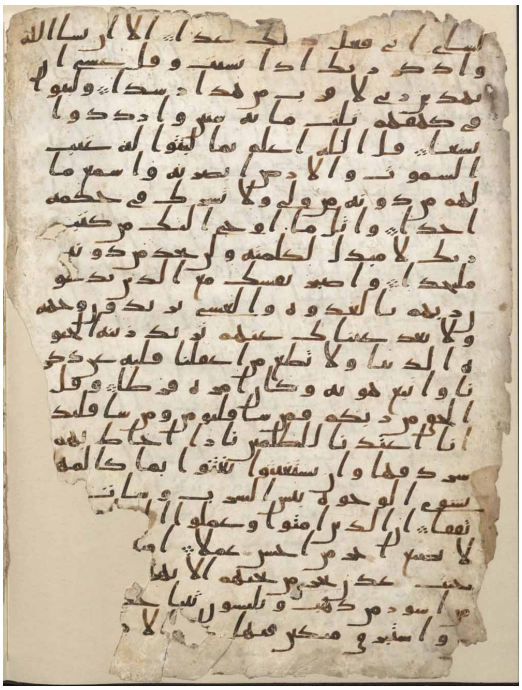

Figure: A folio from the Birmingham Qur'an manuscript, written in Hijazi script on parchment radiocarbon-dated to between 568 and 645 CE. (Image: public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The Qur'an is the only source contemporary with Muhammad's lifetime. It is not, in any ordinary sense, a biography. It does not tell his story. It assumes a story it never narrates — a man, a city, a movement, a struggle — and speaks from inside it. But that is precisely why it is bedrock. When the Qur'an says, in the earliest Meccan suras, that a warning has come to a people who have become complacent, or that orphans have rights, or that a man has been chosen as a warner, these are not later legends dressed up as scripture. They are the words of the movement at the moment it was happening, or close to it, addressed to the people of Mecca while Muhammad was still among them.

The Qur'an also gives us something no other source can: access to what Muhammad himself said when he was under pressure. There are verses where he is comforted after a difficult period. There are verses where he is told off — famously, for turning away from a blind man who came to him seeking counsel. There are verses where his enemies are answered, sometimes sharply, sometimes

with patient argument. These are not the polished pronouncements of a statesman with a prepared text. They are reactive, sometimes emotional, occasionally irritable. They give us interiority that nothing else in the source material provides.

There are limits. The Qur'an does not narrate Muhammad's birth, his marriage, his campaigns, or his death. It does not try to. The reader who expects a life story from it will be disappointed and should not be surprised. Its value for a biography is indirect but substantial: it establishes the earliest layer of what he was saying, and it does so at a remove of only a few decades at most from the events, far closer than anything else we have.

The arrangement of the Qur'an in the standard text is not chronological. The suras are ordered roughly by length, longest to shortest, with the opening chapter as an exception. The earliest revelations — short, intense, focused on judgment, the vulnerable, and the coming reckoning — are mostly at the end of the book. The Medinan suras, longer and more concerned with law, community, and the conduct of a state, are mostly at the beginning. A reader who goes through the book from page one to page end will not encounter the story in the order it happened. This is worth knowing before drawing conclusions from any single passage about when it was said.

**The Sira**

The next tier is the sira — the prophetic biography, in the technical sense. The word literally means "biography" or "life," and in Islamic literary tradition it refers specifically to the life of Muhammad, told as a continuous narrative.

The earliest and most important sira was written by Ibn Ishaq, who died in Baghdad in 767 CE — more than a century after Muhammad's death in 632. Ibn Ishaq was an 8th-century scholar who collected oral traditions about the Prophet's life and wove them into a narrative. He did not, by the account of those who knew his methods, invent much; he compiled, organized, and transmitted. But compilation is not the same as eyewitness report, and the distance in time matters.

Ibn Ishaq's original text does not survive intact. What we have comes mainly through a later editor, Ibn Hisham, who died in 833 — a hundred and sixty years after Muhammad, and nearly seventy years after Ibn Ishaq. Ibn Hisham revised, abbreviated, and in his own words, removed "things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people." He also left out material that his teacher had included. The result is a text that is partly Ibn Ishaq and partly Ibn Hisham, and it requires some judgment to know which is which.

A second survival route for Ibn Ishaq's work is the great history of al-Tabari, writing in the early tenth century and drawing on Ibn Ishaq as a source. Al-Tabari includes some material — notably a controversial episode known as the Satanic Verses — that Ibn Hisham chose to omit. Whether al-Tabari preserved Ibn Ishaq faithfully or reshaped him in the process is a matter of scholarly debate. The honest answer is that we can never be fully certain.

Why does this matter for a reader? Because the sira is where the vivid, human, detailed parts of Muhammad's life come from — his birth, his weaning by a Bedouin woman, the story of the black stone and the Kaaba's rebuilding, the psychological terror of the first revelation, the boy who believed himself possessed. These are the passages that make the biography feel like a life, and they are also the passages furthest from contemporary evidence. They are not invented, in the sense that later tradition did not simply make them up wholesale — they rest on chains of transmission that go

back through teachers and students to people who may have heard the stories from participants. But the further back you cannot see, the more room there is for the story to have taken shape in the retelling. The sira is indispensable; it is also a hundred and thirty to two hundred and fifty years late, written by people with theological and political stakes that the original participants did not have. Read it for what it is, not for what it pretends to be.

The other major early sira writers are al-Waqidi, whose *Maghazi* (Book of Military Expeditions) focuses on the campaigns; Ibn Sa'd, whose *Tabaqat* (Book of Generations) is a biographical dictionary reaching back through the Prophet's companions and their generations; and al-Tabari, whose history is the broadest and most ambitious of the early works. These are all written in the late 8th and early 9th centuries, in a period when the Islamic scholarly tradition was actively systematizing what it knew and what it had inherited. They are rich, detailed, and fascinating. They are also not contemporaneous. The gap is real.

**The Hadith**

The third tier is the hadith — the reports of what Muhammad said and did, transmitted in short, discrete units rather than in continuous narrative. The hadith literature is enormous and it was built over several centuries by scholars who developed a genuinely sophisticated method for assessing reliability: the chain of transmission, or *isnad*, which traces each report back through its narrators to someone who might have heard it from someone who was there.

Two collections stand out: those of Bukhari and Muslim, both compiled in the ninth century, more than two hundred years after the fact. They are not the earliest hadith collections, but they are the ones that came to be trusted most, and their compilers applied real critical judgment, accepting some reports and rejecting others on the basis of the chain and the content. The hadith as a body of literature contains a great deal of material — legal, theological, personal, anecdotal — and it ranges in reliability from well-attested to clearly late. It is not a single thing.

For a biography, the hadith is useful for the small, human moments: how Muhammad ate, how he treated a servant, what he said on particular occasions, the texture of daily life. It is less useful for the broad shape of events, which the sira handles. And it is, like the sira, late — late enough that the earliest reliable material has passed through at least two or three generations of transmission before being written down. The method of the hadith scholars was serious and it did real work, but even the best-attested report in Bukhari is, in historical terms, removed from the event by a distance that no careful historian would ignore.

**Outside Witnesses**

The fourth tier is the one that surprises most readers, because it is so small: the outside witnesses. The earliest contemporary or near-contemporary non-Muslim references to what became Islam are sparse but they exist, and they do something no Islamic source can do — they confirm the basic outline of the story from outside.

A Greek manuscript known as the *Doctrina Iacobi*, probably written around 634, mentions a prophet who has appeared among the Saracens and is named Muhammad. A Syriac document attributed to a Thomas the Presbyter, dated to around 640, records a battle between the Romans and the Arabs of Muḥammad in Palestine. An Armenian chronicle by Sebeos, writing in the 660s, gives a more detailed account of Muhammad's preaching, his followers' flight to Medina, and the military

campaigns that followed. These are not biographies. They are brief, sometimes confused, written by people who were not participants but who were near enough to see something happening. They confirm, in rough terms, that a prophet named Muhammad was active in the Arabian peninsula in the early decades of the seventh century, that his followers were a distinct group, and that they fought the Byzantine Empire within a very few years of his death. That is not a great deal of detail, but it is the difference between a story told entirely by its own side and one that can be checked against witnesses who had no reason to tell it the way the tradition wanted.

**How a Biographer Uses This**

A biography of Muhammad built from these sources is, in one sense, in better shape than many ancient lives. We have a text — the Qur'an — from the period itself. We have a narrative tradition that reaches back through named transmitters to named participants. We have brief outside corroboration from people who were not telling the story from inside it. And we have a secondary scholarly tradition, in English and other languages, that has spent a century arguing about what the sources do and do not support.

The controlling question for this book is not whether the revelations were from God. That question cannot be answered from these sources, and it is not the one this book is built to answer. The question is: what was it like to be a man who believed, against his own initial conviction that he was mad, that God was speaking through him — and who then had to be a husband, a general, a judge, and a head of state while it kept happening?

To answer that, we read the Qur'an as a record of what he was saying at various moments. We read the sira for the story that surrounds those words. We read the hadith for texture. We read the outside witnesses to check that the story's outline is not purely imaginary. And we read modern scholars — Watt, who still provides the spine of the Western account; Lings, whose version is traditional and beautifully written but uncritical by design, to be read for texture and checked against the skeptical scholars; Anthony, who represents the current state of the evidence on what the earliest sources can and cannot support; Donner, who reframes the early community in a way that changes how Part Five needs to be written; and the revisionists, Crone and Cook and Crone alone, whose challenge has mostly not held up but who still must be engaged because the questions they raised about the traditional narrative are real.

None of this resolves the central difficulty. The sources are late in ways that matter. The sira wants to tell a coherent, instructive story; the hadith wants to establish doctrine; the Qur'an, for all its value, does not tell the story at all. But the difficulty is not hopeless. It is the difficulty of almost every life from before the modern period that we cannot know directly. The biographer's job is to know what each source can do, to know what it cannot do, and to build a story that is honest about the gaps.

**A Note on Two Decisions**

Two decisions govern how this book is written, and they should be stated plainly at the outset, since they will be noticed.

First, this book does not use the honorific "peace be upon him" after mentions of Muhammad. That phrase is a mark of religious respect in Muslim usage, and readers who are Muslim will notice its absence. It is not used here because this is a general-audience biography, not a devotional text, and because the phrase would, if used throughout, read as a claim about the book's religious stance that

the book does not intend to make. What the phrase is — a traditional formula of respect, used by Muslims when speaking of the Prophet — is explained, and the choice not to use it is explained, in the author's note. The explanation there is warm, not defensive.

Second, and more absolute: no images of Muhammad appear in this book, and no illustrations, cover art, or AI-generated visuals depicting him are used at any stage of its production. This is not a stylistic preference. It is a production rule, and it reflects the fact that visual depictions of the Prophet are forbidden in Islamic tradition and would be inappropriate in a book addressed to readers of many backgrounds.

The book that follows is a life — not a defense, not a prosecution, not a comparison with any other religious figure. It is an attempt to tell what can be told, plainly, about a man who changed the world, using the sources that exist, with all the honesty the sources allow and all the honesty they do not.

## A Town Built Around a Well

Mecca in the sixth century was a town that should not have existed — and the reason it existed at all is the reason it mattered.

It sat in a valley with no river, no rainfall worth counting, and no agriculture of its own. The soil around it would not support crops. The valley's main reliable resource was a well, the Zamzam, whose water was not abundant but was dependable enough to keep people alive if they were careful with it. Everything else had to come in, or was scarcely there at all. If you looked at a map and asked what was sensible about locating a settlement in this valley, the honest answer was: nothing, unless the settlement had a reason to be there that had nothing to do with farming.

The reason was the Kaaba.

The Kaaba is a cube-shaped stone building at the center of a sacred precinct, and long before Muhammad was born it was already the religious and economic center of the town. It housed, in the pre-Islamic period, a large collection of idols — statues of the gods of the Meccan tribes and of neighboring groups, each with its own shrine and its own following. The main gods included Hubal, the chief deity of the Kaaba in the Meccan tradition; al-Lat, al-Uzza, and al-Manat, three goddesses who were widely venerated across the Hijaz; and a number of others. Pilgrims came from the surrounding tribes to venerate their gods at the sanctuary, and the season of pilgrimage brought travelers, traders, and ritual specialists through the valley in numbers that a town of Mecca's physical limitations should not have been able to support.

This is the central fact about pre-Islamic Mecca: it was not a town that prospered because it produced anything. It prospered because it was a place where other people came, and where, once they were there, they spent money.

The pilgrimage economy worked through several overlapping functions. The sanctuary was a *haram* — a sacred zone in which violence was forbidden. That prohibition was not a minor feature. It made Mecca one of the few places in a violent region where caravans could arrive and depart without being attacked, where tribes could meet and trade without the constant threat of blood feud, and where the pilgrimage season created a predictable, protected window for commerce. The haram was not simply a religious boundary. It was an economic institution.

The caravans that brought the trade are the other half of the story. Mecca's location in the Hijaz gave it access to two seasonal trade routes: a winter route south toward Yemen, and a summer route north toward Syria. The caravans carried spices, leather, cloth, and other goods between the southern and northern ends of the Arabian Peninsula and points beyond, and Mecca sat at a point where the routes came near the sanctuary. The Quraysh — the dominant tribe of the town, to which Muhammad's family belonged — organized and profited from the caravan trade, and they also controlled the Kaaba and the pilgrimage. The same people who guarded the idols also guarded the customs revenues, the supplies to pilgrims, and the commercial infrastructure of the season. Religion and commerce were not separate spheres in Mecca. They were interdependent, and the town's whole reason for being was the fact that it had managed to fuse them.

The Zamzam fits into this picture as the practical foundation. A settlement in a waterless valley cannot survive on reputation alone. The well provided enough water to keep the population going and enough, in the pilgrimage season, to support the influx of visitors. Its importance was both real and legendary: the traditions associate it with Hagar and Ishmael, making it sacred in origin as well as useful in practice. Whether the story goes back to pre-Islamic tradition or is a later religious aura placed around a useful water source is not something we can settle. What matters for understanding the town is that the well was there, that it worked, and that it made the sanctuary viable.

How large was Mecca? The traditional Islamic sources later describe it as a significant town, and the Qur'an itself treats it as a place of some standing. But historians have argued about this. The revisionist scholar Patricia Crone argued, in *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, that the traditional picture of Mecca as a major trading entrepôt was an exaggeration that grew up after the fact, once the Islamic tradition was trying to explain how the Quraysh could have been wealthy enough to oppose Muhammad for years. She suggested that Mecca may have been a smaller, more modest settlement than the later tradition claimed, and that the caravan trade through it was less centralized and less dominant than the sira implies. The counter-argument, from scholars who defend the traditional picture, is that the sanctuary's pilgrimage economy and the haram's protected trade were enough to give Mecca importance disproportionate to its own agriculture or industry, and that the later sources exaggerate some details without inventing the basic shape of the town.

Where does the truth sit? Probably in between. Mecca was not a great city by the standards of Damascus or Ctesiphon. It was a town whose significance came entirely from its sanctuary and its position on the caravan routes, and that significance was real but specialized. It was a pilgrimage town, a caravan town, and a neutral zone, and the Quraysh had built their wealth and status on holding those three things together. If that is a modest kind of wealth, it was still enough.

This is worth understanding clearly, because it shapes everything about Muhammad's early life. A man born into this town in the late sixth century was born into a place where:

- the only reliable water came from one well;
- the main reason anyone visited was a religious sanctuary full of idols;
- the dominant family, the Quraysh, made their living from the pilgrimage and the caravans;
- the town was not itself a producer but a middleman and a host;
- violence within the sacred precinct was forbidden, which made the place safer for visitors than for anyone trying to make a living by force elsewhere.

And also: the sanctuary's protection had limits. The haram kept the peace inside its bounds, but it did not extend to the surrounding valley in the same way, and it did not prevent the kind of localized raids and feuds that were normal in Arabian society. The Meccan environment was a mixture of protected commerce and the normal roughness of tribal life, with the protected zone concentrated around the Kaaba.

Muhammad was born into this. He came from the Banu Hashim, a clan of the Quraysh whose status was respectable but not wealthy — his grandfather Abd al-Muttalib was an important figure, respected and influential, but the clan had lost ground economically by the time Muhammad was born, and his own father Abd Allah had died before he was born. The orphanhood that defined his early life was not simply a personal tragedy. It was also a fact about his place in a town whose whole structure was built around clan standing, trade connections, and the networks that came through the sanctuary. A boy without a father in Mecca was a boy without a voice in the negotiations of the town, without access to the caravan opportunities that shaped advancement, and without the protection that a strong adult male gave within the kinship system. That fact, which Chapter 6 will return to, is already visible in the kind of town this was.

The town itself, then, is not a backdrop in the neutral sense. It is an active piece of the story. A town built around a well and a sanctuary, kept alive by pilgrimage and trade, governed by a tribe that controlled both, and marked by a sacred zone that made it different from every other town in the Hijaz — this is the world that Muhammad entered, and the world that shaped him before he said his first word.

## The Tribe Is Everything

The most important fact about pre-Islamic Arabia, and the one that is hardest for a modern reader to absorb, is that the tribe was the only law.

There was no state, no police, no court system with enforceable authority, no institution that could oblige someone to do what the law required. What existed instead was kinship — the web of relationships through which a person could be protected, avenged, married, supported, and constrained. A man's safety, his livelihood, his honor, his marriage prospects, and his ability to get justice when he was wronged all flowed from his clan. If he had a strong clan behind him, he could survive injuries that would destroy a man without one. If he had no clan, or a weak one, he was exposed to everything the world could do to him.

This is not a picturesque or romantic fact. It is a brutal one. The same system that gave a man protection also bound him to vengeance. If a man from one clan killed a man from another, there was no neutral force to stop the killing from becoming a cycle. The obligation was blood vengeance — *tha'r* — the duty of the victim's kin to exact retribution from the killer's kin. The response did not have to be equal in every case; there were negotiations, compensations, and settlements, and not every killing produced a war. But the underlying logic was violence and the tribe was the unit through which it was organized. Blood vengeance was not an individual act in the modern sense. It was a collective obligation, and it pulled the whole clan into the consequences of what one member had done.

This is the shape of law in Arabia before Islam, and it explains a great deal about the society that Muhammad was born into. The law was kinship. The enforcement of the law was kinship. The failure of the law, when kinship could not agree, was violence.

Protection worked through the same channels. A person who had no clan of his own — an orphan, a slave, a refugee, someone whose tribe had collapsed, someone who had somehow fallen outside — was in a position of extreme vulnerability. The tribe provided a framework for manumission of slaves, for the protection of clients (*mawali*), and for the absorption of outsiders into the kinship web, but these processes were real and important and also limited. A freed slave who became a client of his former master entered a relationship that was recognizable and sometimes generous, but it was still a relationship of dependence. The master's clan remained his master's clan. The freedman did not become a full equal. The structure had room for generosity, but the structure was also a hierarchy.

The status of women in this system was shaped by the same logic. Marriage was a transaction between clans: a woman was given in marriage by her family, and the marriage brought the two families into a relationship of obligations and potential alliance. Widows sometimes retained a degree of independence and even property — high-status women like Khadija, who will appear later, could own wealth and run businesses — but a woman's position generally depended on the standing of her clan and the protection she could command through her male relatives. The Qur'an's later concern with inheritance rights, marriage consent, and the treatment of orphans and women reflects, in part, what the existing system did and did not provide. It is easier to see what the Qur'an changed when you understand what came before.

Slavery was present and well established. Slaves came from raiding, from war captives, from debt, and from trade. They were held by households and by clans, and they occupied the bottom of the social structure. The tradition that developed from this society came to place real emphasis on manumission as a virtuous act — freeing a slave was, in the later Islamic ethic, one of the conspicuous good deeds — and the practice of freeing slaves existed before Islam too. But the system itself was not abolished, and the moral emphasis on freeing slaves coexisted with a world in which slavery was normal and enormous numbers of people lived without freedom. Neither the pre-Islamic world nor the early Islamic world solved this. Both acknowledged it and lived within it. The honest account does not pretend that things were otherwise.

All of this matters directly for Muhammad's life, and not only as background. His orphanhood is the defining fact of his early years, and it only matters because the tribe was everything. A boy whose father had died before his birth and whose mother died when he was six — the traditions say she died in his childhood, and the distance of the journey to Medina for her burial is part of the story — was a boy whose protection fell to his grandfather Abd al-Muttalib, and then, when his grandfather died, to his uncle Abu Talib. He was not destitute, because the Banu Hashim were a respected clan and Abu Talib, though not wealthy, was his uncle. But he was a boy without a father of his own, without the voice that a father's position gave in the negotiations of the town, without the inheritance that a father would have provided, and without the full protection of a man who was his own. That combination of relative comfort and real vulnerability is what the orphanhood meant in this society, and it is the reason the Qur'an's repeated concern with orphans — commands to treat them justly, not to devour their property, not to marginalize them — lands with such force when it appears, decades later, in Muhammad's own words.

The kinship system also shaped the political life of Arabia at every level. Decision-making in a tribe was neither a democracy nor a tyranny in the modern sense. It was a process of discussion among the men with standing — the elders, the heads of important families, the men with eloquence and the men with influence — and the outcome depended on the balance of opinion, the weight of example, and the pressure of reputation. In Mecca, the Quraysh operated through this kind of council, and the leading clans had seats at the table that the weaker clans did not. Muhammad's own voice in his middle years came not from wealth but from a reputation for trustworthiness — a quality that in a tribal society was both moral and practical, because trustworthiness meant that a man's word carried weight in a world where promises had to be enforced by the threat of clan retaliation rather than by courts.

There is a temptation, when describing this world, to treat it as a prelude to Islam's arrival — a dark, violent, confused stage that Islam then corrected. That is one of the standard stories, and it is a mistake. The pre-Islamic tribal system gave Arabia a rough but functioning order. It held people together in small-scale societies that had no other way to survive. It produced genuine codes of honor, of hospitality, of poetic expression, of the obligations that made life bearable without a state. It also produced violence, inequality, slavery, and the grinding vulnerability of anyone without a clan. The full picture contains both. The tribal system was not a disaster waiting for Islam to rescue people from. It was the system that people lived in, that had advantages and costs, and that Islam in some ways inherited, in some ways modified, and in some ways refused.

A word, then, about how Part Five will be read if this chapter is not done properly. The battles that Muhammad fought after the migration to Medina — Badr, Uhud, the Trench — involved raiding and warfare that were, in their Arabian context, not exotic aberrations but normal operations of the tribal world. Raiding was a standard economic and political practice. It was brutal. It was reciprocal: the raided could raid back. The moral framework that judged it was the tribal one, not the modern one. If a reader approaches these events expecting them to look like modern war, or expecting them to be intelligible only as evidence of something uniquely violent about the men involved, the story will not land, and the reader will miss why it mattered to the people it happened to.

This is not an apology for violence. It is the establishment of context — the context in which the wars of Part Five will make sense, and the context in which the moral seriousness of what Muhammad and his followers did can be judged without a distortion that helps nobody. Context is not excuse, and it should never be presented as if it were. But a life story that leaves out the world the man lived in cannot tell the life at all.

## Two Exhausted Empires

Arabia in the early seventh century sat between two empires that had spent most of the previous century trying to destroy each other.

To the northwest lay the Byzantine Empire, the eastern half of what had once been the Roman Empire, governed from Constantinople and controlling Syria, Egypt, Anatolia, and the coastal Mediterranean. To the northeast lay the Sasanian Empire, the great Persian state that had replaced the Parthians and had long competed with Rome for dominance in the Near East. These were the two

great powers of the region, and they had been at one another's throats for generations. The war that matters most for Arabia's story broke out in 602, when the Byzantine emperor Maurice was overthrown and killed by his general Phocas, and the Sasanian king Khosrow II used the murder as a pretext to launch a full-scale invasion.

What followed was one of the most destructive wars of late antiquity. The Sasanians swept through Syria, Palestine, and Egypt — the richest provinces of the empire — and captured Jerusalem in 614, an event of staggering symbolic weight. They pushed the Byzantines back into Anatolia and held the eastern Mediterranean for years. Heraclius, who overthrew Phocas in 610 and took the Byzantine throne, spent the next decade rebuilding the army and the imperial administration while the Sasanians held the ground they had taken. His counter-offensive, beginning in 622, was slow and hard-fought, but it moved. By 628, after campaigns that took him to the very heart of the Persian realm, he had forced the Sasanians to surrender,return the occupied territories, and agree to terms. The war ended, in other words, when both sides were too exhausted to continue.

The cost of all this was enormous. The two empires had bleeded each other white — populations displaced, tax bases destroyed, armies depleted, provincial economies shattered. They were victors and losers at the same time: the one who won the war had lost almost as much as the one who lost it, and both emerged from the conflict weakened in ways that made the world around them more volatile, not less.

This is the larger frame for Arabia. Arabia sat between these two empires, mostly out of their direct control but not far from their orbit. The empires did not govern Arabia in the way they governed Syria or Mesopotamia, but they influenced it through trade, through alliances, through religious and cultural pressure, and through the political structures on its edges. In the northwest, the Ghassanids — an Arab confederation in Syria — served as federates of the Byzantine Empire, holding the frontier and transmitting Byzantine influence southward. In the east, the Lakhmids — another Arab confederation, based in al-Hira in lower Mesopotamia — served the Sasanians in a similar way. These were Arab client states, and they connected the Arabian interior to the imperial world both by making alliances and by passing on news, customs, and sometimes pressure.

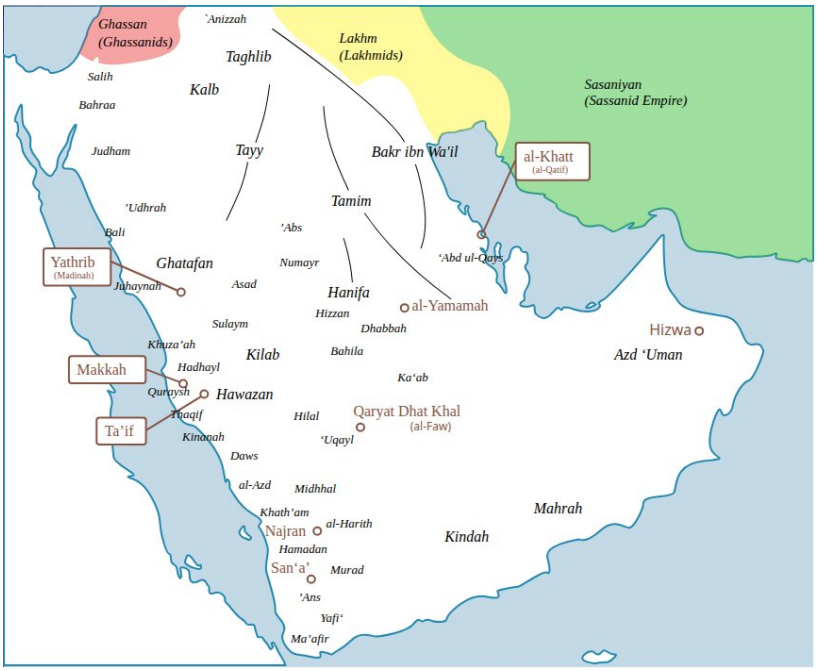


Figure: Arabia around 600 CE, showing the Ghassanid and Lakhmid client kingdoms on the frontiers of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, and the tribal territories of the interior, with Mecca, Yathrib, and Ta'if marked along the western trade corridor. (Image: Murraytheb, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The Hejaz, where Mecca sat, was further from the imperial centers than either of these border zones, and it was not directly governed by either empire. But no one in Arabia was insulated from the war. Trade moved through the same routes that connected Arabia to Syria and Yemen and the Gulf, and the disruption of those routes mattered. The war's religious and cultural atmosphere mattered too: the Byzantine world was Christian, deeply Christian, and a Christianity of multiple forms — Chalcedonian, Monophysite, Nestorian — whose disagreements were serious and whose presence in Syria and Egypt and the countries around Arabia was constant. The Sasanian world was Zoroastrian in its official religion and included Christian, Jewish, and other communities within it.

The point is not that Arabia was about to be conquered by one or the other. The point is that Arabia existed in a world shaped by two exhausted superpowers, and that exhaustion created space — space in which smaller actors could matter more, space in which movements could grow, space in which a region that had been squeezed between giants could make its own decisions. The years after 602 were years in which the empires were fighting a war so costly that neither could spare attention for the Arabian interior. The years in which Muhammad was born and grew up — around 570 to the early 620s — were years in which the empire's direct grip on Arabia's edges was heavy but its ability to project power into the interior was limited by its own crises.

This matters for the biography in several concrete ways. It explains why the Meccan elite's response to Muhammad, when it came, was not simply a matter of local politics but took place in a world where the major powers were absorbed in their own struggle. It explains why the first Muslim emigration to Abyssinia — the Axumite kingdom across the Red Sea, itself a serious regional power with Christian roots — was possible: the Red Sea region was neither fully Byzantine nor fully Sasanian, and the Negus of Abyssinia had his own interests and his own court. It explains why, when the Muslims finally reached Medina and had to deal with surrounding tribes and the still-unoccupied

Arabian interior, the imperial powers were themselves in the late stages of a war that would end in mutual exhaustion. The timing is not incidental. The expansion that followed Muhammad's death, into the Syrian and Egyptian and Persian lands, happened in the space that the war had opened.

It is also worth saying, plainly, that Arabia was not the only actor in this story and not the most powerful one. The empires were large, wealthy, and militarily formidable in ways that the Arabian interior was not. The desert tribes and the settled towns of the Hejaz were not setting the strategic order of the region. They were living inside it, responding to it, and occasionally profiting from the routes it created. When the Muslims later moved north into the empire's territories, they were moving into lands that had been shaped by centuries of Roman and Persian administration, Christenings and Zoroastrian fire-temples, tax systems and fortifications and cities that Mecca had no equivalent to. That asymmetry — the enormous difference between the Arabian interior and the imperial world — is part of what makes the story as extraordinary as it is. The Quraysh of Mecca were not men who assumed they would ever confront the empires. They were men whose world was the sanctuary, the caravan, and the tribe. The fact that their story did not end there is the fact that makes the biography worth telling.

For now, the point is simple: Muhammad was born into a Arabia that existed in the long shadow of two wars, and those wars defined the shape of the world he would later inherit, the space in which his community would grow, and the landscape into which it would eventually move. The exhaustion of the empires is not the cause of Islam. It is the condition under which Islam could become what it became.

## The Gods and the Doubters

The religious landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia was diverse, and the diversity is essential to understanding what Muhammad's message did and did not break into.

The dominant form of religion was Arabian polytheism — a pattern of worship centered on a number of gods and goddesses, each with local bases of support, each associated with particular places and clans, and each recognized in different ways across different parts of Arabia. The gods were not a unified pantheon in the Greek or Roman sense. They were a patchwork of cults, shrines, and local traditions, many of them old and some of them carrying names and functions that can be traced back into the wider Semitic religious world. The most important cultic center was the Kaaba in Mecca, which housed a large number of idols representing the gods of the Meccan and surrounding tribes — Hubal, the chief idol of the Meccan sanctuary, and his associates, together with the three goddesses al-Lat, al-Uzza, and al-Manat, who were venerated across the Hijaz and beyond.

The polytheism of Arabia was not, in the simplest sense, a collection of independently imagined beings. It was embedded in the life of the tribes: a god was associated with a tribe, and a shrine was associated with a place, and worship at a shrine was associated with pilgrimage, sacrifice, oath-taking, and the practical and symbolic recognition of a tribe's place in the world. The gods were real to their worshippers — not abstract symbols but beings with whom one had a relationship, from whom one could seek help, to whom one could make offerings. The religious life was not separated

from the rest of life. It was part of the same structure as the tribe, the trade route, the sanctuary, and the oath.

At the same time, monotheizing ideas were already present in Arabia before Muhammad. The word *hanif* — which the Qur'an uses for people who turned away from idol worship and sought the original religion of Abraham — referred to a small number of individuals who rejected the polytheism around them and sought a purer monotheism. The tradition associates some of these figures with Abraham and with a return to the worship of one God, and the Q ur'an treats the hanif ideal as a real and positive part of Arabian religious memory. The number of actual hanif s was small — the tradition does not suggest a widespread movement — but their existence shows that the ground was not uniformly polytheistic, and that some people in Arabia were already dissatisfied with the gods before Muhammad said anything at all.

Judaism was also present. Jewish communities had existed in Arabia for some time — in the northwestern oases, in parts of the Hijaz, and most significantly in the south, where the Himyarite kingdom in Yemen had, in the late centuries before Islam, moved toward Jewish religious influence at the elite level. The Himyarite ruling house had adopted a form of Judaism in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, and Jewish communities, Jewish practice, and Jewish texts were known in parts of the peninsula. Arabia was not a blank sheet with no contact with the monotheistic religions of the wider Near East. It had Jewish communities, Jewish ideas, and a Jewish past in the south that was part of the historical memory of the region.

Christianity was present too, and more visibly at the edges. In the centuries before Islam, Christian influence spread into Arabia through trade, through the Byzantine Empire's presence in Syria and the frontier zones, through the Aksumite kingdom across the Red Sea, and through the movement of monks and missionaries. The Ghassanids, the Arab clients of the Byzantine Empire, were Christian. Aksum was Christian. Monasteries and Christian communities existed in parts of the peninsula and on its edges, and Christian ideas were known in Arabia. The Christian influences that would later matter for Islam — the shared Abrahamic ground, the prophetic language, the scriptural genres — were not new to the seventh century. They were already there, in the air and in the borderlands.

The result was a religious landscape that was polytheistic in its majority but also marked by contact with and internal development of monotheistic ideas. This is a more complex picture than the simple story — Arabia was pagan until Islam came and fixed it — that the later tradition sometimes implies and that hostile critics sometimes repeat. The pre-Islamic religious world was not a uniform darkness waiting for a revelation to lift it. It was a world with gods, with shrines, with local cults, with Jewish and Christian minorities and influences, with a small number of people who had already begun to turn away from idol worship, and with a longing, in at least some minds, for the purer, older faith that Abraham was said to have practiced.

Why does this matter for Muhammad? Because his message did not arrive in a vacuum. It arrived into a society that already knew the idea of one God, already knew the stories of Abraham, already knew the tensions between tribal religion and a more universal monotheism, and already contained people who were dissatisfied with the local cults. The Qur'an's message — there is no god but God, worship Him alone, and abandon the idols — was not the introduction of an entirely alien idea. It was the forceful, uncompromising, and in some ways new articulation of an idea that some of his

hearers already knew in a partial and inconsistent form, and that others held with the full seriousness of tribal cult.

The figure of Abraham is worth pausing on. Abraham is central to the Qur'an's presentation of the message, and he functions in the Qur'an as the model of the person who recognized one God, who opposed idol worship, and who built the Kaaba as a house of pure worship. The Qur'an's Abraham is not the same as the Abraham of Genesis in all details, but he is recognizably Abraham — the patriarch of the monotheistic tradition, the opponent of idolatry, the builder of the sanctuary. By invoking Abraham, the Qur'an does two things at once. It claims the deepest roots of the monotheistic tradition for the message, and it reinterprets the Kaaba — the very sanctuary around which Mecca's whole religious and economic life was organized — as something that had originally been intended for the worship of one God, not for the idols that had taken it over. The economic and religious center of the town was, in this reading, a hijacked Abrahamic monument. That is a powerful claim, and it was a claim that cut directly into the town's identity.

The response to Muhammad's message in Mecca was not simply theological. It was social and economic before it was theological, and the order matters. The Meccan elite's objection was not that they had never heard of monotheism, or that the idea was intellectually impossible. Their objection was that Muhammad's message challenged the idols that were part of the sanctuary's economy, challenged the social standing of the Quraysh, challenged the established order of the town, and did so in a way that came from a man who was, by clan standards, a person of moderate status and no independent power. When he told the town that its gods were false, he was not only making a theological claim. He was telling the Quraysh that their whole arrangement — the sanctuary, the pilgrimage, the trade, the prestige — had been built on a mistake, and that the mistake was now being exposed by a man they had known for years.

The theological part of the objection — the claim that he was a false prophet, a magician, a possessed madman, a poet imitating revelation — was real, but it was not the whole of it. And the shape of the objection, once you see it whole, tells you something important about the society Muhammad was addressing. It was a society in which religion and trade and kinship and prestige were fused, and in which a challenge to the religious core of the town was at the same time a challenge to the economic and social structure of the town. The opposition was therefore not purely intellectual. It was existential for the people whose position depended on the existing arrangement.

The diversity of the religious landscape also matters for what comes later. The monotheizing minorities — the Jewish communities, the Christian influences, the hanif s — are not just color in the background. They are part of the genetic material of the early Muslim community. The Constitution of Medina, which will appear in Part Five, brings Muslims, pagans, and Jewish tribes into a single political framework. The early community's language and concepts are heavily Abrahamic. The later Islamic claim to be restoring the original religion of Abraham makes sense only if you see that Abrahamic material as already present, in fragments and in tensions, before Muhammad. The Qur'an did not invent the Abrahamic tradition. It reappropriated it, contradicted parts of the existing Abrahamic narratives, and made them central in a way that reshaped the religious identity of the Arabian interior.

For the biographer, the point is this: when Muhammad began to preach, he was not speaking from outside the religious life of his society. He was speaking from inside it, addressing its gods, its

sanctuary, its idea of Abraham, and its small number of people who had already been dissatisfied. The fact that some of his hearers already knew the idea of one God does not make his message less radical. It makes the radicalism more specific: the radicalism was in the uncompromising exclusivity of the God he preached, in the claim that the sanctuary had been corrupted, in the demand that the whole structure of Meccan religion and by extension Meccan life be reordered around a single God who had sent a warner from among themselves.

And the fact that some of his hearers were already dissatisfied with the gods is also important for the biography's human texture. It explains why the earliest believers came as they did — not as a mass conversion of a society that had no other options, but as a small, uneven group of young men, slaves, a wealthy widow who knew him, a young cousin who believed early, a freed slave who was tortured for the faith, and others who had reasons, some of them intellectual and some of them social and some of them simply the response of people who had been waiting for something like this. Those first believers are the subject of a later chapter. They are already visible here, in the religious landscape they were born into.

*Next: Part Two — The Orphan begins with Chapter 6*

# Part Two: The Orphan

## Born After His Father Died

Muhammad was born into a world where his father was already dead.

The traditions give his birth year as roughly the Year of the Elephant — the year, in the traditional picture, when Abraha, the Abyssinian ruler of Yemen, marched a force including elephants toward Mecca in an attempt to destroy the Kaaba and was turned back by what the Qur'an calls "the birds of Ababil," a swarm that struck his army. The story is famous, it is the reason the year is named, and it is also, in the honest historian's view, a legend built around a real invasion of the Hejaz by an Abyssinian force under Abraha in the later 570s. The elephant detail and the miraculous repulse belong to the religious memory of the event. The basic fact — that Abraha's army reached the Meccan territory — is plausible enough, and the Year of the Elephant stuck as the birth-year marker in the Islamic calendar before the hijra era was established. Muhammad was born into Mecca in these years, traditionally in 570, and the year of his birth is remembered, in the traditional telling, as the year the town was threatened and saved.

His mother was Amina bint Wahb of the Banu Zuhra, a clan of the Quraysh. She was a woman of some standing — the traditions remember her as intelligent, with a reputation for sound judgment, and as the one who had received a dream during her pregnancy predicting that her son would be a "lord of the land" and that she should name him Muhammad. The name, which means "the praised one," was not common in Mecca at the time, and the tradition treats the naming as a sign. Amina died when Muhammad was young — most traditions say when he was six — on the journey to Medina to bury her, leaving him an orphan twice over before he was fully grown.

His father, Abd Allah, had died before Muhammad was born, on a trading journey in Yathrib (the town that would later be called Medina). The father's death meant that Muhammad entered the world with the clan of his mother and the clan of his father already unable to provide the male protection that, in the tribal system, mattered so much. His grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, was the real figure in the early part of the story.

Abd al-Muttalib was the son of Hashim and the head of the Banu Hashim, a respected clan of the Quraysh. He was a powerful figure — not the wealthiest or most powerful man in Mecca, but a man of dignity and standing, and the one who controlled the Zamzam well, which gave him a practical and symbolic importance that went well beyond ordinary clan leadership. The traditions credit him with restoring the well after it had been lost or covered over, with digging it up when the water was found again at depth, and with defending its right to be used by the people of Mecca against those who would claim precedence over it. The well was a resource, and the man who controlled it was not a marginal figure. He was also, in the traditional story, a man who made vows and paid them — the most famous being the vow to sacrifice his favorite son if God granted him ten sons, and the story of how he chose Abd Allah, Muhammad's father, for the sacrifice, and how the clan intervened to

ransom him with a hundred camels. The story is hagiographic in shape, and it is best read as what the tradition wanted to say about the family's piety and God's protection of the line that would produce Muhammad, rather than as a literal legal record. But it does tell us that, within the family memory, Abd al-Muttalib was the man who held the clan together at a moment when the line might otherwise have been broken.

When Abd al-Muttalib died, Muhammad was about eight, and his protection passed to his uncle Abu Talib. Abu Talib was a man of the Banu Hashim, a brother of Abd al-Muttalib, and a merchant who took part in the caravan trade. He was not wealthy, but he was respected, and he took Muhammad into his household and cared for him. The tradition is clear that Abu Talib protected Muhammad throughout the Meccan period, even when the opposition to Muhammad became severe — he remained Muhammad's uncle and protector until his death in the Year of Sorrow, when Muhammad lost both his wife Khadija and his protector Abu Talib in the same year. It is important to say plainly what Abu Talib did and did not do. He protected Muhammad as an uncle protects a nephew. He did not, on the strongest reading of the evidence, become a Muslim. The later tradition, especially in some strands of Shia and Sufi memory, has wanted him to be a secret or a hesitant believer; other traditions say he died in the old religion. The honest account does not settle what cannot be settled — the tradition is not unanimous and the earliest sources do not agree — but it does register that his protection of Muhammad was real, and that its limits were real too: he stood by his nephew, but he did not join his movement.

The desert childhood is one of the most memorable parts of the early story, and it is worth telling straight even while noting its limits. When Muhammad was very small — the traditions say at the age of about six months to a year — he was sent to the desert to be nursed among the Banu Sa'd, a Bedouin tribe of the Hawazin, under the care of a woman named Halima. The practice was common: children were sent out of the town to be nursed by Bedouin women, so that they would grow up with the health, the language, the hardiness, and the Arabic of the desert, which was considered purer and stronger than the Arabic of the town. Halima's story is the one told in Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, and it is one of the few early episodes that feels, despite its later shaping, like a real child's experience. She came to Mecca looking for a child to nurse, and after others had refused Muhammad because he was an orphan with no generous payment to offer, she took him. Her own child was with her. She noticed, during the journey back to the Banu Sa'd, that a cloud seemed to follow Muhammad, shading him when he was in the heat. She and her husband decided to return him to his mother once the agreed period was over, because they felt blessed by his presence and did not want to lose him. Amina, according to the tradition, offered them a reward to stay, but Halima had already decided to bring Muhammad back because they had noticed extraordinary things about him — the cloud, the way other children behaved around him, and the sense that he was protected in ways that did not belong to ordinary life.

The story, like most of the early childhood traditions, is shaped by the later memory of Muhammad's extraordinary nature. The cloud is hard to historicize. But the practice of sending children to the desert, the Banu Sa'd as a Bedouin tribe, and the basic outline of a young Muhammad spending his early years with a wet-nurse among the Bedouin are all plausible and not difficult to believe. The desert childhood gave Muhammad the earliest layer of his Arabic — the dialect, the idioms, the

sound of the language that would later appear in the Qur'an — and it gave him a relationship with a world outside the town that was hard, spare, and directly in touch with the older Arabian life.

The story of the pigeons and the raven, and the other small childhood anecdotes — the boy playing with other children, the strange protection, the night that the angel came and opened his chest and removed a "heart of Satan" — belong to the same layer of memory. Some of them are clearly later additions, intended to explain Muhammad's special nature before his prophethood. One of them, the story of the monk Bahira on the Syrian caravan, is worth a fast footnote, because it is so often repeated and so often misunderstood. The tradition says that when Muhammad was a young boy traveling with Abu Talib's caravan to Syria, a Christian monk named Bahira noticed signs on Muhammad — a mark between his shoulders, or a cloud in his shadow — and told Abu Talib to take the boy back to Mecca because he was in danger from those who would envy him. The story is a Christian counterpart to the Islamic memory of Muhammad's early signs, and like the story of Halima it expresses something the tradition wanted to preserve: that there were people, even before Muhammad's own community recognized him, who saw in him something extraordinary. It is not, however, a reliable historical fact in the same way that Halima's care or the desert nursing are plausible. It is a tradition about how the story remembered itself.

When he grew older, he entered the caravan trade. Mecca's economy ran on the caravans, and a young man of a respectable clan, even an orphan without wealth of his own, would have learned the trade. Muhammad traveled with the caravans to Syria in the summer and to Yemen in the winter, learning the routes, the customs, the goods, and the people. The traditions say that he worked for a time for Khadija, the wealthy widow we will meet in the next chapter, and that she sent him on business with her own goods. The point is not just biographical trivia. It is that by the time Muhammad reached his late twenties and thirties, he was known in Mecca as a man of the caravan trade — a man of business, of reputation, of the ordinary life of the town, not yet as anything else.

The orphanhood that defined him was not a single event but a condition that held from birth. His father was dead before he was born. His mother died when he was six. His grandfather died when he was eight. His only remaining close kin, his uncle Abu Talib, cared for him but could not give him the full standing of a son with a father's wealth and voice. The Quraysh's system of clan and caravan meant that Muhammad grew up with enough protection to survive and enough respect to be trusted with business, but without the wealth and the advantage of a man born to a full family in a strong clan. That condition — respected but not wealthy, protected but not powerful — is the condition that would shape the rest of the story, because it is the condition in which he became the man who could be trusted, the man who was asked to arbitrate, the man who was invited to judge the black stone, and the man who, when the first revelation came, was already known to the town in terms that had nothing to do with prophecy.

The Qur'an's repeated concern with orphans makes sense against this precise background. The Qur'an commands, again and again, that orphans be treated justly, that their property not be devoured, that their rights be honored, that those who have power over them not act to devour their wealth. The repeated emphasis is not generic charity language. It is a response to the specific vulnerability of a child without a father in a society where the father's clan was the whole framework of protection. Muhammad is telling his audience, in effect, to remember what it is like to be without the protection that the system provides, because he knew that condition from the inside.

By the end of this chapter, then, Muhammad is no longer the baby of the Year of the Elephant or the child with Halima. He is a young man of Mecca, of the Banu Hashim, known in the town for his reputation, working the caravan trade, living with Abu Talib, and occupying, in terms of his family's standing, a position that is solid but not powerful. The story has not yet reached the revelation. It has only reached the man who would, in his forties, come down from a cave outside the city and convince himself, to his own terror, that God had been speaking to him.

## His Uncle's Household

Abu Talib took Muhammad in when Abd al-Muttalib died, and kept him there through the years when a boy became a young man.

Abu Talib was a son of Abd al-Muttalib, a brother of Abd Allah — Muhammad's father — and a member of the Banu Hashim. He was not the most powerful man in the family by wealth or political reach; the family had lost ground by Muhammad's time, and the Banu Hashim, though respected, were not among the richest Quraysh clans. But he was Muhammad's closest living adult male relative, and in a tribal world that meant he became the boy's protector. The protection was real and it mattered: a man without a father in Mecca had no voice in the negotiations of the town, no access to the caravan opportunities that shaped advancement, and no full place in the clan as a son of his own father would have had. Abu Talib gave him a place in the household, in the trade, and in the clan's life, and he did so through the years when Muhammad was growing up and when the caravan life of Mecca was the whole world he knew.

The household was not a place of wealth or luxury. The traditions do not describe it that way, and the later stories that try to makeMuhammad's early poverty noble do not have much to work from — the fact of modest means is plain enough without needing to embellish it. Abu Talib had his caravans, and Muhammad traveled with them. The young man learned the routes to Syria in the summer and to Yemen in the winter, the customs of the trade, the people who mattered at the caravans' destinations, and the Arabic of the desert that he had carried back from Halima and the Banu Sa'd.

The caravan journeys were, for Muhammad, part education, part livelihood, part the formation of a reputation. Mecca's trade was not simply a matter of buying and selling goods. It was a matter of trust, and trust in a town built on clan and reputation was not a soft word. If a caravan leader was trusted, his goods were trusted, his dealings were trusted, and the network of relationships that made the caravan economy work could be relied upon to extend to him. Muhammad learned this, and he seems to have been notably good at it. The traditions say that before his prophethood he was known as al-Amin — the trustworthy — and as al-Sadiq — the truthful. The first of these was a public reputation, the kind that in a tribal society meant a man could be relied on to keep his word, to deal fairly, to be honest in ways that the clan could vouch for. The second was a personal quality — the consistency of a man's word with his action, the absence of the duplicity that clan rivalry and commercial pressure could produce.

These names, al-Amin and al-Sadiq, are not just moral praise. They are social facts. In a town where a man's standing came from his clan's standing and his own reputation, a reputation for trustworthiness gave a man a position that was not dependent on wealth. Muhammad had that. He

had it before the revelation, before the argument with the Quraysh, before the first believers. It was the foundation on which the later story would be built, because when the first revelations came and the Meccan elite began to turn against him, the fact that he was known as trustworthy meant that his word had carried weight before, and that the opposition to him had to contend with the fact that he was not, at the start, a man with no reputation.

The Syrian caravan journeys in his teens and twenties are where the story of his wider world opens. The traditions say that when he was a young man — some versions say around nine, which is implausibly young, others say later, in his teens or early twenties — he traveled with Abu Talib's caravan to Syria and met Bahira, the Christian monk. The story of Bahira, as noted in Chapter 6, is a later memory in which the signs of Muhammad's special nature are recognized by a Christian before Muhammad's own people recognized them. Whether Abu Talib took him on caravans at that age or later is uncertain, but the logic of the story is consistent: Muhammad traveled with the caravans, he saw the world beyond Mecca, and he met people — Christian monks, Jewish settlements, trading cities — who were not part of the Meccan sanctuary's world. The exposure to Syria was important. Syria was the land of the Byzantine Empire, of Christian monasteries and churches, of Jewish communities, of trade and cities and the wider world that Arabia touched but did not itself contain. A young man from Mecca who went to Syria saw that there were other ways for a society to be organized, other kinds of religion to be practiced, and other kinds of wealth and power to be distributed. Whether that shaped his later thinking is not something we can prove, but the chance to see it was there, and the caravan trade was the mechanism that made the chance real.

Abu Talib, meanwhile, was not just a caretaker. He was a man of the Banu Hashim with his own interests, his own household, his own children — among them Ali, who was born around the same time as Muhammad or shortly after, and who would become Muhammad's cousin, son-in-law, and, in the later tradition, the second of the Rashidun and the first Imam of the Shia. Ali grew up in the same household, in the same modest conditions, and was close to Muhammad from childhood. The bond between them would become one of the most important relationships in the later story. Ali was the first young male to believe in Muhammad, according to the traditions, and he was the one who slept in Muhammad's bed on the night of the migration to Medina, when the Quraysh planned to kill him and Muhammad left his own bed as a decoy. The household of Abu Talib was, in this sense, where the first family of the Muslim story was formed — not only Muhammad but his cousin and future son-in-law, and the network of Banu Hashim relationships that would shape the community's inner life.

The point of the chapter is not simply to narrate the years between childhood and the revelation. It is to show that the man who would become the Prophet was already, in his uncle's household, a person of a specific kind: a modest young man of a respectable but not rich clan, with a reputation for trustworthiness, with experience of the caravan trade and the wider world of Syria, with a close relationship to his cousin Ali, and with a protector in Abu Talib who would stand by him for decades. He was not a nobody, and he was not a man of power. He was in the middle — known, trusted, and not wealthy — and that middle position is exactly what made it possible for him to be the man the story required him to be.

The caravan world also has another significance for the biography, one that the early establishment of the framework of warfare pays dividends for once we reach Part Five. The caravans were not just

trade. They were the mechanism through which the tribes of Arabia interacted with each other and with the settled worlds beyond, and they were also the mechanism through which raiding operated. Raiding — *ghazu* — was a standard Arabian practice, and it was a practice that ran alongside the trade, sometimes at its edges, sometimes against the same targets. The caravan economy created wealth that was worth raiding, and the tribal logic of raiding was separate from the logic of trade even when the two overlapped in practice. It was normal for Arabian groups to raid the caravans of their neighbors or of other tribes. It was normal for violence to occur at the edges of trade. This is not to make Muhammad's later military activity seem ordinary — it was, in its own context, significant and transformative — but it is to establish, early, that the world he entered was a world in which trade and raiding were both normal, and in which the moral evaluation of what happened depended on whose caravan it was, whose enemy was being raided, and whether the violence was within the accepted bounds of tribal practice. That framework, established in Chapter 3 and reinforced here, is what will make Part Five readable as the record of a movement that grew up inside a particular kind of world rather than as a story that appeared from nowhere.

It is also worth noting what Abu Talib's protection did and did not accomplish. It kept Muhammad alive and in the clan during the years when the Meccan opposition was growing. It did not prevent the boycott. It did not prevent the threat of assassination. When Muhammad's position became dangerous, Abu Talib stood by him — the tradition is clear on that — but he also remained within the world of the Quraysh and did not join Muhammad's movement. He protected the man without becoming part of the cause, and that partiality, that protection without conversion, is one of the central facts of the later Meccan years. It meant that Muhammad had a protector until the protector died, and it meant that the protector's death, in the Year of Sorrow, removed the one relationship that had held Muhammad within the clan's protection while his movement was being organized. The loss of Abu Talib and Khadija in the same year was not just a personal tragedy. It was a strategic one. Without Abu Talib's clan protection and without Khadija's wealth and emotional support, Muhammad was a man without the two main pillars of his Meccan life, and the next chapter of the story — the emigration to Medina — becomes not just a change of location but the loss of the two relationships that had made Mecca bearable.

The household, then, is not just the place where Muhammad grew up. It is the place where his closest relationships were formed, where his reputation was built and tested, where his exposure to the wider world took shape through the caravan journeys, and where the bonds that would sustain him — and that would later be broken — were put in place. The man who emerged from Abu Talib's household was the man who, in his forties, would tell his town that its gods were false and that God had sent him as a warner. He was not a stranger to Mecca. He was known. And the Meccans who heard him knew that.

## Khadija

Khadija bint Khuwaylid was, by the time Muhammad met her, a woman of substantial wealth and standing in Mecca, and she was the most important relationship of his life.

She came from the Banu Asad, a clan connected to the Quraysh, and she was a widow when Muhammad became involved with her — a widow who had been married before, had children, and

had built a business in the caravan trade that was large enough to employ others. The traditions remember her as intelligent, generous, and of high character, and they remember her wealth as real. Before Muhammad was known as anything other than a reliable young man of the caravan trade, Khadija employed him to lead one of her caravans to Syria, and she had noticed that he was trustworthy in a way that made her want to deal with him again.

The proposal came from her. According to the traditions preserved in Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, she sent a friend — some versions say a cousin, some say a trusted woman in her household — to Muhammad with a proposal of marriage. Muhammad, who was then around twenty-five and already known in Mecca as al-Amin, was not in a position of wealth or power that would normally have made him a match for a wealthy widow of Khadija's standing. But Khadija did not make her decision on the basis of ordinary matching. She had seen his honesty, and she had judged him. She proposed, and he accepted.

The marriage lasted twenty-five years. It was monogamous for all but the last few years of Muhammad's life, until Khadija's death. In the early period, before his prophethood, it was a marriage of a man to a woman who was older than he was — the traditions say she was about fifteen years older — and who brought him wealth, business sense, and a position in the town that he had not had before. The marriage also gave him children, though the children who survived from the marriage were few, and the sons — the two who are traditionally named, Qasim and Abdullah — died in infancy. The daughter most closely associated with Muhammad, Fatima, was born in Mecca well before the first revelation, traditionally around 605, and is the child who became the ancestor of the line that would carry the family forward.

The importance of the marriage for the biography is not just that it was a marriage, or that it was a love match as the traditions present it, or that it was the marriage of a man with no money to a woman with money. It is that Khadija was, in the years when the first revelations came and the early opposition began, the one person in the world who knew Muhammad fully and believed in him without reservation. When Muhammad came down from the cave of Hira after the first revelation, shaking and convinced he had lost his mind, Khadija's response was the first act of belief. She did not panic in the way he told her he feared he had. She took him to her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a Christian who knew Hebrew and had some knowledge of the scriptures, and Waraqa, when he heard what Muhammad described, told him that what had happened to him was the same kind of thing as the great divine communications of the prophetic tradition, and that he was the prophet of this people. Waraqa's identification is a crucial moment in the early memory — it is the first Christian recognition of Muhammad's experience in the tradition's own terms — and it is Khadija who made it possible.

Khadija's wealth was also the material support that allowed the small, early Muslim community to exist. In the years before the migration, when the Muslims were being persecuted, when the boycott was in place, when the economy of the Muslim households was under pressure, Khadija's resources mattered. She was not simply the wife of the Prophet. She was a businesswoman of the Meccan world, a woman whose wealth and independence made her able to support the movement in practical ways at the moment when it was most vulnerable. Her death, in the Year of Sorrow, removed that support. The same year saw the death of Abu Talib, and the two losses together left Muhammad without his wife, without his protector, and without the wealth that had sustained the early

community. The Year of Sorrow is, in the tradition's own terms, the year in which Muhammad lost the two relationships that had been the main support of his life in Mecca.

The marriage also establishes something important about Muhammad's character that the later years will never fully obscure: he was capable of deep, sustained, monogamous attachment. The plains of his later marriages — the political alliances, the widows, the women who came into his household after the conquests and after the battles — have often been read, by critics and by apologists, in terms that flatten the earlier life. But the earlier life is the earlier life. For twenty-five years, Muhammad was married to one woman alone, and the traditions preserve, in spite of their tendency to idealize, the sense of a relationship that was mutual in ways that early Islamic biography sometimes records and sometimes suppresses. Khadija is remembered as the first believer, the first to accept Muhammad's message, the first to stand by him when he doubted himself, and the woman whose wealth made the early community's survival possible. Her importance in the biography is not reducible to any single of these roles. She was all of them.

The status of women in this part of the story is worth registering plainly, because it is one of the things that must be handled without flinching. Khadija was a woman of independent wealth, who made a proposal, who ran a business, and who stood by her husband as the first believer. Her status is a fact about Meccan society that the traditional Islamic account remembers and that the later polemics sometimes forget. A woman in Arabia before Islam could have wealth, could own property, could propose marriage, and could stand as the most important person in a man's life. The society was not, in this specific respect, a uniform prison. At the same time, Khadija was a woman of high clan standing and high wealth, and the freedom she had was the freedom of a woman with the right kind of clan and the right kind of money. It was real, but it was not generalized. The same society that gave Khadija room also made an orphan's survival depend on his clan, made a woman vulnerable if she lacked the right protection, and made slavery and manumission normal parts of life. The point is not that Khadija is an exception that proves the rule. The point is that the rule was complicated, and the complication matters for how the biography understands the world it is describing.

The marriage also gives the biography a way into the emotional texture of Muhammad's life that the later years, with their mass of wives and political alliances, tend to obscure. When Muhammad is with Khadija, he is not yet the statesman, not yet the general, not yet the man with many wives and many responsibilities. He is the man of the caravan trade, the man who asked for a marriage he might not otherwise have expected, the man whose first revelation he processed with the help of his wife, the man whose early life was made bearable by her wealth and her belief. The biography needs to hold this earlier Muhammad in view, because it is him, too. The man who would be a husband, a general, a judge, and a head of state was, for twenty-five years, simply a husband and a trader and the father of the few children who survived him.

The children of the marriage deserve a fast note, because their fates matter for the biography's realism. Two sons, Qasim and Abdullah, died in infancy — the tradition records the names, and the names are where the memory is concentrated, because the deaths were losses. The daughter Fatima lived long enough to become central to the later story. The other children attributed to Muhammad in the traditions, and the question of which were born to Khadija and which to the later wives, is one of the areas where the sources disagree and where the plain reader should not pretend certainty that the

evidence does not support. The important fact is that the married life with Khadija produced few surviving children, and that the children who did survive — Fatima above all — became central to the family's later identity and to the claims that would be made about the Prophet's line after his death.

Khadija's death, then, is not simply the end of a marriage. It is the end of the first layer of Muhammad's life as a Prophet. She died in 619, the Year of Sorrow, and with her died the woman who had been the first believer, the first support, and the most important relationship of his life. The loss is registered in the tradition with a sense of finality. When Muhammad afterward married multiple women — some of them widows of fallen Muslims, some of them political alliances, some of them women he married for practical reasons in the Medinan period — the change was real, and it did not erase Khadija's place. The tradition remembers that he never forgot her, that his later wives knew she had been the first and the best beloved, and that Muhammad, who had been monogamous for most of his life, carried the memory of that monogamy into the rest of his life in a way that the later marriage structure complicated but did not replace.

Muhammad was, for the largest part of his life so far, a known man, a married man, and the husband of Khadija. The revelation had come, the first believers had gathered, and the opposition had begun — but none of that changes the fact that Muhammad's world had been the world of a trader and the husband of Khadija. The next chapter will look at the Mecca of that time and at the reputation that made him, for a moment, the man the town trusted to settle the black stone.

## The Trusted One

By the time Muhammad reached his late thirties, he had spent more than a decade in Mecca as a man the town knew and trusted, without any idea that he would one day be the center of a religious movement. He was a trader, a husband, a father of a few children who mostly did not survive, and a man of the Banu Hashim known as al-Amin. In a town whose life ran on reputation, trust, and clan, being known as trustworthy was not a soft moral label. It was a social fact. People relied on his word. When there was a question of arbitration, of business, of anything that required a man whose action could be counted on, Muhammad was one of the men the town turned to.

That reputation is essential to the story of the Kaaba's rebuilding, because that is the episode in which Muhammad's reputation in Mecca becomes, briefly and clearly, the subject of a public moment that everyone in town noticed. The Kaaba had been damaged — tradition says the flood had weakened its walls — and the Quraysh decided to rebuild it. The rebuilding required the work to be done by the clans of the Quraysh, each taking a part of the structure, and it required, once the walls were up, the placing of the sacred cornerstones, the most important of which was the Black Stone, the dark stone set into one of the Kaaba's corners and revered as part of the sanctuary's original fabric. The story goes that when the work was done and it came time to lift the Black Stone back into place, the heads of the clans fell into dispute over which of them would have the honor of setting it. Each wanted the prestige. Each feared the loss of face if another clan placed it. The dispute grew tense enough that the rebuilding was in danger of collapsing into a fight, and the Quraysh were on the point of rebuilding the Kaaba around the old foundations without completing the work properly, when Muhammad — then a man in his late thirties or early forties — was proposed as an arbiter.

Muhammad was brought in as a man whom no clan could object to, because he was known to be truthful and fair, and because he had no personal stake in the clan politics that were at issue. His solution, in the traditional account, was simple and clever: he spread his cloak on the ground, placed the Black Stone on it, and invited the chief of each clan to grasp an edge of the cloak, so that all of them lifted the stone together. Once the stone was in position, Muhammad himself set it in its place. The dispute was ended without any clan losing face. The honor was shared. The Kaaba was completed.

The story is one of the few early Meccan episodes that feels, on the face of it, both plausible and characteristic. It is the kind of story that a town would tell about a man everyone respected. It is also the kind of story that a later tradition would preserve because it illustrates the future Prophet's character in one of his pre-prophetic roles — the man who could solve a dispute that no one else could solve, the man whose fairness made him acceptable to all sides, the man whose authority came from his reputation and not from his clan's power. Whether the details of the cloak are exactly as remembered is not the point. The point is that Muhammad had reached a position in Mecca in which he could arbitrate a matter of the greatest local sensitivity, and that he did so, and that the result was good enough that the story survived.

What the story does not show is that Muhammad was already in any sense a religious figure different from the rest of the town. He was not. He was the man who worked the caravans, who was married to Khadija, who had the reputation for trustworthiness, and who, in this one curious episode, demonstrated precisely the kind of judgment that the town valued. The episode belongs to the life of Muhammad before the revelation, and it is important because it establishes that the man who received the first revelation was not a stranger to the town, not a madman discovered only after the fact, not a marginal figure. He was the man everyone knew.

This is also the moment, in the biography's chronology, at which the world that shaped Muhammad in Mecca is most visible before the life changes. The Quraysh's council, the clan politics, the honor that each head of a clan wanted for himself, the threat that the dispute would turn into violence — all of this is the Meccan world, the world of the sanctuary and the tribe and the caravan, and Muhammad was, in this moment, operating inside it as a respected member of it. He kept the peace through a solution that worked within the town's own logic of honor and clan. He did not, in this story, do anything that a reader would recognize as religious. He solved a problem.

The episode matters for another reason, which is that it shows the limits of Muhammad's position. He was respected. He was trusted. But he was not powerful. He did not have wealth, he did not have a strong clan of his own in the sense of a man who was the head of his household with full standing, and he did not have political authority. He was the man the town turned to when it needed a fair answer, but he was not the man the town turned to when it needed power. That was fine, for the years up to the revelation. It meant he could live his life, trade, be married to Khadija, be a father, be a man of the caravan trade, and be known as al-Amin. It also meant that when the revelation came and he began to preach, the Meccan elite would hear a man they knew — a man whose word they trusted, a man whose personal reputation preceded the message — and that would make the opposition to him more personal and more difficult than it would have been if he had been an unknown.

The reputation also helps explain, in a small way, why the first believers came to him as they did. When the movement began, it was not a stranger arriving with a new religion. It was Muhammad, the

trusted one, saying that God had spoken to him, and asking the people closest to him to believe. Khadija believed first because she knew him, and because she had the wealth and the independence to back her judgment. Ali, his cousin, believed because he was young and close to him. Abu Bakr, a friend and a man of standing in Mecca, believed because he knew Muhammad and trusted him. The first believers were not a random assortment. They were the people whose lives and relationships brought them close enough to Muhammad to judge his claim, and whose positions gave them the freedom, or the lack of fear, to believe. Khadija had the wealth and the position to risk. Ali was a young man in Muhammad's household. Abu Bakr was a friend. Zayd, the freed slave, and Bilal, the Abyssinian slave, came later and under pressure — their stories belong to Chapter 14.

The point of the chapter is that the Mecca into which the revelation would come had already produced, through the years of the caravan trade and the household of Abu Talib and the marriage to Khadija, a man known as trustworthy. He was not a prophet by the standards of the town. He was a merchant, a husband, an arbitrator, and a man who, in the episode of the Black Stone, had shown the judgment that made the town trust him. When the cave of Hira comes and the first revelation comes, the change will be enormous — but it will not be the change that a stranger made in Mecca. It will be the change that this man, known to the town, initiated in the town.

The reader who approaches the later chapters with this picture in mind will understand something that the sources are sometimes too reverent to make plain: that Muhammad was, before he was anything else, a man of Mecca, and that his Mecca was a small, poor, trade-and-pilgrimage town with a sanctuary, a tribe, and a reputation economy in which being called trustworthy mattered more than being called rich. That was his world, and it is the world the story has been building toward. The next chapter — Chapter 10 — will look at the cave, the retreat, and the first night of what Muhammad himself thought, at the time, was a catastrophe.

## The Cave

Every year in the months when the trade caravans had gone and the town was quiet, Muhammad used to withdraw from Mecca to a cave in the hill called Jabal al-Nur, the Mountain of Light, above the town. He went alone, or almost alone, into a cave called Hira, to stay there for days at a time, eating the simplest food, reflecting, and contemplating the world around him. The practice was not unusual for a man of his temperament in a society that had its ascetics, its contemplatives, and its dissatisfied — the hanifs, the people already mentioned in Chapter 5, who were looking for a purer monotheism and had turned away from the idols. Muhammad had been, by his own account in the later tradition, a man who hated the idol worship around him, who felt the pressure of the society's wrongs, and who wanted a world different from the one he saw. The retreats were his way of staying with that feeling.

He was forty years old when the first revelation came.

The year is traditionally given as 610. The month is Ramadan, the month of fasting that Islam would later establish. He had gone up to the cave as he often did, and he was there alone when the encounter happened. The recollection of it, as it comes down through Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham and the later tradition, is one of the most vivid pieces of early Islamic memory, and it is also one of the

most psychologically honest. Muhammad himself, in the tradition's memory, did not come down from the cave thinking he had become a prophet. He came down thinking he had lost his mind.

The account says that he was sitting in the cave when the angel came to him. The angel called him by name and said, "Read," or "Recite" — the Arabic word is *iqra*, and it is the word from which the Qur'an takes one of its central themes, the command to recite the message. Muhammad said he could not read — he was unlettered, and the tradition has always emphasized that Muhammad did not read or write, that the Qur'an was not a text he composed or learned but something that came to him spoken. The angel then grasped him and pressed him tightly until he could bear it no longer, and then released him, and said "Read" again. Muhammad again said he could not. The angel pressed him again, and released him, and said "Read," and then gave him the words of the first revelation:

*Read in the name of your Lord who created — created man from a clot of blood. Read, and your Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know.*

This is the beginning of Sura Al-Alaq, the ninety-sixth chapter of the Qur'an, and it is one of the earliest revelations preserved in the Qur'anic text. The imagery — created man from a clot, taught by the pen — is the language of a revelation that came piece by piece over the years, and it is also the language of a movement that began, in this moment, with a single overwhelming encounter.

Muhammad came down from the cave in a state of terror. He went to his wife Khadija and said, "Cover me, cover me" — the tradition remembers that he asked to be wrapped up, that he was shaking, that he thought he had been possessed. He said that he feared he was mad, that he was a *majnoon* — the Arabic word for a person possessed by a jinn, a person who had lost his mind and was under the control of an unseen being. He had thought, in the tradition's account, that he was mad, or that he was a poet, or that he was possessed — one of the things the later Meccan opponents would say about him, in fact, was that he was a poet or a magician or possessed, and the origin of the accusation was this first experience, when Muhammad himself dismissed what had happened to him as a catastrophe.

Khadija did not dismiss him. She did not tell him he was mad, and she did not tell him he was a poet. She told him that God would not forsake him, that God would not abandon him, because of the way he was — because he carried the burdens of others, because he spoke the truth, because he kept the ties of kinship, because he helped the poor and the needy, because he gave hospitality to the guest and supported the righteous. The tradition records her words as a practical, grounded response to a man in distress, and it records that she then took him to her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a Christian who had knowledge of the scriptures.

Waraqa listened to Muhammad's account of what had happened, and when he heard it, he told him that what had come to him was the same kind of thing as the great divine communications of the prophetic tradition — the same kind of commissioning. He told Muhammad that he would be the prophet of this people. He told him that, if he lived to see the day when his people drove him out, he would be with him and would support him. Waraqa's recognition was, in the tradition's memory, the first external validation of Muhammad's experience, and it was given by a Christian, a man who knew the scriptures and knew what a prophet encountered when the divine communication came.

The encounter with Waraqa is important for two reasons. First, it establishes that, in the tradition's own early memory, Muhammad's experience was understood by at least one knowledgeable person as a genuine divine communication of the kind that had come to other prophets in the Abrahamic

tradition. The debate about whether Muhammad was mad or inspired or a poet was not settled by Waraqa's response — the Meccans would continue to say he was mad, or a poet, or a magician for years — but Waraqa's response shows that the earliest available external voice heard the experience in the language of prophethood. Second, it establishes that the early recognition came from a man who was outside Islam, a Christian who knew the scriptures. The shape of the early community's self-understanding — Abrahamic, prophetic, part of a long religious tradition — is already visible here, before the first suras were revealed, before the first believers gathered, before the opposition began.

Muhammad returned to the cave, or at least to the practice of withdrawal, and the revelations came again after a gap. The tradition records a gap — a period of months, perhaps a year, during which no revelation came — and it says that this gap made Muhammad anxious, that he went back to the cave, that the angel came again and reassured him. The gap is important for a reason that Chapter 11 will return to: the silence after the first revelation was one of the things that did to Muhammad, and the way the silence ended and the revelations resumed shaped the rest of the story.

What the cave chapter makes plain is that the beginning of Muhammad's prophetic life was not a triumphant moment of clarity. It was a moment of terror, because the man who experienced it had no way to interpret it except through the possibilities available to him: madness, possession, poetry, catastrophe. His wife and his cousin's Christian friend helped him see it differently — as something like the prophets of old had experienced — but the interpretation took time, and the terror was real. The Qur'an's later references to Muhammad's distress, to his being told not to grieve, to the way he frowned at a blind man and was rebuked, to the way he was comforted after the enemy said certain things — all of these belong to the same pattern. Muhammad did not receive the revelation as a man who had been waiting for it and expected it and understood it. He received it as a man who had not expected it, and who first believed himself to be mad.

The cave, then, is the place where the life changes. Before the cave, Muhammad is the man of Chapter 9 — the trusted one, the husband of Khadija, the man of the caravan trade, the man the town turned to for arbitration. After the cave, he is the man who has been through an encounter he cannot name. The story from this point becomes the story of how he learned to name it, how the people around him reacted, how the Meccan elite reacted, and how the man who thought he was mad became the man who started a movement that would, in twenty-two years, unify Arabia and change the course of history.

Muhammad stood at the edge of a new life, still not fully understanding it, still afraid, still supported by Khadija, still going back to the cave. The terror of the first night is not just a dramatic moment in the biography. It is the first genuinely interior entry into Muhammad's life — the first time the sources give us access to what it felt like to be him. That interiority, which is the book's best single move, is here from the beginning, because the Qur'an recorded what he said when he was afraid, and the tradition remembered how he felt when he came down from the mountain. The man who thought he had lost his mind and then learned, with the help of his wife and his cousin's friend, that he had not — this is the man the book is about.

# Part Three: The First Words

## The Silence

The first revelation did not come again right away, and the gap between the first event and the resumption was, by the most honest reading of the sources, one of the most psychologically important periods in Muhammad's life — the period in which, having been through something he still did not understand, he had to wait and wonder whether it had meant anything at all.

The tradition is clear about the gap. After the encounter in the cave, after Muhammad had told Khadija and she had taken him to Waraqa, and after Waraqa had told him that what had come to him was of the kind that the great prophetic traditions of the region knew, there was a period during which no new revelation came. The gap was not a day. It was not a week. It stretched across months — the traditions vary on the exact length, and the chronology of the Qur'an is not precisely recoverable from the sources — but the effect is consistent in every version: Muhammad went back to the cave, waited, and the silence was, for him, a catastrophe.

What Muhammad did during the gap is not perfectly known, because the sources are interested in the revelations and the events more than in the daily texture of his waiting. We know that he continued to live in Mecca, that he was still married to Khadija, still with Abu Talib, still known as al-Amin, still a man of the caravan trade. The brief mentions of his life during this period are, in the sira, sparse. But the sparse record tells us something important: Muhammad did not, during the gap, set himself up as a public figure. He did not begin to preach. He did not announce his message. He waited.

The shape of the waiting is what matters. Muhammad had been through an overwhelming event that he himself had interpreted, with Khadija's help and Waraqa's help, as a possible divine communication. He had been told that he had been chosen. And then silence. If the communication had been real, why had it stopped? If he had been chosen, why had he been left alone with the memory of what had happened and nothing further? The anxiety of the gap is not invented by the later tradition. It reads, on the face of it, like the experience of a man who has had an overwhelming event and does not know what it means or whether it will happen again. The silence was real. It was long. It mattered.

The length matters. If the gap had been a few weeks, it would be a footnote in the life of almost any religious founder — a pause, a preparation, a moment of doubt overcome quickly. The gap in Muhammad's case was long enough to have become, in his own mind, a sustained uncertainty. The tradition does not give us the precise number of months, and we should not pretend it does. But the tradition is clear that the gap was long enough to have been, for Muhammad, a source of distress. The Qur'an, in the suras that scholars associate with this early period, speaks to a man who is called to be steadfast, to be patient, to be warned that the people of his town would not like what he had to say, to be told that the message would come and that he should wait for it. The suras of this early

period — the earliest Meccan suras, which come at the end of the standard text — are anxious, urgent, fragmented, and they give the impression of a man who is in the middle of a crisis of waiting.

The Qur'an itself preserves traces of the gap. The earliest suras — the short, intense Meccan chapters that come at the end of the standard text — speak to a man under pressure, a man who has been chosen and is being told that the message will come, a man who is being urged to be steadfast, who is being warned that the people of Mecca will not like what he has to say, who is being told to be patient in the face of the delay. The early suras do not narrate the biography, but they do give us the atmosphere of the period in which Muhammad was trying to understand what had happened to him and whether it would continue.

The gap matters for the shape of the whole story. If the revelations had come continuously from the first moment, Muhammad's life would have had a different shape — the prophet as a man who knew from the start that he was receiving revelation, who could organize his life around it, who could build his movement from a position of certainty. That is not what happened. What happened was that the man who thought he was mad, and who was told by his wife and his cousin's friend that he was not, was then left with a long silence in which he had to live with the memory of the encounter and the uncertainty of whether anything more would come. The uncertainty is part of the story, and it is part of why the early suras feel the way they do — urgent, anxious, sometimes irritable, sometimes comforted, sometimes rebuking Muhammad himself for the way he has reacted.

The Qur'an's own first sura, Sura Al-Alaq, the ninety-sixth chapter, is the sura of the first revelation, and it is preserved as the first words Muhammad received. *Read in the name of your Lord who created*, the sura begins, and the words are the words that came to Muhammad in the cave. The sura is short — fifty-three verses in the standard text — and it is one of the earliest of the Meccan suras, and it is the sura that records the first event. But the sura itself does not tell the story of the gap. It tells the words of the first revelation and nothing more. The gap has to be inferred from the silence that follows, and from the shape of the next suras, and from the later tradition's memory of Muhammad's distress.

When the revelation resumed, it came with the same kind of directness that the first had had. The second revelation is traditionally remembered as the command to stand up and warn — *iqra* giving way to *abd*, in the sense of the call to preach, to warn the people. The Arabic of the second revelation, in the traditional account, is the command to stand and to warn and to glorify God. The early suras that follow — the ones that speak of judgment, of the fatherless, of the scales of the afterlife, of the burial of infant girls, of the coming reckoning — are the language of a man who has received a charge and is now, in the silence that has ended, beginning to act on it. The resumption of revelation is not simply the continuation of the first event. It is the beginning of the public life. The man who had been told to read and had been too terrified to understand it was now, after the gap, being told to warn, and warning was a public act.

The next sura after Al-Alaq in the traditional chronology is not certain, but the early suras that scholars associate with this first period of the revelation include Sura Al-Muddaththir, the seventy-fourth chapter, which commands Muhammad to arise and warn and to put aside the garment that covers him and to devote himself to the divine calling. Sura Al-Muddaththir is significant because it marks the transition from the private revelation to the public command. The sura is in the first person

— *O you who are wrapped in your garment, arise and warn* — and it is the moment at which Muhammad is told to go public. The sura is brief. It is intense. It is the beginning of the public life.

The gap also matters for the way the early movement formed. The first believers did not come to Muhammad in a mass. They came one by one, or in small groups, over time. The silence between the first revelation and the resumption gave Muhammad time to recover from his terror, to speak to Khadija, to think, to be with his wife and his cousin and the small circle that formed around him. The first public preaching, when it came, was not a sudden burst. It was the gradual emergence of a man who had been through something private and overwhelming and who was now, after the silence had ended, beginning to speak.

The period of the gap was also the period in which Muhammad's own understanding of what had happened to him consolidated. The silence was not simply a period of waiting. It was a period of processing. Muhammad had to live with what had happened, with the fact that he had been through something he could not fully name, with the fact that a man who knew the scriptures had recognized his experience as belonging to the prophetic tradition, with the fact that Khadija had stood by him. The silence was the space in which Muhammad's own sense of the event slowly took shape, and the silence was the space in which the later story, with its certainty, had to be grown from the first uncertain moment.

The interest in the silence is not just dramatic. It is interpretive. The silence is part of the interiority that the sources preserve, and it cannot be skipped by anyone who wants to give the reader access to what it was like to be him. The Qur'an gave Muhammad words to say when he was afraid. The tradition remembered that he thought he was mad. The silence between the first and second revelation is the space in which Muhammad had to live with his own uncertainty, and it is the space that made the first public words — the first warnings, the first suras — the words of a man who had been through something and was now, after a period of doubt about what it meant, beginning to act on it.

The silence is also the counterpoint to the usual story of prophetic certainty. The call that Muhammad received was not followed by immediate clarity. It was followed by a long period in which the recipient had to wonder whether it meant anything at all, and then by a resumption that carried the same charge but in a man who had already lived through the silence. That is not a weakness. It is a fact about him, and a fact that gives the biography its human texture. The man who could not be certain at the beginning is the same man who, after the silence ended, became the steady leader of a movement, the man who would stand in the cave and receive the words, the man who would, over twenty-two years, receive the whole Qur'an as it is known today.

There is also a more specific piece of evidence in the sources for the gap, and it comes from the way the early suras address Muhammad's own state. The Qur'an, in the early Meccan suras, speaks to Muhammad as a man who is being reassured, being comforted, being warned, being urged. The suras of this period are not just the message to the Meccans. They are also, in part, the message to Muhammad himself. The Qur'an tells Muhammad not to be sad over what the Meccans say. It tells him that the message will come. It tells him that God is with him. The early suras treat Muhammad, in other words, as a man who needs to hear these things — a man who is anxious, a man who is being told to persist. This is not the language of a prophet who has already settled into his role. This is the language of a man who is still finding his footing.

The story now moves to the second phase of the Meccan period — the public preaching, the first suras, the response of the town. But the silence matters first, because it was real, it was long, and it shaped the man who came out of it. The story of the first revelations is not just the story of the words that came. It is the story, too, of the gap between them, and of what the gap did to the man who had heard the first words and was waiting for the next.

## What He Actually Said

When the revelations began again after the silence, they came in the form of short, compact chapters — *suras* — in a language that was, to the people of Mecca, immediately recognizable as powerful Arabic, and in a style that was, to the people of Mecca, unlike anything they had heard before.

The language of the Qur'an was a matter of the first importance to the Meccans, and it is a matter of first importance to the biographer. The Qur'an was not, in its original form, a book. It was an oral revelation — words that came to Muhammad and that he recited, and that were memorized by those who heard them, and that were preserved in the memory of the community before they were ever written down in a single collected text. The early suras were short enough to be memorized in a single hearing, and they were rhythmic enough, and intense enough, to leave a strong impression. They were not the long, flowing style of the tribal poetry that was the model of excellence in Arabian speech. They were something else — shorter, more direct, more anxious, more focused on a single message repeated with variations. The Meccans heard them and they understood at once that the Arabic was extraordinary, and they also understood that the form was not what they were used to.

A reader today who does not know Arabic should be told plainly that the sound of the Qur'an was, for its first audience, the audience that mattered, part of the evidence for what it was. The recitation was not simply a vehicle for meaning. The sound — the rhythm, the cadence, the repetitions, the way a single phrase would carry through a short sura — was itself part of the experience. The early suras were not written to be read in silence. They were meant to be heard, and the hearing was the event. The Meccans understood this. They understood that what they were hearing was not the Arabic of the poets, and that it was not the Arabic of the soothsayers, and that it was not the Arabic of the conversations of the market. It was something else.

What Muhammad said, in these first years, clustered around a small number of themes, and the themes were the building blocks of his message.

The first was judgment. The early suras speak repeatedly of a coming reckoning, of a day when deeds will be weighed, of the fate of those who denied the truth, of the punishment that is coming for the people of the town if they do not respond. The judgment is not presented as a distant, abstract theology. It is close. It is a warning to the Meccans where they stand. It is, in the language of the first suras, the language of a warner who has arrived from among the people themselves, calling on them to wake up before it is too late.

The judgment theme is the dominant theme of the earliest Meccan revelation, and it is the theme that the Meccans heard first. The Qur'an's earliest suras speak of a day of judgment, of the resurrection of the dead, of the scales on which deeds will be weighed, of the punishment of the deniers, of the reward of the believers. The language is vivid, sometimes terrifying. The suras paint a picture of a

world in which what happened in this life was not the end, in which the injustices of the present would be set right, in which the powerful who oppressed the weak would be called to account, and in which the weak who had been wronged would be vindicated. The Meccans heard this and understood that Muhammad was telling them that their present advantages — their wealth, their power, their idols, their status — would not save them from this judgment.

The second was the fatherless and the vulnerable. The Qur'an's early concern with orphans — the command not to devour their property, the insistence that they be treated justly, the reminder of what happens to a child without protection — is not a disguised form of a later legal system. It is the concern of a man who grew up an orphan in a society where the tribe was everything, and who had, in his own life, experienced the vulnerability that the system produced. The repeated attention to the orphan is one of the most persistent themes of the early Meccan revelation, and it is one that speaks directly to the society Muhammad was addressing.

The Qur'an's concern with the orphan is not a single verse or a single theme. It is a sustained focus across the early suras. *Do not devour the property of the orphan except in the way that is good*, the Qur'an says, and the command is repeated, and the orphan is treated as a sign of the society's moral condition. The orphan is the test of the society — if the society treats the orphan badly, the society is bad. This is the logic of the theme, and it is a logic that Muhammad, as an orphan himself, would have felt in his own life.

The third was the burial of infant girls. The Qur'an in its earliest form speaks, bitterly, of the practice of burying infant daughters alive when the family feared poverty or shame. *When the female child is questioned for what sin she was killed*, the Qur'an says, and the question is not rhetorical in the way a modern reader might take it. It is a direct accusation against a practice that existed in parts of Arabia and that the Qur'an treats as an outrage. The passage is one of the most distinctive and forceful pieces of the early revelation, and it sets the moral tone of Muhammad's message in a way that the Meccan elite could not easily dismiss: this was not a set of rules about ritual purity. This was a condemnation of what the society did to its own children.

The practice of burying infant girls is not a universal practice of pre-Islamic Arabia — the sources do not suggest that every tribe did it, or that it was the norm everywhere — but it was known enough to be a matter of concern, and it was a practice that the Qur'an treats as an abomination. The passage is included here because it is one of the clearest examples of the moral force of the early revelation, and because it is one of the clearest examples of the Qur'an's concern with the vulnerable. The practice was a form of the same logic that made orphanhood so dangerous: a child without protection, a girl without value in the tribal economy, a child who could be disposed of. The Qur'an's response was to say that this was wrong, and that God would question the person who did it.

The fourth was the scales, the balance, the idea that every person's life and deeds would be measured, that the world was not a place where things simply happened without consequence, that there was a judgment coming that would set right what the current world left wrong. The imagery of the scales — the weighing of deeds — is one of the central moral images of the Qur'an, and it appears early, in the Meccan period, as part of the language of the warning. The scales are not a minor detail. They are the image at the center of the judgment, and they are the image that makes the judgment concrete. The Qur'an says that on the day of judgment, the scales will be set up, and the deeds will be weighed, and the balance will be true. The image is one that the original audience would have understood,

because weighing and balance were part of the commercial life of Mecca. The Qur'an took a commercial image and turned it into a moral one.

The fifth was the oneness of God. The message was not, at this stage, a complex legal system or a detailed political program. It was the insistence that God is one, that the idols are false, that the Meccans were worshipping things that could not help them, that Abraham had been a monotheist and that the Kaaba had been built for the worship of one God and then corrupted. The message was uncompromising on this point, and the uncompromising quality of it was part of what made the Meccans furious. It was not enough to ask them to add one god to their pantheon, or to honor a new prophet alongside their old gods. It was to tell them that everything they did at the Kaaba was wrong.

The oneness of God is the theological core of the message, and it is the message that the Meccans heard and rejected. The Qur'an did not present monotheism as a new idea. It presented it as the original idea, the idea of Abraham, the idea that had been corrupted by the idols and needed to be restored. The Qur'an's argument was that the Meccans had forgotten the one God and had taken up the idols, and that the idols could not help them, and that the one God could. The argument was not abstract. It was practical. The Qur'an said that the idols were not gods, that they could not hear, could not see, could not help, could not harm, and that worship of them was a mistake. The argument was, in its way, a simple one, but it was not a gentle one. It was a challenge to the whole religious structure of the town.

These themes — judgment, the vulnerable, the buried daughters, the scales, the one God — are the substance of the earliest suras. They are not extensive. They are hammering. They are repeated with variation. They are the voice of a man who has received a charge, who is warning his people, and who does not yet have the long legal suras of the Medina period to draw on. The language is short, rhythmic, intense, and it carries the kind of directness that oral revelation, delivered by a man who is not a poet in the tribal sense but who is speaking a language charged with something his listeners can feel, carries.

The early suras also have a formal quality that is worth describing plainly. The Meccan suras are not the long, discursive suras of the Medina period. They are short, they are single-themed, they are filled with oaths and warnings and promises, and they have a kind of intensity that comes from the way the theme is repeated and developed. The oaths are a notable feature — the Qur'an begins many of the early suras with oaths by things in the natural world: by the night, by the morning, by the pen, by the sunrise, by the night visitor, by the stars, by the sky, by the moon, by time, by the fig, by the olive, by the mountain. The oaths are not decorative. They are part of the argument. The Qur'an swears by these things to establish the authority of what follows. The oaths are meant to carry weight.

The Meccan suras also have a rhythmic, almost chant-like quality in translation, and the rhythm is part of what made them powerful in the original Arabic. The suras repeat phrases, they use parallelism, they build to a climax, and they end with a summary or a warning. The form is not the form of the Arabic poetry that was the high achievement of the tribal tradition, and the Meccans heard the difference. The Qur'an was not poetry, and it was not prose in the ordinary sense. It was something that the Meccans did not have a category for, and the lack of a category was part of the power.

For the biographer, the important thing is that the early suras give us access to what Muhammad was saying at the moment he was saying it, and that they give us that access in a form that is close to the moment — much closer than the sira, which was written more than a century later. The Qur'an is not a biography, and it does not tell us what Muhammad felt or did on most days. But it tells us what he said, and it tells us, in the long run, what it did to him. The suras that console him, the suras that rebuke him, the suras that answer his enemies, and the one sura — a short one, memorable for its slightness — that tells him off for turning away from a blind man who came to see him, are the closest thing we have to the unfiltered voice of Muhammad under pressure.

The sura that rebukes him is Sura Abasa, the eightieth chapter, and it is worth lingering on briefly, because it is the one piece of the Qur'an that gives us a moment of Muhammad's own behavior and his own correction. The tradition says that a blind man came to Muhammad asking for instruction, and Muhammad turned away from him, frowning, because he was preoccupied with some of the leading men of the Quraysh who were listening. The sura was then revealed, and it rebuked Muhammad for his reaction, and told him that the blind man might have purified himself, or have been reminded, and that he should not have turned away. The passage is short, and it is tender in a way that the Qur'an's more severe moments are not. It is also, for the biographer, one of the most valuable pieces of evidence in the whole source material: it gives us Muhammad's own reaction, his impatience with a poor and blind man who interrupted him, and the Qur'an's rebuke of that reaction. It lets us see him being wronged and then being corrected, and it lets us see that the correction came from the revelation he believed was from God.

The early suras are not the whole of what Muhammad said. The message developed over time, and the style changed as the years passed. The Meccan suras are short and intense; the Medinan suras, later, are longer and more concerned with law and community. But the early suras are the core of what the first Muslims heard, and they are the foundation on which the rest of the message was built. A reader who wants to know what Muhammad said when he first began to warn his people should begin there, with the short, anxious, rhythmic chapters that were the immediate response to the silence that had ended, and that were the first public form of a message that would eventually carry the whole Islamic world.

The early suras are also the foundation of the Qur'an's authority in the Islamic tradition, because they are the first layer, and the first layer is the one that the community heard first and the one that was preserved first. The early suras are the beginning of the Qur'an as a collected text, and the beginning of the Qur'an as the word of God in the Islamic sense. The honest account does not confuse the two — the historical beginning and the theological beginning are not the same thing — but it also does not pretend that they are unrelated. The historical beginning is the beginning of the written text, the theological beginning is the beginning of the divine communication, and both are true in their own way.

## Why It Made Them Furious

The Meccan elite's response to Muhammad's message did not begin with theological argument and it did not end there. It began with the fact that the message threatened the town's whole arrangement —

its sanctuary, its trade, its social structure, and the standing of the men who controlled those things — and it continued with the theological arguments that were added on top of that.

Muhammad had been known in Mecca for years as al-Amin, the trustworthy. He had been the man who settled the Black Stone dispute. He had been the man who carried the caravans and kept his word and was married to Khadija and had a reputation that the town, by and large, respected. Then he began to say that the gods of the Kaaba were false, that God was one, that the town's whole religious center was built on a mistake, and that the Meccans were in danger of a coming judgment if they did not change. He was not a stranger. He was not an outsider. He was the man they knew, telling them that the thing they had built their lives around was wrong.

The response was immediate and it was not polite. The Qur'an records the kinds of things the Meccans said about Muhammad — that he was a poet, that he was a magician, that he was possessed, that he was fabricating the revelation, that he was trying to win power and status for himself and his clan. The accusations were not invented by the later tradition. They are in the Qur'an, because the Qur'an was responding to them in real time. They are the Meccan elite's own language, preserved in the record of the man they were arguing with.

The most important thing about these accusations is that they were not purely intellectual. They were also social and personal. To call Muhammad a poet was to say that his words were not revelation but the product of a man's skill — a way of reducing the claim without engaging it. To call him a magician was to say that what his listeners experienced was not divine communication but a trick. To call him possessed was to say that he had lost his mind. To say he was fabricating was to say that he was a liar. Each of these charges had a strategic purpose: they reduced the claim, undermined the authority of the man making it, and gave the Meccan elite a vocabulary for refusing to take the message seriously.

The men of the Quraysh who opposed Muhammad were not a single person. They were a group of men of standing in the town, men of the leading clans, men who controlled the sanctuary and the trade and the political life of the Quraysh. Among the most prominent of the opponents were Abu Jahl, whose name was Amr ibn Hisham, a man of the Makhzum clan, one of the leading clans of the Quraysh, who became one of the most determined of the enemies of Muhammad; al-Walid ibn al-Mughira, a rich and influential man of the Banu Makhzum, who was the one who heard the Qur'an and was impressed by its language and then tried to find a way to deal with it; and Utba ibn Rabi'a, an elder of the Quraysh who was one of the first to try to negotiate with Muhammad on behalf of the Quraysh. These men were not cartoon enemies. They were the leaders of the town, men of power and wealth and standing, men who had the most to lose from the success of Muhammad's message.

Abu Jahl is worth a specific mention, because he is the most vivid of the opponents in the early sources. He was a man of the Makhzum, the clan that controlled much of the Meccan trade and that was one of the most powerful in the Quraysh. He was a man of influence, of wealth, and of hostility. The tradition remembers him as one of the most relentless of the opponents, as a man who persecuted the Muslims, who urged the boycott, who was among the men who tried to kill Muhammad in the assassination plot, and who was killed at the Battle of Badr. He is the face of the opposition in the early story — the man who represents the Quraysh's determination to resist Muhammad in the strongest form.

Al-Walid ibn al-Mughira is worth a specific mention for a different reason. The tradition records that he heard Muhammad reciting the Qur'an and was struck by the language — by the power of the Arabic, by the way it was unlike the poetry he knew — and that he went to the other leaders of the Quraysh and proposed that they should try to deal with Muhammad in a way that would not require them to fight him directly. He proposed, in the tradition's account, that they should call Muhammad a sorcerer or a poet or a madman or a genius, in order to discredit him in the public mind. The proposal was a sign of the kind of threat Muhammad posed. Al-Walid was not dismissing the message because it was obviously false. He was dismissing it because it was powerful and he needed to neutralize the power.

The religious core of the objection was also real, and it was serious. The Meccans did not deny the idea of one God in the abstract. They knew the Abrahamic tradition, they knew the Jewish and Christian communities, they knew the hanifs who had turned away from idol worship. Their objection was not that monotheism was logically impossible. Their objection was that Muhammad's monotheism was uncompromising, that it required the abandonment of the idols they worshipped at the Kaaba, that it required the abandonment of the economic and social structure that the sanctuary represented, and that it required a change in the way they lived that they were not ready to make.

The Meccans did not summon the theologians of the town to debate Muhammad. They summoned the leaders of the town to deal with him. The opposition was not a matter of intellectual refutation. It was a matter of political and economic resistance. The Quraysh's leaders understood that the message was a threat to their position, and they responded as men in their position would respond — by argument on one side, by pressure on the other, and by the attempt to preserve the structure that gave them their standing.

The economic and social objection was the larger one, and it is the one that should not be allowed to slip into the background. The Quraysh's wealth came from the caravans and the pilgrimage. The pilgrimage depended on the sanctuary. The sanctuary depended on the idols. If Muhammad's message succeeded, the idols would be abandoned, the pilgrimages would cease to be what they were, the Quraysh's position would be undermined, and the town's economy would be damaged. That was not a small thing. That was the material basis of the town's existence.

The Meccan elite understood this, and their response was shaped by it. They did not simply argue that Muhammad was wrong. They tried to preserve the structure that made them powerful. They tried to isolate the Muslims. They tried to persuade Muhammad to stop. They tried to buy him off. They tried to threaten him. They tried to kill him. The sequence of their responses was the sequence of a group that had a great deal at stake and that was watching the threat grow.

The obstacle was also a matter of clan and honor. Muhammad belonged to the Banu Hashim, a respected but not dominant clan of the Quraysh. When he began to preach, he was not a man of power, and he was not announcing a message from a position of authority. He was a man of moderate standing telling the town that it was wrong, and the town's response was shaped in part by the fact that he was not someone they could dismiss as a threat from the outside. He was, in their terms, one of them. That made the challenge more irritating, because it was harder to ignore a complaint from a man you knew than a threat from an enemy.

The power of the Meccan elite in the town's social life was the power that came from the clan system, from the sanctuary, from the trade, from the reputation economy. The men who opposed

Muhammad were the men who had the most to lose from his success, and they were the men who had the power to resist him in the short term. They were not omnipotent. They could not simply make Muhammad disappear. But they could make life difficult for him and for his followers, and they could try to persuade the town to turn against him.

The opposition grew over time. At first it was mockery, argument, threats. Then it became pressure, boycott, and the attempt to isolate the Muslims from the rest of the town. The Meccan elite tried to persuade Muhammad to stop, or to compromise, or to keep the message to himself. They offered him wealth if he would stop. They offered him leadership if he would stop. They offered him the protection of the town if he would stop. Muhammad rejected all of it. The Qur'an records his refusal, and the refusal is one of the most important early signs of the man he was becoming: a man who would not trade the message for anything the town had to offer.

The offer of wealth and power was one of the most striking episodes in the early opposition. The Quraysh offered Muhammad that he could have any woman he wanted, any wealth he wanted, any leadership he wanted, if he would only stop preaching. The offer was made, according to the tradition, by the men of the Quraysh, and Muhammad's response was to refuse it. The refusal is recorded in the Qur'an, and it is one of the clearest signs of the man's character. Muhammad had the chance to gain wealth and power in the town by stopping the message. He chose the message instead.

The opposition also shaped the way the message was heard. The Meccans were not a passive audience. They were a hostile one, and the hostility made the early suras the kind of intense, anxious, repetitive, warning-centered thing they were. The Qur'an was not a calm theological treatise. It was a message being spoken into a hostile environment, and the environment left its mark on it. The anger of the Meccans is audible in the Qur'an's urgency.

The biographer needs to understand that the Meccan opposition was not an irrational reaction to a purely religious message. It was a rational response — rational in the sense that the message threatened the material and social structure of the town, and the town's leaders reacted to that threat in the ways that men in their position would react: by arguing, by threatening, by trying to isolate the threat, by attempting to buy it off, and eventually by using force. The opposition was not a matter of stupid pagan resistance to pure truth. It was a matter of real people with real interests defending a real position against a challenge that, if successful, would have destroyed their way of life.

The Meccan elite are not, in this story, a cartoon of villainy. They are men of a town who had built their wealth and their honor on a sanctuary and a trade and a set of practices, and who heard a man they knew telling them that the whole thing was wrong and that God was angry with them, and who, after a period of argument, concluded that the man had to be stopped. The story of the opposition is the story of a society under threat from within, and of the ways a tribal society, with its honor, its trade, and its religion fused together, defended itself against a challenge that could not be met by argument alone.

The opposition was also a matter of the Meccan elite's sense of themselves. They were the guardians of the sanctuary. They were the masters of the trade. They were the leaders of the town. Muhammad's message, if successful, would have turned their world upside down. It would have made their gods false, their sanctuary corrupted, their trade and their pilgrimage and their prestige dependent on a mistake. The Meccan elite understood this, and their opposition was not a petty personal animosity. It was a defense of the way they understood their town and their place in it.

The chapter ends here, with the opposition full-grown and the Muslims under pressure, and with the reader understanding that the Meccan period of Muhammad's life was not a period of easy preaching followed by mass conversion, but a period of argument, threat, pressure, and the slow build of a movement that was small enough to be persecuted and large enough to be a problem. The next chapter — Chapter 14 — will look at the first believers, the people who came to Muhammad when the town was turning against him, and the shape of the movement at its beginning.

## The First Believers

The first Muslims did not arrive in a mass. They came one at a time, or in small groups, over the first years of the message, and the shape of the early community was determined by who those people were and what they had to risk in order to believe.

The tradition names the earliest believers, and the list is the list of the people who were close enough to Muhammad to judge his claim and free enough, or brave enough, or desperate enough, to follow it. The first was Khadija, his wife, who believed in him when he came down from the cave thinking he was mad, and who stood by him through the earliest opposition. The second was Ali, his cousin, who was young enough — the traditions put him at around ten or slightly older — to have no power to lose and every reason to be close to the man who raised him, and who became the first young male believer. The third was Abu Bakr, a friend of Muhammad's, a man of standing in Mecca, a man of the Quraysh who had the independence and the courage to believe in his friend's message when the town was beginning to turn against it.

These three — Khadija, Ali, Abu Bakr — are the core of the early community. They are not the whole of it, but they are the beginning, and they matter because they represent the three kinds of person the first message attracted: the wife who knew him and had the wealth to support the movement, the young cousin who had no worldly status to lose, and the friend of standing who believed the man he knew. The early community did not form from a population convinced by public preaching. It formed from a small number of people whose proximity, or their circumstances, brought them to the message, and whose belief was a personal act before it was a public one.

The order of the first believers is itself interesting. The first to believe was the woman who knew Muhammad best, who had observed him in the cave, who had seen him come down terrified, who had taken him to Waraqa, and who had the wealth and the independence to support him in the early days. The second to believe was the young boy who had no worldly position to lose and every reason to be close to the man who raised him. The third to believe was the friend of standing who believed the man he knew. The order is not an accident. It is the order of the people who had the closest relationship to Muhammad and the most reason to trust him.

Khadija's belief is the most important of the early moments, because it set the pattern for the whole early community. She believed in Muhammad before he had done anything public. She believed in him when he was still terrified, still not sure what had happened, still afraid he was mad. She believed in him because she knew him, because she had seen his character, because she had seen the way he was, and because she had the resources to back her judgment. Her belief was not the belief of

a mass. It was the belief of a person who had known Muhammad and who had decided to stand with him. That belief, and the support that came with it, was the foundation of the early community.

Ali's belief was the belief of a young man who had grown up in Muhammad's household and who had no position in the town to lose. Ali was young — the traditions vary on the exact age, but he was a boy or a very young man — and he had been close to Muhammad since childhood, and he had watched Muhammad's life, and he had seen the way Muhammad lived. His belief was a personal belief, a belief in the man he knew and in what the man was saying. The fact that Ali was young and had no power to lose made his belief possible in a way that would have been impossible for a man of standing in the town who had everything to risk by joining a persecuted movement.

Abu Bakr's belief was the belief of a man of the Quraysh who had the independence and the courage to stand with Muhammad in the face of the opposition. Abu Bakr was a friend of Muhammad's, a man who knew him well, a man of standing, a man who had his own wealth and his own position, and a man who was willing to risk that wealth and position for the sake of what he believed Muhammad was saying. Abu Bakr's belief was significant because it showed that the message was not only attracting the vulnerable and the young. It was also attracting men of standing, men who had something to lose and who were willing to lose it.

After them came the people who were closer to the edges of Meccan society — the people who had less to lose and more to gain from a movement that promised judgment on the powerful and protection for the vulnerable. Zayd ibn Haritha was a slave or a freedman of Muhammad's household — the traditions are ambiguous about whether he was originally a slave given to Muhammad by Khadija or a freedman who had been with him from earlier — and he became one of the earliest and most devoted of the Muslims. He was among the first to believe, and he stayed with Muhammad through the whole of the Meccan and Medinan story, and he was the one whom Muhammad treated with a special closeness that the later tradition remembers in ways that are emotionally vivid even if their exact legal meaning is disputed. Whatever the technical status, Zayd was a man of the household, a believer from the early days, and a person for whom Muhammad's faith meant something intimate and lasting.

Zayd's story is interesting for several reasons. First, he was a man who belonged to Muhammad's household, and whose closeness to Muhammad was a matter of daily life. Second, he was a man who had the least worldly status — a slave or a freedman — and who was among the first to believe. Third, his relationship with Muhammad was close enough that the later tradition remembered it in ways that were emotionally vivid, and that raised questions about the legal status of the relationship. The tradition remembers that Muhammad treated Zayd with a special closeness, that Zayd was one of the first to believe, and that Zayd was among the small group who formed the core of the early community.

The early believers also included women who are remembered less vividly in the tradition than Khadija and who are no less part of the first community. The traditions name some of them — Sumayya, the mother of Ammar, and her husband Yasir, who were among the first to believe and among the first to suffer — and they point to a community in which women were not merely followers of their husbands but persons making their own commitment. Sumayya and Yasir were among the poor and unprotected who came to the message early, and Sumayya is remembered in the tradition as one of the first to be killed for the faith in Mecca, a fact that makes her part of the first

community and part of the first martyrs. The point of mentioning these women is not to add names for ornament. It is to make clear that the first community was not a band of men alone. It was men and women, free and slave, young and old, and the women were part of it from the beginning.

Bilal ibn Rabah was an Abyssinian slave in Mecca, owned by an unbeliever — the tradition names his owner as Umayya ibn Khalaf — and he became a believer at a time when the opposition was growing. His story is one of the most powerful in the early memory, because it is the clearest early instance of what the message meant to a man who had the least. Bilal was tortured for his faith — the tradition records that he was put in the heat of the sun, on his back, with a heavy stone on his chest, and that his owner demanded that he renounce Islam, and that Bilal refused, and that his only response, in the face of the torture, was to repeat "One God, one God" — *Ahad, ahad*. The refusal and the repetition are remembered as the emblem of what the message meant to the unprotected: that there was one God, and that this God did not belong to the Quraysh or to the rich, and that a slave could belong to Him in a way that the Quraysh could not take away.

Bilal's story is one of the most powerful in the early memory, and it is one of the most revealing. The torture of Bilal was the kind of thing that the Meccan elite did to the unprotected. The persecution was concentrated on the slaves and the unprotected, on the people who had no clan to defend them, on the people who had the least. Bilal's refusal, and his repetition of the words "One God," are the emblem of the early community's belief that the message belonged to the vulnerable as much as to the powerful, and that the vulnerable could belong to God in a way that the powerful could not take away. The story is a small one in the grand narrative, but it is one of the clearest examples of the message's appeal to the people at the bottom of Meccan society.

The early believers included others, men and women, who came in smaller numbers and whose names are preserved in the tradition because the tradition remembered that the first community was made of persons, not just of a mass. The early list of believers — the names that Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham record — is a list of individuals, and it is worth reading as that: a set of human beings who each made a decision to stand with Muhammad at a time when that decision had no obvious worldly advantage and real worldly risk.

Among the others who came in the early period were men of standing who had been won over by Muhammad's personal character, men of the lower classes who had been won over by the message's promise of justice, and women who had been won over by the message's promise of equality and dignity. The early community was a mixture of the powerful and the vulnerable, of the young and the old, of the men and the women, and the mixture is the form that the community took at the beginning.

The shape of the early community matters for several reasons. First, it tells us what kind of social base the message had at the start: not the powerful Quraysh, not the men who controlled the sanctuary and the trade, but a mixture of the wife of substance, the young relative, the friend of standing, the slave, the freedman, the Abyssinian, and the others who were on the edges of Meccan society or close enough to Muhammad to see what he was saying and believe it. The movement began, in other words, in the places where a challenge to the established order would meet the least resistance and the most need — among the people who had reason to doubt the Meccan system because they were outside its benefits, or who had enough personal trust in Muhammad to override the social pressure against him.

Second, the early community was small enough that the Meccan opposition could feel it was a real threat and also small enough that the Muslims could be pressured, boycotted, and pursued without the town being openly at war. The early years were a period of tension, of argument, of the slow hardening of the Quraysh against the message, but not yet a period of open violence against the Muslims as a whole. The persecution was concentrated on the vulnerable — on Bilal, on the slaves and the unprotected who had no clan to defend them — and it was the kind of pressure that a tribal society could exert without declaring war. The Muslims who had protection — Muhammad himself, his clan, Abu Bakr — could survive the pressure in ways that Bilal and Zayd and the slaves could not. That asymmetry was real, and it shaped the early story in ways that the later triumphal narrative sometimes flinches from: the first Muslims who suffered most were the ones who had the least.

Third, the early community's composition was prophetic of what would come later. The Muslim community would grow, and it would eventually include the powerful and the tribal leaders and the men of the Quraysh who had opposed Muhammad. But at the beginning it was the young, the poor, the unprotected, and the few who trusted Muhammad. That beginning was not an accident. It was the shape of a movement that had as its first audience the people who were least satisfied with the Meccan system, and it was the shape of a message that, from the beginning, took the vulnerable seriously and the powerful skeptically.

The early community was also the community that Muhammad had to build, and the community that he had to protect. The early years were the years of building, and the years of protecting, and the years of the slow accumulation of the small group that would become the basis of the larger movement. The community was not large enough in the early years to be a political force. It was a small group of believers, a small group of followers, a small group of people who had decided to stand with Muhammad in the face of the opposition. The community was the beginning of the movement, and the beginning was the most vulnerable period of the life of the movement.

There is a distinction worth making about the early period, and it is one that the later tradition sometimes blurs. In the earliest phase, the belief was private — a small circle of people who believed in Muhammad when he had not yet begun to preach publicly to the town. The tradition remembers that Muhammad first preached to a small circle, and that the message became public only later. The distinction between the private and the public phases is real, and it is important, because it explains how a man could begin a movement in a hostile town without immediately becoming the target of the town's full force. Muhammad began by telling a few people, and those few people believed, and the circle grew, and the circle was the beginning of the community. The public preaching came later, and the public preaching was the thing that brought the opposition down on the community in force.

The community at the end of the Meccan period, before the emigration, was a small group of men and women, some free and some not, some with protection and some without, who had believed in Muhammad when his own town was turning against him, and who had paid, some of them, the price of their belief. They were the first Muslims, and they were not a faceless mass. They were persons. The story of the Meccan period is not complete without them, and the story of what they had to risk is not complete without the recollection that the first to die for the faith in Mecca were not the powerful but the powerless.

Part Four takes up the persecution in full: the boycott, the emigration to Abyssinia, the Year of Sorrow, the stoning at Ta'if, and the night journey that ended with the road out to Medina. The first

believers introduced here are the people who would go with Muhammad into that story, and some of them would not survive it unchanged.

# Part Four: Persecution and Exile

## The Boycott

The opposition in Mecca had begun with mockery and argument. The Quraysh had heard Muhammad say that the gods of the Kaaba were false, that God was one, that the sanctuary had been corrupted, and that the Meccans were in danger of a coming judgment. At first, they had responded with the language of ridicule — calling him a poet, a magician, a possessed man, a fabricator. They had tried to dismiss the message with words. The words did not work. The small community that had gathered around Muhammad held firm. A few more people had believed. The Meccan elite had watched their own position begin to erode in a way that argument could not stop.

So they stopped arguing and started organizing. The boycott was the result.

It is worth pausing on the fact that a boycott was the first serious escalation. Not an assassination attempt, not a military attack, not a legal prosecution — an embargo. The Meccan elite decided to use the clan system against Muhammad's own clan, to impose starvation and social isolation on the Banu Hashim until they surrendered their protégé. The boycott was not dramatic in the way a battle would be dramatic. But it was, for the men and women and children who lived through it, a slow, grinding, three-year assault on everything they needed to survive. And it tells us something essential about the Meccan elite's understanding of their own society: they knew that the clan was the weapon, that starvation was the method, and that the only way to break Muhammad was to make the people around him unable to bear his protection.

**The document**

The mechanics of the boycott are preserved in the tradition, mainly in Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, and they are worth knowing because they are specific. The clans of the Quraysh drew up a document. They bound themselves, by a formal agreement, to cut off the Banu Hashim and the Banu Muttalib — Muhammad's clan and his uncle Abu Talib's clan, which were closely related and often treated as a single unit in Meccan political life — from trade, from marriage, and from all contact.

The terms were comprehensive. No one was to buy from them. No one was to sell to them. No one was to marry into them. No one was to help them. The agreement was to seal the pact against them until they surrendered Muhammad to the Quraysh, or until they called him off. The document was hung in the Kaaba, in the sanctuary that was supposed to be a protected zone, and it stood there as the formal declaration of the embargo against Muhammad's own family.

The detail of the document matters because it shows how deliberate the boycott was. This was not a spontaneous reaction to an insult. It was a written, sealed, public agreement, hung in the sanctuary itself, binding the leading clans of Mecca to an act of collective punishment. The sanctuary, which was supposed to be a place where violence was forbidden, became the place where the document was displayed — a bitter irony, and an indication of how far the Meccan elite's sense of Mecca's own rules had eroded in the pursuit of Muhammad.

The boycott was directed at a specific group: the Banu Hashim and the Banu Muttalib. The agreement did not apply to all of the Quraysh. It applied to Muhammad's clan, and to the clan that shared his protection. The logic was clear. The Quraysh knew that Abu Talib would not abandon Muhammad. They knew that Muhammad's own clan would not abandon him. So they tried to make the clan's protection too expensive to maintain. If the Banu Hashim could be made to suffer enough, they would either abandon Muhammad or be destroyed.

**The place of exile**

The boycott lasted, according to the tradition, for three years. During that time, the Banu Hashim and the Banu Muttalib were imprisoned in a part of the Meccan valley separate from the town — a valley, or a ravine, or a region of the outskirts where they were isolated from the rest of the Meccan community. The exact location is not something the historian can settle with confidence, but the effect is clear: they were cut off from the town, from the market, from the wells, from the trade, from the marriage connections, from the ordinary life of Mecca.

They lived on what they had brought with them. They lived on what they could obtain by stealth. They lived on the few sympathizers who would break the boycott, at great personal risk, and bring them food. They lived on the meager supplies that kept them from outright starvation. The hardship was real. Muhammad was in the midst of it. Khadija was in it. The children of the household were in it. The elderly, the sick, the weak, were in it.

The boycott was not a military siege in the sense of an army surrounding a city with weapons. It was a social and economic siege — a cut-off from the resources of the town, a separation from the network of relationships that normally sustained a clan in Mecca. But the effect was the same as a siege in one important respect: it reduced the people inside to a condition of hunger and dependence on the narrowest possible resources.

The tradition remembers the hunger. It remembers the suffering of the children. It remembers the way the people in the ravine had to eat leaves, or scraps, or whatever they could find. The memory is shaped by the later Islamic desire to emphasize the martyrdom of the early community, but the basic fact — that the boycott produced real hunger over a period of years — is not in serious doubt.

**What the boycott was meant to do**

The boycott was not simply a punishment of Muhammad. It was a punishment of his clan, and it was intended to bring the clan to heel by making the cost of protecting him unbearable. The Meccan elite knew that they could not simply kill Muhammad — his clan was too strong, his reputation as al-Amin was too solid, and the sanctuary too public a place to kill a man without causing a wider conflict. So they tried to make the clan give him up by making the clan's loyalty too expensive.

This was a sophisticated understanding of the Meccan political system. The clan was the unit of protection and the unit of social power. A man without a clan could not survive in Mecca. A clan that could not feed itself could not protect its members. The boycott targeted the clan's ability to function, and it targeted it at the root: food, trade, marriage, contact.

The Meccan elite also understood that the Banu Hashim were not wealthy. They had lost ground economically by Muhammad's time. Their protection of Muhammad was real, but it was not backed by the financial resources of the leading Makhzum or Umayya clans. The boycott was designed to

exploit that vulnerability — to make the Banu Hashim's protection of Muhammad a burden they could not sustain.

The strategy required patience. The boycott was not expected to work in a few weeks. It was expected to work over months, over years, as the suffering grew and the clan's ability to protect Muhammad eroded. The three-year duration of the boycott tells us that the Meccan elite were serious about their strategy and were willing to sustain it for a long time.

**The people in the boycott**

The people inside the boycott were a cross-section of the Banu Hashim and Banu Muttalib. They included Muhammad himself, his wife Khadija, his uncle Abu Talib, his children, his cousins, his relatives, and the servants and clients who belonged to the clan. They included people of different ages and conditions: the young, the old, the sick, the children who had no voice in the political decision but who bore the consequences of it.

The hardship was not evenly distributed. The old and the sick suffered most. The children suffered in ways that adults could sometimes survive but that children could not. Khadija, who had been the source of the community's wealth, now found herself without the resources to feed her household. Muhammad, who had been a man of the caravan trade, found himself cut off from the trade that had been his livelihood.

The boycott was, in this sense, a class event as much as a political one. The Meccan elite used the economic vulnerability of the Banu Hashim against them. They knew the clan's resources were limited, and they pressed those limits until they found what they could break.

**The acts of defiance**

The three years of the boycott are remembered for the suffering they caused, but they are also remembered for the acts of defiance that the suffering produced. The tradition preserves some of these, and they are worth recording because they show that the boycott did not simply break people into submission. It produced resistance, and the resistance was of a kind that the Meccan elite had not expected.

One of the most famous of these acts was the defiance of Hakim ibn Hizam, who secretly brought food to the Banu Hashim at great risk to himself. Hakim was not a Muslim — he was a man of the Makhzum, the clan of Abu Jahl, one of the leading opponents of Muhammad. But he was a kinsman of the Banu Hashim through his mother, and he defied the boycott by bringing them food. The story, as it is told, is that he came by night, or by stealth, with donkeys loaded with food, and that he was one of the few who broke the embargo.

Another act of defiance was that of a woman — unnamed in some versions, named in others — who also brought food to the Banu Hashim. The fact that the tradition remembers these acts at all is itself a sign that they mattered. They were not the main story of the boycott — the main story was the suffering. But they were the counter-story, the story of people who refused to let the embargo work unopposed.

The defiance matters for the biographer because it shows that the boycott did not achieve the silence it was intended to produce. It produced stories. It produced memories. It produced acts of people who, even while they were not Muslims, refused to let the clan of Muhammad be destroyed. The

boycott was meant to isolate the Banu Hashim. In part it succeeded. In part it failed, because some of the Meccans themselves would not let isolation be total.

**The psychology of the boycott**

The boycott was not only a physical hardship. It was a psychological one. The Banu Hashim were cut off from the town, from the market, from the ordinary social life of Mecca. They were separated from the network of relationships that normally sustained a clan. They were placed in a position of visible suffering that every other Meccan could see, and that reinforced the Meccan elite's message: this is what happens when you protect a man the town has decided against.

The psychological pressure was part of the strategy. The Meccan elite wanted not only to starve the Banu Hashim but to humiliate them, to make them an object lesson, to show the rest of Mecca that protection of Muhammad was not a viable position. The boycott made the Banu Hashim visibly, publicly, the object of a collective punishment that everyone in Mecca could witness.

This was, in one sense, a mistake by the Meccan elite. The boycott made Muhammad and his clan more sympathetic, not less. It showed that the Meccan elite were willing to use the full force of their clan system against a man who had never used force against them. The boycott hardened the resolve of the Muslims rather than breaking it, because it demonstrated to them that the Meccan elite were serious, and that there was no middle ground. The boycott was the moment when the Meccan elite stopped pretending that the conflict was a matter of argument and began treating it as a matter of survival on both sides.

**Why the boycott did not work**

The boycott failed in its purpose. Muhammad did not recant. His clan did not abandon him. After three years, the Banu Hashim had suffered, but they had not surrendered. The Meccan elite had discovered, in the course of the boycott, that the old tribal loyalty was stronger than their pressure.

This failure is important for the biography because it marks the point at which the Meccan elite understood that the boycott was not going to work. The next escalation was the attempt to kill Muhammad outright. The boycott had failed, and the failure made the Meccan elite willing to consider more extreme measures. The assassination plot that followed — the plan to send a young man from each of the leading clans to strike Muhammad down at once, so that his blood would be on all of them and his clan could not revenge a single killer — was the product of the realization that the boycott had failed.

The boycott also failed in another sense. It did not break the small Muslim community. The Muslims who were not of the Banu Hashim — those who had no clan protection in Mecca — were more vulnerable, and the boycott intensified their vulnerability, but the community held together. The small group of believers continued to believe. The boycott had been intended to crush the movement by crushing its leader's clan. It had not done that.

**The end of the boycott**

The boycott ended, according to the tradition, when some of the Quraysh began to defect from the agreement. The tradition names a few men who are said to have broken the pact — men who were beginning to feel the pressure of their own conscience, or who were persuaded by the pleas of sympathizers, or who were sufficiently moved by the suffering to withdraw from the agreement. The boycott was lifted. The Banu Hashim and the Banu Muttalib were able to return to the town.

The return was not a return to normal life. Muhammad had been through three years of hardship. His wife had been through it. His uncle had been through it. His children had been through it. The town was still hostile. The opposition had not ended. It had only changed form.

The end of the boycott is one of the moments in the early story that should not be rushed past. The three years of boycott were over, but the damage had been done. The moral and psychological pressure of the boycott had been real. The suffering had been real. The failure of the boycott to break the Muslims had been real, but the failure had not produced reconciliation. It had produced the realization on the Meccan elite's side that a different kind of action was needed.

**What the boycott tells us**

The boycott tells us several things about the Meccan period that the biographer needs to understand.

First, it tells us that the Meccan elite were not simply mocking Muhammad and dismissing his message. They were willing to organize, to write formal agreements, to impose sustained suffering on a clan of their own tribe, to use the full weight of the Meccan system against a man they had once respected. The boycott was a sign of how serious the opposition had become.

Second, it tells us that the Meccan elite understood their own society well enough to use its mechanisms against Muhammad. The clan system was the load-bearing wall of Meccan life, and the boycott used that wall as a weapon. The Meccan elite knew how to apply pressure through the clan, and they chose the form of pressure that they believed would be most effective.

Third, it tells us that the Meccan elite were not omnipotent. They could impose the boycott, but they could not force the Banu Hashim to surrender. The clan's loyalty to Muhammad was stronger than the Meccan elite's pressure. The boycott failed, and the failure was a strategic failure for the Meccan elite, because it led them to the more extreme measure of the assassination plot.

Fourth, it tells us that the suffering of the early Muslim community was real and sustained and was not limited to the dramatic moments of persecution. The boycott was a three-year siege of a clan, and it produced hunger, isolation, and psychological pressure that were as serious as any of the more famous episodes. The boycott should not be skipped in favor of the dramatic moments that came after it. The boycott was part of the story of what the early community endured.

**The bridge to the next phase**

The boycott was the bridge between the early years of preaching and the later years of crisis. It was the moment when the Meccan elite moved from argument and mockery to organized, sustained pressure. It was the moment when the Muslims understood that the Meccan elite were serious and that the conflict would not be resolved by argument. And it was the moment when the Meccan elite discovered that their first serious escalation had not worked, and that they would have to escalate again.

The next escalation was the attempt to kill Muhammad. The assassination plot took shape after the boycott failed. Muhammad lost his protector and his wife in the same year — the Year of Sorrow. The opposition moved from the boycott to the attempt at assassination, from pressure to the threat of murder.

The three years of the boycott were the bridge between the early years of preaching and the later years of crisis, and they showed that the Meccan opposition was a real, organized, sustained effort to crush a movement that, at this point, was still small enough to be nearly crushed. The boycott failed.

But it had not been a small thing. It had been a three-year siege of a clan, and it had almost worked. The next chapter — Chapter 16 — will look at the emigration to Abyssinia, the first attempt by the Muslims to escape the pressure of Mecca by crossing the sea.

## Across the Sea

The boycott had failed. The Meccan elite had not broken Muhammad's clan, and they had not broken the small Muslim community. But the pressure had not gone away. It had concentrated. The boycott had shown the Meccan elite that economic and social pressure alone would not produce the result they wanted, and the increase in their own determination meant that a different kind of action was coming. The assassination plot was being formed. Muhammad was being marked for death by a coalition of the leading clans. And a group of the Muslims — men and women, young and old, some with protection and some without — decided that the only way to survive was to leave.

They left for Abyssinia.

The emigration to Abyssinia is the first organized migration of Muslims from Mecca, and it is the first time in the story that the Muslims are forced to leave their home because the home has become too hostile to bear. It is the first hijra in the sense of a migration for the sake of faith, before the great hijra to Medina that would come later. And it is the episode that introduces the first non-Arab, non-Meccan ruler to the story — the Negus, the Christian king of Axum, who would have to decide what to do with the people who had come to him asking for protection.

The chapter that follows is about the emigration across the Red Sea, about the negotiation with the Meccan elite who followed the Muslims, about the hearing before the Negus, about the recitation from the Qur'an that won the Negus's protection, and about the way this first exile established something important about the Muslim community's relationship to the wider world.

**The decision to leave**

The date of the emigration is not perfectly certain, but the tradition places it during the boycott or shortly after, when the persecution had become severe enough that some of the Muslims could no longer stay in Mecca. The exact sequence of events is not well recorded, but the general picture is clear: a group of Muslims, seeking safety, decided to emigrate across the Red Sea to the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia.

The reason for choosing Abyssinia is significant. Abyssinia — the kingdom of Axum, in what is now Ethiopia and Eritrea — was a serious state, a Christian kingdom with a navy, with a ruler who was known to be just, with a history of contact with Arabia across the Red Sea. The Muslims knew that the Negus of Abyssinia was a Christian and that Christians were not pagans. They knew that the sanctuaries of Christianity might be more hospitable than the sanctuary of Mecca, which had become the instrument of their persecution. And they knew that the Red Sea was not an absolute barrier — that crossing it was possible, and that Abyssinia was a place where they could hope for protection.

The emigration was not a flight of the cowardly. It was a decision to abandon the only home most of them had ever known. It was a decision to leave behind the clan, the town, the marketplace, the sacred precinct of the Kaaba, the ancestors, the identity, the life. The men and women who went were not the most powerful of the Muslims. Many of them were the most vulnerable — slaves, freedmen,

those without strong clan protection, those who were being persecuted in ways that made staying impossible.

Muhammad himself did not go. He remained in Mecca. He was still protected by his clan and by his own reputation. He was still al-Amin, still known, still a man of standing. The Muslims who went were the ones who could not stay. The emigration was a partial exodus — some of the community leaving while the rest remained — and it was the first sign of the disintegration of the Muslim community's presence in Mecca.

**The first wave**

The migration happened in two waves, according to the tradition. The first wave was smaller. It consisted of a group of Muslims — men and women — who left Mecca and crossed the Red Sea in small boats, arriving in Abyssinia and seeking protection from the Negus.

The first wave was not a large group. The tradition does not give a consistent number, but the point is that it was substantial enough to be noticed by the Meccan elite, and substantial enough to prompt the Meccan elite to decide that the emigration had to be stopped. The Muslims had not just left; they had left with their faith, and they had left for a place where they could practice it without persecution. The Meccan elite understood, at this point, that the emigration was a threat to their authority over the Muslims — if the Muslims could leave and be safe, then the Meccan elite's power over them was limited.

The first wave established the presence of the Muslims in Abyssinia. They settled there, they practiced their faith, they found a measure of safety. The Negus gave them protection, or was understood to have given them protection, and they were able to live as Muslims without the persecution they had fled.

The first wave was also the first time that the social composition of the Muslim community became visible to an outside ruler. The Muslims who came to Abyssinia were not a uniform group. They were men and women. They were free and slave. They were young and old. They were some of the first believers — the ones who had believed early, who had left Mecca because the pressure had become too much, who had come to Abyssinia with the hope that they could live as Muslims in peace. The Negus saw, in the first wave, the shape of the Muslim community — not a political force yet, but a group of people who had a faith that they were willing to leave their homes for.

**The Meccan pursuit**

The Meccan elite did not accept the emigration. They sent an envoy to Abyssinia to demand the return of the Muslims. The tradition records that the Meccan envoy came to the Negus, and argued that the Muslims were not a religion but a new and dangerous sect, that they had abandoned the religion of their ancestors, that they had broken clan ties, that they were a threat to the Meccan social order, and that they should be returned to Mecca to be punished.

The Negus's response to the Meccan envoy is one of the first pieces of evidence in the early story for the way the Muslim message was understood from outside Arabia. The Negus did not simply order the Muslims to be returned. He asked to hear them. He wanted to understand what the Muslims believed before he decided what to do with them. The Meccan envoy's argument was that these people had abandoned their religion and were not worth protecting. The Negus's response was that he would hear them, and that then he would decide.

This was a significant moment. The Negus was a Christian ruler, and the Meccans were pagans. The Meccan envoy was asking a Christian ruler to help pagans suppress a monotheistic sect. The Negus was not committed to the Meccan elite's version of the story. The hearing that followed was the moment when the Muslims had their first real exchange with a non-Arab, non-Meccan ruler, and when that ruler had to decide whether the Muslims were people to be protected or people to be returned.

**The second wave and Ja'far**

The second wave of emigration was larger, and it included some of the most prominent of the early Muslims. The tradition records that the second wave included men and women who had decided to leave Mecca after the first wave, and that the second wave was deliberate — the Muslims had learned from the first wave that Abyssinia was a place of safety, and they had come in larger numbers.

Among the second wave was Ja'far ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad's cousin. Ja'far was a man of the Banu Hashim, the nephew of Muhammad, the brother of Ali. He had been one of the early Muslims, and he had left Mecca with the second wave and had become the leader of the Muslim community in Abyssinia. It was Ja'far who would speak for the Muslims at the hearing before the Negus.

The hearing before the Negus is the most famous episode of the emigration, and it is remembered with the detail that the tradition gives to the most significant moments of the early Muslim experience. The Meccan envoy had come to the Negus and demanded the return of the Muslims. The Negus had refused to return them without a hearing. He had summoned the Muslims to come before him and explain what they believed.

Ja'far ibn Abi Talib was chosen to speak. He stood before the Negus and gave what the tradition remembers as a speech about the Muslim faith — a speech that described the condition of the Muslims before Islam, the revelation that had come to Muhammad, the message of monotheism and justice and the rights of the vulnerable, and the persecution that had driven them from Mecca. Ja'far's speech was the first sustained account of Islam delivered to a non-Muslim ruler, and it is one of the founding documents of the Muslim understanding of how the faith should be explained to those outside it.

The tradition records that Ja'far recited from the Qur'an during the hearing. The passage he recited was from Sura Maryam, the chapter of the Qur'an that tells the story of Mary and the birth of Jesus. The choice of Sura Maryam was not an accident. The Negus was a Christian, and the Muslims were speaking to him in a language he would understand — the story of Mary and the birth of Jesus was a story that the Negus, as a Christian, knew. The recitation of Sura Maryam was the Muslims' way of saying to the Negus that their faith was not a foreign cult but a faith that had points of continuity with the Christian tradition, that recognized Jesus as a prophet, that honored Mary, that worshiped the same God that the Christians worshiped.

The Negus's reaction to the recitation is remembered as a striking moment. The Negus wept at what he heard. He recognized, in the recitation, something that was consistent with his own faith. He said that the Muslims and the Christians were close in their understanding of God, and that he would not return the Muslims to the Meccan elite. He gave the Muslims his protection, and the Meccan envoy went home empty-handed.

**The Negus's decision**

The Negus's decision is one of the most important early encounters in the story, because it is the first time that a non-Arab, non-Meccan ruler had to decide what to do with the Muslims, and because his decision was to protect them.

The Negus's reasoning was twofold. First, he recognized that the Muslims were not simply a mutinous sect or a rebellious group but a community with a faith that was connected to the broader Abrahamic tradition. The recitation from Sura Maryam demonstrated that the Muslims worshiped a God who was recognizably the God of the Christians, and that they honored Jesus as a prophet. The Negus, as a Christian, could see that the Muslims were not attacking Christianity but were, in some important respect, in continuity with it.

Second, the Negus saw that the Muslims had been persecuted in Mecca, and that they had fled to Abyssinia to escape persecution. The Meccan envoy's demand for their return was a demand that the Negus help the Meccan elite persecute the Muslims. The Negus declined. He gave the Muslims protection.

The Negus's protection was not a conversion to Islam. He remained Christian. He did not accept Muhammad as a prophet. But he accepted that the Muslims had a right to practice their faith in Abyssinia without persecution, and that the Meccan elite had no right to demand their return. The protection was political, not religious. It was the act of a ruler who had listened to a group of refugees and had decided to protect them.

**The significance of the emigration**

The emigration to Abyssinia is significant for several reasons, and each of them matters for the biography.

First, it established that the Muslims could find protection outside Arabia. The Meccan elite had assumed that they could control the Muslims by controlling Mecca — by the boycott, by the social pressure, by the threat of assassination. The emigration to Abyssinia showed that the Muslims could escape, and that the Meccan elite's power was limited by geography. The Muslims could leave. They could find a place where they could live as Muslims without the Meccan elite's persecution. This was a lesson that the Meccan elite did not want to learn, and it was a lesson that the Muslims would teach them again later, when the hijra to Medina made the community impossible to contain.

Second, the emigration established contact with the wider world in a concrete and dramatic way. The Muslims came face to face with a Christian ruler. They explained their faith to him. They won his protection. The encounter with the Negus is one of the early pieces of evidence for the way the Muslim message was understood from the outside — not as a foreign cult but as a form of monotheism that had points of continuity with the Christian tradition, and that could be recognized, fairly, by a Christian ruler. The Negus's protection was the first sign that the Muslim message might find a sympathetic hearing in the Christian world.

Third, the emigration established that some of the Muslims were willing to leave their home, their clan, and their life in Mecca for the sake of their faith. The emigration was not a flight of the cowardly. It was a decision to abandon the only home most of them had ever known. The ones who went were not all the Muslims — Muhammad remained in Mecca, and those who stayed remained under the pressure of the Meccan opposition — but those who went were the ones who could not

stay. The emigration was the first sign that the Muslim community was willing to pay a high price for its faith, and that the price of leaving was one that some of them were prepared to pay.

Fourth, the emigration created a community of Muslim exiles outside Arabia. The Muslims who went to Abyssinia did not just disappear. They formed a community. They practiced their faith. They lived as Muslims. Some of them stayed in Abyssinia for years. Some of them would later return to Medina after the hijra. The emigration created a Diaspora of Muslims that extended beyond Arabia, and that diaspora was one of the first signs that Islam was not going to be confined to the Arabian peninsula.

**The Meccan reaction**

The Meccan elite's reaction to the emigration was anger. They had not wanted the Muslims to leave. They had not wanted the Muslims to be safe. They had wanted to crush the movement in Mecca, and the emigration had shown that they could not. The Meccan envoy had gone to Abyssinia and come back without the Muslims. The Negus had protected them. The Meccan elite's authority over the Muslims had been not only defied but publicly humiliated.

The Meccan elite's humiliation is significant because it shows the limits of their power. They could impose a boycott. They could pressure individuals. They could try to assassinate Muhammad. But they could not control the movement of the Muslims across the Red Sea. They could not force a Christian ruler to return the Muslims. They could not prevent the Muslims from establishing a safe community outside Mecca. The emigration was the first sign that the Meccan elite's power was not absolute, and that the Muslim community was beginning to outgrow the Meccan elite's ability to suppress it.

The Meccan elite's reaction also set the stage for the escalation that followed. The failure of the boycott and the failure of the attempt to stop the emigration meant that the Meccan elite's next move would have to be more drastic. The assassination plot was being formed. The Meccan elite were preparing to kill Muhammad. And the emigration to Abyssinia was the sign that, if Muhammad did not leave or die, the Muslims would keep leaving.

**The Muslim community in Abyssinia**

The Muslim community in Abyssinia was not a temporary refuge. It was a community that lasted for years. The Muslims who went to Abyssinia settled there, practiced their faith, raised their children, and lived as Muslims under the protection of the Negus. Some of them stayed until after the hijra to Medina, and some of them returned to Medina when the community was established there. Others stayed longer.

The community in Abyssinia is important for the biographer because it is the first Muslim community outside Arabia, and because it established a pattern that would be repeated in later centuries — the Muslim community living under the protection of a non-Muslim ruler, practicing its faith in peace, and maintaining its identity in a context that was not its own. The Abyssinian community was the first example of this, and it is the first sign that Islam could survive outside Arabia, and that the Muslim community could function under non-Muslim rule.

The community in Abyssinia also preserved a memory of the early Muslim experience that was different from the Meccan memory. The Muslims in Abyssinia had left Mecca because of persecution. They had found protection in a Christian kingdom. They had heard the recitation of Sura Maryam in the hearing before the Negus. Their experience was the experience of exiles, of refugees,

of people who had been forced to leave and who had found safety. This was a different side of the early Muslim story than the side that was being lived in Mecca, where the pressure was still building and where the assassination plot was being formed.

**The return from Abyssinia**

The Muslims who had gone to Abyssinia returned to Medina after the hijra. When Muhammad had established the community in Medina, and when the Meccan elite had failed to kill him, some of the Muslims who had stayed in Abyssinia came back to Medina. The return was a reunion — the Muslims who had fled to Abyssinia coming back to the community that had been established in Medina, and finding that the community had grown and had become a state.

The return is not the most dramatic moment of the story, but it is a significant one. It shows that the emigration to Abyssinia was not a permanent exile but a temporary refuge, and that the Muslims who had fled had been able to return when the community was safe. It shows that the Negus's protection had been real, and that the Muslims had been able to survive in Abyssinia until they could return.

The return also shows that the Muslim community had become a place that the exiles could return to. The community in Medina was not the community that had been persecuted in Mecca. It was a different community — a political entity, a state, a movement that had survived the persecution and had become something larger. The Muslims who returned from Abyssinia found that the community had changed, and that they had changed, and that the story had moved on.

**The chapter in the larger story**

The emigration to Abyssinia is a chapter in the larger story of the Muslim community's growth. It is the first chapter of the exile, and the first chapter of the expansion beyond Arabia. It is the chapter that shows that the Muslim community was willing to leave its home for its faith, and that the Meccan elite's power was not absolute.

The emigration is also the chapter that introduces the first non-Arab ruler into the story — the Negus of Abyssinia — and that shows that the Muslim message could find a sympathetic hearing outside Arabia. The Negus's protection was the first sign that the Muslim community was not going to be confined to the Arabian peninsula, and that the message might find a place in the wider world.

The emigration is the bridge between the Meccan period and the Medinan period. It is the chapter that shows that the Meccan elite's pressure had failed, and that the Muslims were beginning to leave. The hijra to Medina would be the larger version of the same story — the Muslims leaving Mecca for a place where they could be safe — and the emigration to Abyssinia was the first, smaller version, the first sign of what was to come.

The chapter ends here, with the Muslims in Abyssinia under the protection of the Negus, with the Meccan elite having failed to stop the emigration, and with the reader understanding that the Muslim community had now established itself outside Arabia, and that the story was moving toward the hijra to Medina — the great migration that would be the year zero of the Islamic calendar. The next chapter — Chapter 17 — will look at the year of sorrow, the deaths of Khadija and Abu Talib, and the loss of the two relationships that had sustained Muhammad in Mecca.

## The Year of Sorrow

The Year of Sorrow is the year in which Muhammad lost the two relationships that had held his life together in Mecca. It is the year that the tradition names with a grief that is not editorial language but the language of the old sources themselves — the year of sorrow. Not a year of a single sorrow, but a year in which two sorrows arrived together, and in which the shape of Muhammad's life in Mecca came to an end.

The two deaths that gave the year its name were the death of Khadija and the death of Abu Talib. Khadija had been his wife, his first believer, the woman whose wealth had sustained the early community, the woman who had stood by him when he came down from the cave thinking he was mad. Abu Talib had been his uncle, his protector, the man who had kept him in the clan, who had stood by him through the boycott and the opposition and the years of pressure, who had not joined his movement but had protected him as an uncle protects a nephew.

The two losses together left Muhammad, in the Meccan world, without the two main pillars of his life: the woman who was his wife and his first believer, and the man who was his uncle and his clan's protection. He was now, in the terms that mattered in Mecca, a man without a wife of his own and without the protection of a powerful clan member. The Year of Sorrow was not just a year of sadness. It was a year of strategic transformation. The Meccan opposition, sensing that Muhammad was now without the protection of Abu Talib and the support of Khadija, moved to end him.

**The deaths**

The tradition puts both deaths in the same year, the year before the hijra to Medina. The exact order is not perfectly clear. Some versions say Abu Talib died first. Some say Khadija died first. The important thing is that both died in the same year, and that the year was a year of concentrated loss. With Abu Talib's death, Muhammad lost the man who had been his protector for decades. With Khadija's death, Muhammad lost the woman who had been his wife, his first believer, and the practical support of the early community.

Khadija's death is remembered as a profound personal loss. She had been the first believer, the first support, the woman whose wealth sustained the early community. She had been his wife of twenty-five years, the woman who had proposed to him, the woman who had stood by him through the first revelation and the first opposition and the boycott. Her death was the end of the first layer of his prophetic life. The tradition remembers that Muhammad spoke of her with affection after her death, that his later wives knew she had been the first and the best beloved, that he never forgot her. The memory of Khadija is part of the record of the man he was — the man who had been capable of a deep, sustained, monogamous attachment, and who carried that attachment into the rest of his life in a way that the later marriage structure complicated but did not replace.

Abu Talib's death is more complicated, because the tradition and the later sectarian memory have complicated it. Abu Talib had protected Muhammad and died as a non-Muslim, according to the strongest reading of the evidence. He had been a man of the Quraysh who had stood by his nephew without becoming part of his movement. The Shia tradition, later, wanted him to be a Muslim or a secret Muslim. The Sunni tradition, later, wanted him to die in the state he was in. The early sources do not agree, and the honest account does not settle what cannot be settled. What can be said is that

his protection of Muhammad was real, and that its loss was real, and that Muhammad felt the loss in a way that the story remembers as a major event.

The two deaths together are the reason the year is called the Year of Sorrow. It is not a name the biographer gives. It is a name the tradition gives, and it is a name that captures the concentration of the loss. Muhammad had lost his wife and his protector in the same year. He had lost the two relationships that had made Mecca bearable. He had lost the woman who believed in him and the man who protected him. The Year of Sorrow was the end of the Meccan period as he had known it.

**The significance of Khadija's death**

Khadija's death matters for the biography for several reasons, and each of them is worth tracking.

First, she was the first believer. When Muhammad came down from the cave of Hira after the first revelation, shaking and convinced he had lost his mind, Khadija's response was the first act of belief. She did not panic in the way he told her he feared he had. She took him to her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who recognized his experience as belonging to the prophetic tradition. Her belief was the first belief, and it was the foundation of everything that followed. Without Khadija's belief, the story of the early community might have gone differently — or might not have gone at all.

Second, she was the practical support of the early community. Her wealth sustained the Muslims in the years before the migration, when the Muslims were being persecuted, when the boycott was in place, when the economy of the Muslim households was under pressure. Her wealth mattered. She was not simply the wife of the Prophet. She was a businesswoman of the Meccan world, a woman whose wealth and independence made her able to support the movement in practical ways at the moment when it was most vulnerable. Her death removed that support.

Third, she was the embodiment of the monogamous attachment that defined Muhammad's earlier life. For twenty-five years, Muhammad was married to one woman alone. The traditions preserve, in spite of their tendency to idealize, the sense of a relationship that was mutual in ways that early Islamic biography sometimes records and sometimes suppresses. Khadija is remembered as the first believer, the first to accept Muhammad's message, the first to stand by him when he doubted himself, and the woman whose wealth made the early community's survival possible. Her death was the end of that chapter. When Muhammad afterward married multiple women — widows of fallen Muslims, political alliances, women he married for practical reasons in the Medinan period — the change was real, and it did not erase Khadija's place.

Fourth, her death was a strategic loss for the early community. The small Muslim community in Mecca had depended on Khadija's wealth and Muhammad's protection. With both gone — Khadija dead, Abu Talib dead — the community was exposed in a new way. The Meccan elite could sense that Muhammad was now more vulnerable, and they moved to exploit that vulnerability.

**The significance of Abu Talib's death**

Abu Talib's death is equally significant, and it is equally complicated.

Abu Talib was the son of Abd al-Muttalib, the brother of Muhammad's father Abd Allah. He was a member of the Banu Hashim, the clan of the Quraysh to which Muhammad belonged. He was a merchant who took part in the caravan trade. He was not wealthy, but he was respected. He took Muhammad into his household when Abd al-Muttalib died, and he cared for him through the years when a boy became a young man. He protected Muhammad throughout the Meccan period, even

when the opposition to Muhammad became severe. He remained Muhammad's uncle and protector until his death in the Year of Sorrow.

The tradition is clear that Abu Talib protected Muhammad. It is also clear, on the strongest reading of the evidence, that Abu Talib did not become a Muslim. He protected Muhammad as an uncle protects a nephew. He did not join his movement. The later tradition, especially in some strands of Shia and Sufi memory, has wanted him to be a secret or a hesitant believer. Other traditions say he died in the old religion. The honest account does not settle what cannot be settled — the tradition is not unanimous and the earliest sources do not agree — but it does register that his protection of Muhammad was real, and that its limits were real too: he stood by his nephew, but he did not join his movement.

The significance of Abu Talib's death is that it removed the clan protection that had kept Muhammad alive in Mecca. Without Abu Talib, Muhammad was a man without a protector in the clan. He was still al-Amin, still known, still a man of some standing, but he was no longer protected by the powerful figure of his uncle. The Meccan elite could sense that Muhammad was now more vulnerable, and they moved to exploit that vulnerability.

The loss of Abu Talib was also a personal loss. Muhammad had lived with him for decades. He had been his uncle, his guardian, his protector. The tradition remembers the bond between them, and the loss of that bond was a major event in Muhammad's life. Abu Talib's death was not just the removal of political protection. It was the loss of a relationship that had sustained Muhammad for decades.

**The change in Muhammad's position**

The two deaths together changed Muhammad's position in Mecca fundamentally. He was now, in the Meccan world, a man without wife and without protector. He had been a man with Khadija's wealth and Abu Talib's clan protection. He was now a man without either. The Meccan elite could sense the change, and they moved to exploit it.

The pressure on Muhammad intensified after the Year of Sorrow. The assassination plot took shape. The Quraysh decided to kill Muhammad. The plot led to the hijra to Medina. But before the plot and the hijra, there was the immediate aftermath of the two deaths — the period in which Muhammad was physically present in Mecca but strategically exposed in a new way.

The Meccan elite had failed to crush the Muslims by boycott. They had failed to break them by pressure. After the death of Abu Talib, they had lost the man who had shielded Muhammad from the clan's pressure. After the death of Khadija, they had lost the woman who had given the movement its first and most important support. Muhammad was now, in the Meccan world, exposed in a new way. And the Meccan elite moved to exploit that exposure.

**The assassination plot**

The assassination plot is remembered as the immediate consequence of the Year of Sorrow. The Quraysh decided that Muhammad had to be killed. The problem they faced was that Muhammad was protected by the Banu Hashim, and that killing him would bring the vengeance of the Banu Hashim on the killer's clan. The solution they devised was to have a young man from each of the leading clans strike Muhammad down at once, so that his blood would be on all of them and his clan could not revenge a single killer.

The plot was a calculated attempt to solve the problem of clan vengeance. If one man killed Muhammad, the Banu Hashim would revenge him. If many men from many clans killed him together, no single clan could be identified as the killer, and the Banu Hashim could not revenge the death without attacking all the leading clans of the Quraysh at once. The plot was clever in its own terms. It was designed to make the assassination politically safe for the killers.

The plot failed, because Muhammad and Abu Bakr escaped from Mecca before it could be carried out. Muhammad learned of the plot, and he and Abu Bakr fled to the cave of Thawr, and then to Medina. The assassination plot was the immediate context of the hijra. It was the reason Muhammad had to leave Mecca in secrecy and at night. It was the reason Abu Bakr accompanied him. It was the reason Ali slept in Muhammad's bed as a decoy. The plot was the immediate pressure that drove the hijra.

The plot is important for the biography because it shows the Meccan elite's escalation. The boycott had failed. The emigration to Abyssinia had not stopped the Muslims. The assassination plot was the next step — the decision that Muhammad had to be killed, and that the killing had to be done in a way that would be politically safe for the killers. The plot was the product of the Year of Sorrow: the realization that Muhammad, without Khadija and Abu Talib, could be killed without the same immediate consequences.

**The emotional texture**

The Year of Sorrow is a year that the tradition remembers with a profound emotional weight. The tradition does not simply record the deaths. It records the loss as a major event in Muhammad's life. The grief is part of the story. The sorrow is part of the story. The name "Year of Sorrow" is not a later invention. It is the name the tradition gives to the year, and it is a name that captures the concentration of the loss.

The emotional texture of the year matters because it humanizes Muhammad in a way that the later triumphal story sometimes does not. The triumphal story moves from the first revelation to the hijra to the battles to the conquest to the death, skipping the years of pressure in between. But those years were the years in which Muhammad lost the two most important people in his life. The sorrow is part of the story. The grief should not be skipped. The Year of Sorrow should not be skipped.

The grief also matters because it makes the later decisions more intelligible. The decision to emigrate to Medina was not just a strategic decision. It was a decision made by a man who had just lost his wife and his protector, who had just been through the most concentrated period of loss in his life, and who was now exposed in a new way. The hijra was driven by the loss of the two relationships that had sustained Muhammad in Mecca. The Year of Sorrow was the end of the Meccan period as Muhammad had known it.

**The year in the larger story**

The Year of Sorrow is the pivot of the Meccan period. It is the moment when the Meccan period that Muhammad had known came to an end. The boycotted, the persecuted, the pressured, the slowly growing Muslim community — all of that was still there. But the two relationships that had held Muhammad's life together in Mecca were gone. The woman who had believed in him was dead. The man who had protected him was dead. Muhammad was now exposed in a new way.

The Year of Sorrow is also the moment when the Meccan elite moved from pressure to the threat of murder. The boycott had failed. The emigration to Abyssinia had failed to stop the Muslims. The assassination plot was the next step. The Year of Sorrow was the context of the plot. It was the moment when the Meccan elite understood that Muhammad was vulnerable, and that the time to act had come.

The Year of Sorrow is the bridge between the Meccan period and the Medinan period. The deaths of Khadija and Abu Talib ended the Meccan period as Muhammad had known it. The assassination plot led to the hijra. The hijra led to Medina. The Year of Sorrow was the end of the Meccan period and the beginning of the Medinan period.

The chapter ends here, with the two deaths, the change in Muhammad's position, the assassination plot, and the reader understanding that the Year of Sorrow was the year in which Muhammad lost the two relationships that had held his life together in Mecca, and that the loss of those two relationships led to the hijra to Medina. The next chapter — Chapter 18 — will look at the stoning at Ta'if, the lowest point of Muhammad's life, and the return from Ta'if that made the hijra possible.

## Stoned at Ta'if

After the deaths of Khadija and Abu Talib, after the Year of Sorrow, after the Meccan elite had decided to kill him, Muhammad went to Ta'if.

Ta'if was a town in the mountains of the Hijaz, a place of vineyards and a cooler climate, a place that had its own sanctuary and its own tribal life, a place that was not part of Mecca and not under the Meccan elite's direct control. The reason Muhammad went there, according to the tradition, was desperation. He had lost Khadija. He had lost Abu Talib. The Quraysh were now openly trying to kill him. He had no protector left in Mecca. He went to Ta'if hoping that the people there would listen to his message, would accept it, and would give him protection. He went hoping for shelter.

He did not get it.

He went to the leaders of Ta'if, and he asked them to accept his message, and they refused. They not only refused. They drove him out. They set the town's children and the lower people against him, and they stoned him, and they drove him from the town, and he was wounded, and he fled, and he went back toward Mecca in a state of physical and emotional devastation.

The story of Ta'if is one of the most powerful episodes in the early biography, and it is one of the most human. The man who had received the revelations, who had been through the cave and the silence and the first public preaching and the boycott and the Year of Sorrow, had now reached the point at which he went to another town hoping for shelter and was driven out and stoned. The tradition remembers the stoning as a physical wound, and it remembers the emotional wound, and it remembers the way Muhammad prayed afterward — the prayer that is remembered as his supplication to God after the rejection at Ta'if, in which he expressed his distress and his sense of being abandoned, and in which he asked God to help him or to take him in His care.

**The journey to Ta'if**

The journey to Ta'if was a journey of the last resort. Muhammad had no place else to go. Mecca was hostile. The assassination plot was being formed. His wife was dead. His protector was dead. He had to go somewhere, and Ta'if was the place he chose.

Ta'if was not Mecca. It was a town of the Banu Thaqif, a tribe of the Hijaz, with its own sanctuary — the idol of al-Lat, one of the three goddesses who had been venerated at the Kaaba in Mecca, was particularly associated with Ta'if. The town was known for its agriculture, its vineyards, its cooler climate. It was a place that might have offered shelter, if the people there had been willing to give it.

Muhammad's reasoning, as the tradition reconstructs it, was that Ta'if might be more receptive than Mecca. The Meccan elite had rejected him. The town had boycotted him. The assassination plot was being formed. Ta'if was a different place, with different people, with its own tribal politics, with its own sanctuary. Perhaps the people of Ta'if would listen to his message. Perhaps they would accept him. Perhaps they would give him protection.

The hope was not unreasonable. Ta'if was a place that might have given shelter to a man who had no place else to go. But the hope was not realistic in the way that Muhammad needed it to be. The people of Ta'if refused him.

**The rejection**

Muhammad went to the leaders of Ta'if. He told them his message. He told them about the one God, about the idols, about the judgment, about the message that had come to him. He asked them to accept his message, and to give him protection.

The leaders of Ta'if refused. They not only refused. They drove him out. They set the town's children and the lower people against him. They told him that he was not welcome. They told the people to stone him, to drive him away, to keep him out of the town.

The children threw stones. The lower people threw stones. Muhammad was wounded. He was bleeding. He was exhausted. He fled from the town, and he went back toward Mecca in a state of physical and emotional devastation. The physical wounds were real. The emotional wounds were real. The rejection was total.

The story of the stoning is one of the most powerful episodes in the early biography, and it is one of the most human. The man who had received the revelations, who had been through the cave and the silence and the first public preaching and the boycott and the Year of Sorrow, had now reached the point at which he went to another town hoping for shelter and was driven out and stoned.

The tradition remembers the stoning as a physical wound, and it remembers the emotional wound, and it remembers the way Muhammad walked back toward Mecca, wounded and unable to walk easily, and the way he prayed afterward — the prayer that is remembered as his supplication to God after the rejection at Ta'if, in which he expressed his distress and his sense of being abandoned, and in which he asked God to help him or to take him in His care.

**The prayer after Ta'if**

The prayer that Muhammad is remembered as having made after Ta'if is one of the most powerful moments of the early biography. The tradition records that Muhammad, wounded and bleeding and exhausted, prayed to God, and that his prayer was a prayer of distress and of hope — a prayer in which he expressed his sense of being abandoned, and his sense of being alone, and his hope that God would help him.

The prayer is remembered as a prayer of real distress. Muhammad had just been stoned. He had just been driven out of Ta'if. He had just been rejected by the leaders of the town. He had just been wounded. He had just been at the lowest point of his life. And he prayed — not a prayer of triumph, not a prayer of certainty, but a prayer of distress, of hope, of the sense of being abandoned, of the hope that God would help.

The prayer is one of the moments in the early biography that should not be skipped. The triumphal story skips the Ta'if episode, or treats it as a brief setback on the way to the hijra. But the Ta'if episode is one of the most human moments of the early life, and the prayer is one of the most human prayers. The prayer should not be skipped. The prayer is the moment when Muhammad expressed his distress, and his hope, and his sense of being abandoned, and his hope that God would help him. The prayer is the moment when the interiority of the early life comes through most clearly.

**The angel and the mercy**

One of the traditions about Ta'if is that an angel came to Muhammad after the stoning, and offered to crush the town of Ta'if between two mountains, and that Muhammad refused, and that the refusal was a sign of his mercy and his restraint. The tradition is not unanimous on the detail, and it should not be treated as certain. But the tradition records the offer, the refusal, and the mercy. The story, even if it is shaped by later memory, captures something essential about Muhammad — the refusal of revenge, the refusal of the temptation to crush the people who had rejected him, the mercy that was part of the character of the man.

The refusal of the angel's offer is one of the moments in the early biography that should be treated with care. The tradition records the offer, the refusal, and the mercy. The detail should not be invented, but it should not be dismissed either. The refusal is part of the story that the tradition tells, and it is a story that captures something essential about Muhammad — the refusal of revenge, the refusal of the temptation to crush the people who had rejected him, the mercy that was part of the character of the man.

**The return to Mecca**

Muhammad returned to Mecca after Ta'if. He came back to the town that had persecuted him, to the town that had boycotted him, to the town that had tried to kill him. He came back wounded in body and in spirit, and he came back to the Meccan elite who had succeeded in making his position impossible in Ta'if, but who had not succeeded in killing him in Mecca.

The return is important because it shows that Muhammad survived the lowest point. The lowest point was Ta'if. The stoning was the lowest point. The rejection was the lowest point. And Muhammad survived it. He came back to Mecca. He kept going. He did not give up. The return is the moment when the story shows that the man who had been stoned at Ta'if was the man who would later go to Medina and succeed. The return is the moment when the story shows that the man who had been at the lowest point was the man who would rise again.

The Meccan elite had succeeded in making his position impossible in Ta'if. But they had not succeeded in killing him in Mecca. He was still alive, still receiving revelations, still under the pressure of the threat. The return is the moment when the story shows that the man who had been at the lowest point was still alive, still receiving revelations, still under the pressure of the threat, and still going forward.

**The negotiations with Yathrib**

The return to Mecca after Ta'if was followed by the negotiations with Yathrib — the town that would become Medina. The negotiations were the next stage of the story. They were the negotiations that led to the hijra — the migration of Muhammad and the Muslims from Mecca to Medina — and the hijra is the year zero of the Islamic calendar.

The negotiations with Yathrib were the work of the Muslims who had contacts with Yathrib, and of the people of Yathrib who had been impressed by Muhammad's message and had wanted to invite him to their town. The tradition records that the people of Yathrib had met Muhammad at the pilgrimage season or at the market, and that they had asked him to come to their town, and that Muhammad had agreed, and that the Muslims of Mecca began to migrate to Yathrib in small numbers before the final emigration.

The negotiations were the work of the Muslims who had been in Mecca, and of the people of Yathrib who had been impressed by Muhammad's message. The negotiations were the work of the Muslims who had been in the boycott, and in the Year of Sorrow, and in the stoning at Ta'if. The negotiations were the work of the Muslims who had survived the lowest point, and who had come back to Mecca, and who had then gone to Yathrib.

The chapter ends here, with the return to Mecca, the stoning at Ta'if, the prayer, the angel, the mercy, and the reader understanding that the Ta'if episode was the lowest point of Muhammad's life, and that the life that followed was made possible by the fact that he survived the lowest point and did not give up. The next chapter — Chapter 19 — will look at the night journey, the ascension, the negotiation with Yathrib, and the hijra — the year zero.

## The Night Journey and the Road Out

In the year before the hijra, in the period after the deaths of Khadija and Abu Talib, after the rejection at Ta'if, and in the midst of the Meccan elite's preparation to kill him, Muhammad received what the tradition has remembered as the Isra and the Mi'raj — the Night Journey and the Ascension. It is one of the most famous episodes of Muhammad's life, and one of the hardest for a biographer to handle, because the sources are late, because they disagree on the details, because the event is, in the tradition's own terms, extraordinary, and because the honest account has to hold together two things at once: the event as the tradition remembers it, and the event as a modern reader can critically assess it.

The chapter that follows maps the event carefully — the two parts of the Isra and the Mi'raj, the layers of the sources, the reason the event matters for the biography, and the road out of Mecca that followed, the negotiations with Yathrib, the hijra itself, and the cave of Thawr. The road out is the bridge between the Meccan period and the Medinan period, and it is the bridge the biographer has to cross carefully, because it is the moment when the story changes from a man under pressure in his own town to the head of a community in a new place.

**The Isra — the night journey to Jerusalem**

TheIsra is the journey from Mecca to Jerusalem in a single night. The tradition says that Muhammad was taken by night from the sacred mosque in Mecca — the Masjid al-Haram, the sanctuary that

housed the Kaaba — to the distant mosque in Jerusalem, the al-Masjid al-Aqsa, the Farthest Mosque, the site that the tradition identifies with the Temple mount, the place where the prophets of old had lived and prayed.

The journey, as the tradition remembers it, was a journey of the body — Muhammad's body was taken from Mecca to Jerusalem in a single night. Some versions say he was taken on a creature called the Buraq, a creature that was described in the tradition as something like a mule with wings, or a creature smaller than a mule and larger than a donkey, or a creature that was white and that carried him at great speed. The story of the Buraq belongs to the later tradition, and it should not be treated as certain. But the basic claim — that Muhammad was taken from Mecca to Jerusalem in a single night — is the Isra, and it is the first part of the remembered event.

At Jerusalem, the tradition says, Muhammad was met by the prophets of old. He was led in prayer with them — the Muslim tradition holds that Muhammad led the other prophets in prayer at Jerusalem, and that this was a sign of his place in the succession of the prophets. The tradition says that he was met by Moses, and by Abraham, and by Jesus, and by the other prophets, and that he stood with them in prayer.

The detail of the prayer is important. The tradition holds that Muhammad led the prophets in prayer, and that this placed him in a position of leadership over the previous prophets — a claim that would later be understood as a claim to supersession, and that was originally, in the tradition's own memory, a claim to continuity: Muhammad was the last of the prophets, and he was led by the previous prophets in prayer, and he was given the prayer that would be the central practice of his community. The Jerusalem connection is also the origin of the Muslim claim to Jerusalem as a holy place, and it is the origin of the connection between Islam and the Jerusalem of the prophets.

**The Mi'raj — the ascension through the heavens**

The Mi'raj is the ascension from Jerusalem through the heavens. The tradition says that Muhammad ascended from Jerusalem through the seven heavens, meeting the angels and the prophets at the various stages, and that he arrived at the point where he spoke with God — the point, in the tradition's memory, of the direct divine communication that gave him the commandment of the five daily prayers.

The tradition describes the heavens as stages, each one associated with a prophet or a sign. At each stage, Muhammad meets a prophet — at one stage Adam, at another John the Baptist and Jesus, at another Joseph, at another Idris, at another Aaron, at another Moses, at another Abraham. At the highest stage, Muhammad speaks with God. The tradition says that God gave Muhammad the commandment of the five daily prayers — the fifty prayers that were first commanded, then reduced to twenty-five, then to ten, then to five, in the conversation between Muhammad and Moses at the various stages.

The story of the reduction of the prayers is one of the most famous details of the Mi'raj. Moses, according to the tradition, advised Muhammad to ask God to reduce the number of prayers, because he knew from his own experience that the people would not be able to bear fifty prayers a day. Muhammad asked, and the number was reduced. Moses advised again. The number was reduced again. The process continued until the number was five. Moses advised one more time, but Muhammad said that he was ashamed to ask again, and that the five prayers were the final

commandment. The five daily prayers are one of the central practices of Islam, and the tradition holds that they were given in the Mi'raj.

**The layers of the sources**

The night journey is a difficult source to handle, because the sources are not unified on the details, and because the event is, in the tradition's own terms, an extraordinary one. Some traditions treat the Isra as a physical journey — Muhammad's body was transported from Mecca to Jerusalem in a single night. Other traditions treat it as a spiritual journey — the body remained in Mecca and the soul or the vision traveled.

The honest account does not settle what cannot be settled. The event is remembered across the Islamic tradition as a real event, and the disagreement about whether it was physical or spiritual is a disagreement within the tradition about the nature of the event, not a disagreement about whether the tradition remembers it as happening. The honest account does not pretend that the disagreement can be resolved. It registers it, and then moves on to what the event meant for the man who experienced it.

The sources here require care, because the sources must be treated with their lateness in view. The Isra and Mi'raj are remembered in the hadith and the sira, and they are remembered in a form that developed over time. The Qur'an itself mentions the night journey in a single verse — "Glory to the One who took His servant by night from the sacred mosque to the distant mosque" — but the Qur'an does not narrate the ascension or the meeting with the prophets or the command of the five prayers. Those details come from the later tradition.

The Qur'anic verse is the only contemporary layer of the event. The rest is the later tradition's memory of the event. The honest account reads the verse as the contemporary layer, and the hadith and sira as the later tradition's memory of the event, and does not conflate the two. The verse says that God took His servant by night from the sacred mosque to the distant mosque. The rest is the tradition's memory of what the journey was, what the ascension was, what the meeting with God was, what the command of the prayers was.

The reader should understand that the event is remembered in a form that the tradition shaped, and that the Qur'anic verse is the only contemporary layer of the event. The honest account does not hide the lateness of the sources. It registers the layers, and then asks what the event meant for the man who experienced it.

**What the event meant**

The night journey, as remembered, has several important consequences, and they are worth tracking.

First, it gave Muhammad, in his own understanding, a direct experience of the divine presence and a confirmation of his prophethood that was, in his experience, unmistakable. The meeting with God — in the tradition's memory, the point of the Mi'raj — was the moment in which the prayers were commanded, and the five daily prayers are one of the central practices of Islam in their origin. The event, in this sense, is the origin of the prayer regimen, and it is the origin of the claim that Muhammad was taken into the divine presence and given the instruction that would structure the daily life of the Muslim community.

For Muhammad, the event was the most direct encounter with God that the tradition remembers. The first revelation in the cave had been an encounter with the angel. The events that followed had been

revelations, words spoken to him over time. The Mi'raj was the encounter with God himself — the point at which Muhammad, in the tradition's memory, spoke with God, and was given the command that would structure the daily life of the Muslim community. The event was the confirmation of the prophethood that the first revelation had begun, and the confirmation of the message that the years of preaching had developed.

Second, the journey to Jerusalem and the meeting with the prophets of old is a claim about Muhammad's place in the Abrahamic succession. The tradition remembers that he led the prophets in prayer in Jerusalem, and that this placed him in a position of leadership over the previous prophets. The claim was originally one of continuity — Muhammad was the last of the prophets, and he was led by the previous prophets in prayer, and he was given the prayer that would be the central practice of his community. The later understanding of the event was one of supersession — the claim that Muhammad was the final prophet, and that the previous prophets had been messengers in anticipation of him.

The Jerusalem connection is also the origin of the Muslim claim to Jerusalem as a holy place. The tradition remembers that Muhammad was taken to Jerusalem in the night journey, and that he led the prophets in prayer there. The site became, in the Muslim understanding, the third holiest place in Islam, after Mecca and Medina. The night journey is the origin of that claim, and it is the origin of the connection between Islam and the Jerusalem of the prophets.

Third, the event, in the chronology of Muhammad's life, comes at a moment of extreme pressure. The Year of Sorrow had ended with the deaths of Khadija and Abu Talib. Ta'if had ended with the stoning and the rejection. The assassination plot was being organized. Muhammad was at the lowest point of his life in Mecca — or close to it — and the night journey came in this context, as a confirmation and a comfort. The tradition remembers that the event was a comfort to Muhammad, and that it strengthened him for the trials that were to come.

The chronology matters for the biographer because it places the event at the moment when Muhammad was most in need of it. The deaths of Khadija and Abu Talib had left him exposed. The stoning at Ta'if had left him wounded. The assassination plot had left him in danger. And the night journey came at this moment, as a confirmation and a comfort. The event was the response of the divine to the pressure of the human, and the tradition remembers it as such.

**The road out — the negotiations with Yathrib**

The road out is the next part of the story, and it is the story of the negotiations with Yathrib — the town that would become Medina — and the emigration that followed.

The negotiations were carried out by the people of Yathrib, who had been impressed by Muhammad's message and wanted to invite him to their town, and by the Muslims of Mecca, who had contacts with Yathrib and who had been looking for a place to go. The tradition records that the people of Yathrib had met Muhammad at the pilgrimage season or at the market, and that they had asked him to come to their town, and that Muhammad had agreed, and that the Muslims of Mecca began to migrate to Yathrib in small numbers before the final emigration.

The first Muslims to go to Yathrib were the ones who had the contacts there, the ones who had been impressed by the message, the ones who had wanted to leave Mecca because of the pressure. The migration happened in small numbers at first, as the Muslims went to Yathrib one by one or in small

groups, and as the people of Yathrib received them and gave them protection. The migration was not a single event. It was a process that happened over a period of time, and Muhammad's own migration came last, after the assassination plot had been set, and after the Quraysh had decided to kill him, and after he had learned that the plot was in motion and had to leave immediately.

The negotiations with Yathrib were the work of the Muslims who had been in Mecca, and of the people of Yathrib who had been impressed by Muhammad's message. The negotiations were the work of the Muslims who had been in the boycott, and in the Year of Sorrow, and in the stoning at Ta'if. The negotiations were the work of the Muslims who had survived the lowest point, and who had come back to Mecca, and who had then gone to Yathrib.

**The hijra — the migration**

The hijra is the most important single event in the early Islamic story, because it is the moment at which the Muslims left Mecca and went to a town that would accept them, and at which the Islamic community began to exist as a political and social entity. The migration was not just a move. It was the founding of a new center. It was the beginning of the Islamic state. It was the beginning of the Islamic calendar. It was the beginning of the period in which Muhammad was not just a preacher in Mecca but the head of a community.

The tradition records that Muhammad left Mecca in the night, with Abu Bakr, and that the assassins were waiting for him at his house, and that he escaped by having Ali sleep in his bed in his place, and that he and Abu Bakr went to the cave in Thawr, and that they stayed there for a few days, and that they then traveled to Medina.

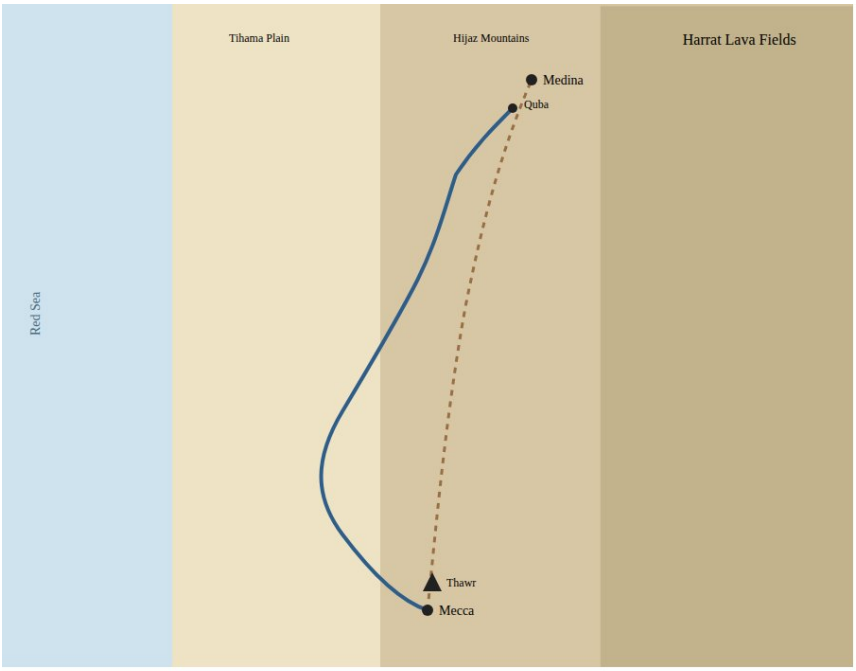


Figure: The traditional route of the hijra, from Mecca south to the cave of Thawr and then north through the Hijaz mountains to Medina. (Image: SPQR10, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The detail of the cave is one of the most famous moments of the hijra. Muhammad and Abu Bakr went to the cave of Thawr, a cave in the mountain outside Mecca, and they stayed there for three days. The assassins were watching the house, waiting for Muhammad to come out. They did not

know that he had escaped. They found Ali in the bed, and they believed that Muhammad was in the bed. They did not find Muhammad. Muhammad and Abu Bakr stayed in the cave, and the tradition remembers that Abu Bakr was afraid, and that Muhammad comforted him, and that God sent spiders to weave webs at the entrance of the cave, and that pigeons laid eggs there, and that the web and the eggs deceived the pursuers into thinking that no one had entered the cave recently. The story of the cave is one of the most famous moments of the early Islamic memory, and it is one of the moments that the tradition remembers with the detail that distinguishes it from the legendary elaboration that surrounds some other moments.

The journey to Medina took about a week. The tradition records that Muhammad and Abu Bakr traveled overland, following the coast road to avoid the main caravan tracks and the pursuit of the Quraysh, and that they arrived in Quba, on the outskirts of Medina, and that Muhammad stayed in Quba for a few days, and that he then went to Medina. The tradition records that the Muslims of Medina came out to meet him, and that the women of Medina sang, and that the children welcomed him. The arrival in Medina was the beginning of the Medinan period, and the beginning of the Islamic state.

**The significance of the hijra**

The hijra is the most important single event in the early Islamic story, because it is the moment at which the Muslims left Mecca and went to a town that would accept them, and at which the Islamic community began to exist as a political and social entity. The migration was not just a move. It was the founding of a new center. It was the beginning of the Islamic state. It was the beginning of the Islamic calendar. It was the beginning of the period in which Muhammad was not just a preacher in Mecca but the head of a community.

The Muslims left Mecca for Medina. The migration was the result of everything that had come before — the message, the opposition, the boycott, the Year of Sorrow, Ta'if, the night journey, and the assassination plot. It was the beginning of a new phase of the story, the phase in which Muhammad would become the statesman, the judge, the general, and the head of the community.

The hijra is the year zero of the Islamic calendar. The years are counted from the hijra, not from the birth of Muhammad, not from the first revelation, but from the migration to Medina. The calendar is the sign that the migration was the founding moment of the Islamic community, the moment at which the community began to exist as a political and social entity. The years before the hijra are the years of the Meccan period. The years after the hijra are the years of the Medinan period. The calendar is the sign that the migration was the turning point.

The road out from Mecca is the bridge to that phase. The chapter ends here, with the hijra, the arrival in Medina, and the reader understanding that the road out is the bridge between the Meccan period and the Medinan period, and that the Medinan period is the period in which Muhammad would become the statesman, the judge, the general, and the head of the community. Part Five takes up the Medinan period in full: the Constitution of Medina, the battles, the Jewish tribes, and the household. The road out from Mecca is the bridge to that phase.

# Part Five: Medina

## A New Kind of Community

Muhammad arrived in Medina with the Muslims who had followed him from Mecca, and with a message that had already cost him his wife, his protector, his standing in Mecca, and his physical safety. He arrived in a town that had invited him, a town whose people had offered him protection and had offered the Muslims refuge, and a town whose tribal life was organized in a way that was different from Mecca's — less dominated by a single sanctuary and a single dominant tribe, more a collection of the Medinan Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, and the Jewish tribes that lived there, and the others who had a place in the town.

The first thing Muhammad had to do in Medina was to establish the community on a new footing. In Mecca, the Muslims had been a persecuted minority in a hostile town. In Medina, they were a substantial body that had its own base, its own people, its own land, and its own future. But Medina was not simply a Muslim town. It was a town of Arab tribes and Jewish tribes, of relationships and rivalries, of a settlement that had its own internal politics and its own conflicts. The Aws and the Khazraj, the two main Arab tribes of Medina, had been fighting each other for years before Muhammad arrived, and their conflict was part of the reason they had looked for a mediator and had turned to Muhammad. Muhammad's arrival, in this sense, was not only a religious event. It was an event in Medinan politics.

The Constitution of Medina — the document, or the arrangement, that is remembered in the tradition as the foundation of the first Muslim community in Medina — is the key to the transformation. It is a document that is known from the tradition, mainly from Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham and the later historians, and it is one of the most remarkable pieces of early Islamic history. It is a document that binds Muslims, pagans, and Jewish tribes into a single community — the *umma* — with Muhammad as its leader, and with a set of rules for how the groups would live together, how disputes would be settled, how war and peace would be managed, and how each group's religious identity would be respected.

The Constitution of Medina is not, in its survival, a perfect document. It comes down to us in the traditional sources in a form that may have been shaped in transmission, and it is not a modern constitution in the sense of a single legal instrument. The document's exact date, its unity as a single text, and the precise terms of some of its clauses are all matters of scholarly debate, and the honest account does not pretend that these questions are settled. But the substance of it is clear enough: it established the Muslims of Medina — the Meccan emigrants and the Medinan helpers, the *ansar* — as one community, it recognized the Jewish tribes as parties to the agreement, it established the principle that the believers and the Jews were one community in the political sense while remaining distinct in the religious sense, it set rules for mutual defense, for the payment of blood money, for the conduct of war, for the resolution of disputes, and for the role of Muhammad as the final arbiter.

The document is astonishing in one respect above all: it made the Muslim community a political entity that included non-Muslims as parties to a single agreement. The Jewish tribes of Medina — the Banu Qaynuqa, the Banu Nadir, the Banu Qurayza, and others — were not forced to convert. They were not required to give up their religious identity. They were bound, in the political arrangement, to the Muslims as allies and as parties to the same community, and they were given rights and Obligations under the same framework. The constitutional idea — that a religiously diverse population could be organized into a single political community under a single leadership — was not a common idea in the seventh century. The Constitution of Medina is, in this sense, one of the most original political documents of the early period.

For the biographer, the Constitution of Medina is one of the most important pieces of the story, because it shows Muhammad making the transition from a man who had been a preacher and a persecuted leader to a man who was now the leader of a real political community. The community that had followed him from Mecca was not just a religious group. It was now, in Medina, a polity. The Constitution was the framework in which that polity was built, and it was the framework in which the Muslims and the Jewish tribes and the others lived together for the years that followed, before the conflicts with the Jewish tribes that will be the subject of Chapter 25.

The Constitution matters for what it reveals about the man who made it. Muhammad had arrived in Medina as a refugee with a following. He could have set himself up as the leader of the Muslims only, excluding the other groups of the town. He did not. He made a compact that included the Jews, that recognized their distinct religious identity, that gave them rights and obligations within the same political framework as the Muslims. This was not a universal declaration of religious freedom — the document was a political arrangement made in a specific situation, and it was shaped by the needs of that situation — but it was, in its context, an unusual act of political inclusion. It set a precedent for the kind of polity Muhammad would try to build: a community that was, in the religious sense, Muslim, but that in the political sense could include others.

The Constitution also established the principle of the *qibla* — the direction of prayer — at this stage. The Muslims at first prayed facing Jerusalem, in a gesture of connection with the Jewish and Christian tradition and with the site of the night journey. The *qibla* would later be changed to Mecca, and the change would be one of the markers of the community's independence, but at the beginning the Jerusalem orientation was part of the Abrahamic framework in which the community was formed.

The difference between the physical arrival and the political act was the difference between the refugee and the founder. Muhammad's arrival in Medina was the physical event. The Constitution was the political event. The two together transformed Muhammad from a refugee with followers into the head of a community. The story from this point is the story of that community in action — the legal and administrative work of the statesman, the battles that followed, the political and religious crisis with the Jewish tribes, and the way the community developed into the shape that would carry Islam into the rest of Arabia.

The Constitution also made provision for the clan-based structure of Medinan society. The document did not erase the tribal affiliations that had shaped the lives of the people of Medina. It acknowledged them. It bound the various tribes to each other through the new political community while leaving their internal structures intact. This was a pragmatic arrangement. The tribes were realities. The new

community had to work with them, not pretend they did not exist. The result was a polity that was layered: the political community of the *umma* on top, the tribal affiliations underneath, and the religious community of Muslims within and across both. This layered structure would prove unstable over time — the conflicts with the Jewish tribes, the growing distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, the eventual breakdown of the arrangement — but at the moment of its creation it was a genuine attempt to build a political home for groups that had not previously lived together under a single authority.

With the Constitution in place and the community established, Muhammad was now the leader of Medina as well as the leader of the Meccan emigrants. The next chapter looks at what it meant for Muhammad to become a statesman, a judge, a tax collector, a legislator, and a man who had to receive revelations that were, from this point, longer, more legal, and more concerned with the conduct of a state.

## The Prophet Becomes a Statesman

Muhammad's life did not end with the migration to Medina. It changed shape. In Mecca, he had been a preacher, a persecuted leader, a man who had received revelations and had been subjected to the pressure of a hostile town. In Medina, he became, over time, a statesman.

The change is not a change of vocation. The revelations continued, and Muhammad was still the man who received them, who believed they came from God, and who transmitted them to his community. But the character of the revelations changed, and the character of Muhammad's work changed with them. The Meccan revelations had been short and intense, focused on judgment, the vulnerable, the one God, and the warning to the Quraysh. The Medinan revelations, from the time after the migration onward, were longer, more detailed, and more concerned with law,with community organization, with the rules of inheritance and marriage and divorce, with the rules of war and peace, with the treatment of the poor and the orphan and the debtor, with the structure of the community and the relationships between the Muslims and the other groups in Medina.

The change in the revelations reflects the change in Muhammad's circumstances. In Medina, Muhammad was not just the man who warned a hostile town. He was the man who had to govern a community, resolve disputes, collect taxes, organize the defense of the settlement, negotiate treaties, and make decisions that affected the lives of a population that included Muslims, Jews, and the other inhabitants of the town. The revelations that came in Medina were the revelations of a man who was doing those things, and they were the revelations of a man who was receiving from God the guidance that would shape the community's legal and moral life.

The boredom that the biographer has to guard against here is the sense that the Medinan period is a catalogue of rules and campaigns, the sense that the statesman's work is less interesting than the preacher's. This is a mistake. The Medinan material is where the biography's most distinctive insight sits — the insight that the revelations change character with the job, and that the change tells us something about the man who received them. Muhammad was not the same man after the migration that he had been before. He was the same man, but he had a different job, and the revelations that came to him while he was doing that job were different in kind. The sequence of the revelations —

short and intense, judgment and warning in Mecca; long and legal, detail and regulation in Medina — is not an accident. It is the record of a life in which the message grew with the responsibilities.

The statesman's work included the administration of the community. Muhammad set up the systems by which the Muslim community in Medina would live: the collection of the *zakat*, the alms tax, the poor tax, the systematic giving of a portion of wealth to the support of the poor and the community; the organization of the distribution of spoils and the rules for the division of wealth that came into the community from war and from other sources; the regulation of marriage, divorce, and inheritance; the establishment of the prayer times and the communal prayer; the regulation of the market and the weights and measures; the rules for the treatment of the orphan, the debtor, the traveler, the captive, the slave, and the freedman.

The statesman's work also included the judiciary. Muhammad decided disputes between members of the community, between Muslims and the other inhabitants of Medina, and between the tribes. The tradition records that he was the final arbiter in Medina, and that disputes were brought to him, and that he decided them according to the revelations that had come and according to the principles that the community was building. The judicial role shows Muhammad in a new register — not just the preacher or the warner, but the man who had to apply the message to the concrete problems of a real society.

The tradition preserves a number of cases that give a sense of how this worked in practice. There are reports of disputes over inheritance, over the boundaries of property, over the treatment of debtors, over the responsibilities of one tribe to another when a killing had occurred. The details of these cases are not always consistent across the sources, and some belong to the later tradition's effort to illustrate Muhammad's wisdom. But the general picture is clear enough: Muhammad was the point at which the community's legal and moral questions came to rest. He was not, in the Medinan period, a king in the sense of a ruler who imposed his will by force on a subject population. He was, rather, a leader whose authority rested on a combination of religious standing, personal reputation, and the consent of the groups who had agreed to be part of the community he led. That authority was real, but it had to be exercised in a context where the Medinan tribes retained their own loyalty and their own grievances.

The statesman's work also included the military and the diplomatic.

The statesman's work also included the military and the diplomatic. The battles that would follow — Badr, Uhud, the Trench, and the later campaigns — were not the subject of a standing army in the modern sense. They were the actions of a community that had to defend itself, to organize raid and counter-raid, to negotiate with the surrounding tribes, and to deal with the Meccan elite's determination to destroy the Muslim community. Muhammad was the head of the community in these matters, and the decisions he made — when to fight, when to wait, when to negotiate, when to forgive — were the decisions of a man who was both a religious leader and a political leader, and who had to make the two roles work together.

The point of the chapter is not to list these functions. It is to show that the period in Medina was the period in which Muhammad became a statesman, and to argue that this matters for the biography because it shows the life of a man who was given a message and then had to live out that message in the practical life of a real community. The Medinan period is not the anticlimax of the Meccan period. It is the period in which the message, which had been a warning to Mecca, became a social

and legal and political reality in Medina, and in which the man who brought the message had to live with the consequences of that reality.

The chapter ends here, with Muhammad established in Medina as the head of a community that was both religious and political, and with the reader understanding that the Medinan revelations and the Medinan work were the record of a life in which the message became a state. The next chapter — Chapter 22 — will look at the first battle, Badr, the raid that became a battle, and the way the outnumbered Muslims won and were transformed.

## Badr

The first battle of the Muslim community in Medina came out of the normal Arabian practice of raiding, and it turned into something that changed the movement's sense of itself forever.

The background is the rivalry between Mecca and Medina, the persistence of the Meccan elite's determination to destroy the Muslim community, and the economic and political logic of Arabian warfare. The Muslims in Medina were not simply a religious community. They were a political and military entity, and they had to secure their own food, their own wealth, their own safety, and their own position. The Meccan elite, for their part, had not abandoned the idea of destroying Muhammad and his followers. The boycott had failed. The emigration to Abyssinia had not eliminated the Muslims. The assassination plot had failed. The Muslims had escaped to Medina. The Meccan elite now faced a community that was established outside Mecca, that was building its own power, and that was, from the Meccan point of view, a threat to the town's prestige and its economic position.

The raid that became the Battle of Badr began as a Meccan caravan. The tradition records that a caravan of the Quraysh, returning from Syria under the leadership of Abu Sufyan, was making its way back to Mecca, and that Muhammad and the Muslims set out to intercept it. The caravan was a rich target. It was carrying goods that had been acquired in Syria, and the Muslims hoped to capture it. The Meccan elite, hearing that the Muslims were coming, sent a force from Mecca to protect the caravan — a force that was intended to defend the goods and to teach the Muslims a lesson. The caravan itself, under Abu Sufyan, heard that the Muslims were coming and took a different route, escaping the interception. But the Meccan force, now without the caravan to defend, was still in the area, and the Muslims, having learned that the caravan had escaped, decided to face the Meccan force instead.

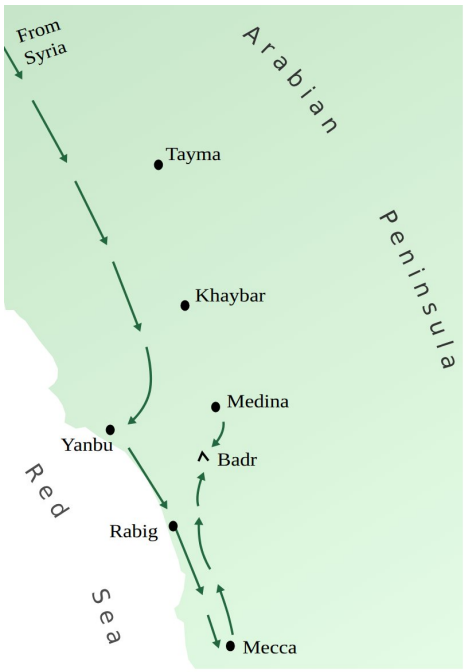


Figure: The Badr campaign, 624 — the Meccan caravan's route from the northwest, the Muslim army moving to intercept it, and the Meccan relief force converging from the southeast. (Image: Tom66, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The battle took place at Badr, a place between Mecca and Medina, in the year 2 AH (624 CE). The Muslims were heavily outnumbered. The Meccan force is traditionally given as around a thousand men, the Muslim force as around three hundred. The Muslims had the advantage of morale, of the belief that God was with them, and of the leadership of Muhammad. The Meccans had the advantage of numbers and of equipment and of the confidence of the proud Quraysh.

The battle was fought, and the Muslims won. The tradition records the course of the battle, the deaths of the Meccan leaders — among them Abu Jahl, the most determined of the early opponents — the capture of the Meccan prisoners, the division of the spoils, and the way the victory transformed the Muslim community's understanding of itself. The victory at Badr was the first major military success of the Muslim community, and it was a success that came against a force that was stronger in numbers and that had all the local advantages. The Muslims believed, and the Qur'an later reflected, that the victory was a sign of God's help, and that it confirmed the truth of the message.

The battle was not, however, simply a triumph. The Muslims had made choices that brought them to this point — the choice to intercept the caravan, the choice to fight rather than withdraw when the caravan escaped. These were choices made under pressure, in a moment when the community's survival was still uncertain. The victory validated those choices, but it did not erase the risks they had involved. The community that won at Badr was not yet a secure power. It was a small group that had just astonished itself by defeating a much larger force, and the exhilaration of the victory sat alongside the knowledge that the Meccan elite had not been destroyed and would not stop.

The prisoners taken at Badr were treated according to the rules that Muhammad set.

The battle was not a simple thing. The Muslims had planned to intercept the caravan and had ended up fighting the Meccan force instead. The battle was the result of choices made in a specific context, and it was the result of the Arabian practice of raiding and the Meccan determination to destroy the Muslim community. The Muslims were not a nation-state. They were a community that had to fight

to survive, and Badr was the fight in which they first proved that they could survive against the Meccan elite's military power.

The prisoners taken at Badr were treated according to the rules that Muhammad set, and the treatment of the prisoners is one of the episodes in the early story that the tradition records in detail and that the modern reader should read with care. The Muslims took prisoners, and they treated them in ways that were, in the context of Arabian warfare, relatively humane — some prisoners were released in exchange for ransom, some were released for nothing, some were set free on the condition that they teach the Muslims to read and write. The kindness that the tradition records in the treatment of some prisoners is the kind of detail that the later tradition preserved because it wanted to show that the Muslims were better than their enemies, and that Muhammad's community had standards. The honest biographer does not flatly dismiss the tradition's record of humane treatment, but he also does not pretend that the battle was a modern operation, or that the treatment of prisoners was free from the roughness of the period.

The victory at Badr changed the balance of power in Arabia. It showed the Quraysh that the Muslims could not simply be crushed by force. It showed the Muslims that they could fight and win. It strengthened the morale of the Muslim community. It made Muhammad's leadership more secure. It gave the community wealth from the spoils. It made the Meccan elite realize, with alarm, that the Muslims were a serious force.

For Muhammad, the victory had a personal dimension as well. He had been the one who made the decision to intercept the caravan. He had been the one who led the community into the battle. The victory confirmed his leadership in a way that nothing before had done — not the respect of the Meccans in the years before his prophethood, not the fact that he was known as al-Amin, not the support of Khadija and Abu Talib. Badr was a public test, and he had passed it. The man who had once come down from the cave thinking he was mad had now led a community to victory against a force that outnumbered it. The contrast between those two moments — the cave and Badr — is one of the measure of the change that the first fourteen years had produced.

The chapter from this point turns to the way the Meccan elite recovered and planned revenge, and the way the next battle, Uhud, would come in 625 and would end in a Muslim defeat and a serious loss. But Badr is the first battle, and it is the battle that established the Muslim community as a military force. The victory at Badr was not the end of the story. It was the beginning of a phase of warfare that would continue for years, and that would test the community in ways that Badr did not.

The chapter ends here, with the Muslims victorious at Badr, the spirits of the community high, and the Meccans determined to recover. The next chapter — Chapter 23 — will look at Uhud, the defeat, and the way losing changed the movement.

## Uhud

The second major battle of the Muslim community in Medina ended in defeat, and the defeat mattered.

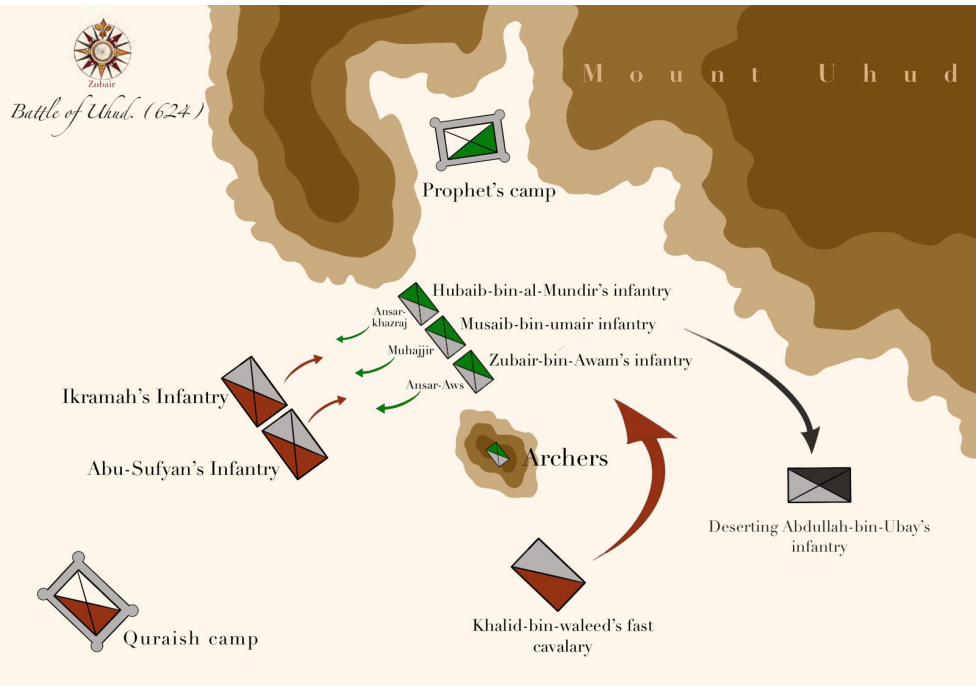


Figure: Troop positions at Uhud, 625 — the archers on the hill above the Muslim line, whose abandonment of their post exposed the army to Khalid ibn al-Walid's cavalry. (Image: DrZubairRashid, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

Uhud took place in 625, a year after Badr, and it is remembered as the battle in which the Muslims were beaten back, in which the Meccan force under Abu Sufyan managed to inflict serious losses, and in which the Muslims' own disobedience contributed to the outcome. The battle was fought on the slopes of Mount Uhud, north of Medina, and the terrain played a role in the fighting. The Muslims had taken a position on the mountain, with a small detachment left to guard the rear against a Meccan flanking movement. The Meccans attacked, the Muslims fought, and at a critical moment some of the Muslim fighters — young men, tempted by the hope of capturing the Meccan war booty — left their position against orders and went down from the mountain to pursue the Meccan army. The move left the Muslim lines exposed, and the Meccans turned and counterattacked, and the battle turned into a reversal.

The defeat was serious. Some of the Muslims were killed — seventy men, by the traditional count — including a number of the leading men of Medina and the Meccan emigrants. Among the dead were the uncle of Muhammad, Hamza, who had been one of the first to take up the sword in defense of the Muslims and who had become a symbol of the community's martial spirit. The loss of Hamza was a personal blow to Muhammad and a symbolic wound to the community, because he had been a figure of such visible courage. Muhammad himself was wounded — the tradition remembers the wound, the rumor that he had been killed, and the way the rumor spread, and the way he was found alive afterward and confirmed that he was alive. The loss of life was not trivial. It was a setback, and it was an emotional shock, and it was a test of the community's confidence in the way that Badr had not been a test.

The question of Hamza's death is one of the moments in the battle that the tradition remembers with particular sharpness. He was killed by a slave of the Meccan force, in an exchange that the sources describe in some detail. The killing was not, in the tradition's account, a noble duel between warriors but a sudden act in the confusion of the battle — which is, in its own way, a more honest kind of

detail than a more heroic version might have been. The death of such a prominent figure in such a manner is the kind of thing that the later tradition preserves because it was felt to matter, and it matters because it shows that the battle was not a clean encounter but a violent event in which the outcome was determined by many small acts, some of them ugly.

The Qur'an's response to Uhud is one of the most direct pieces of evidence for the way the early community processed a military defeat. The suras that came after Uhud contain passages that are, in tone, very different from the triumphant passages after Badr. They speak of the wound that was inflicted on the Muslims, of the distress of the battle, of the Muslims' guilt for disobeying Muhammad's orders, and of the need for steadfastness and repentance. The tone is not triumphal. It is somber, instructional, and honest. The Qur'an does not hide the defeat. It takes it seriously, and it uses it to teach the lessons that the defeat made visible.

The Muslims' disobedience at Uhud is an important detail. The young men who left their position against orders were tempted by the promise of war booty, and their action exposed the lines and contributed to the defeat. The tradition records the sequence clearly, and it records the lesson that the community had to learn — that success in battle depended not only on fighting but on obedience to the strategy, and that the pursuit of booty could have consequences that outweighed the immediate gain.

The Meccan side of the battle is also worth tracking. The Meccans under Abu Sufyan had not abandoned their determination to crush the Muslims. Badr had been a defeat for them, and Uhud was, in part, the chance to recover. The Meccan force came to Uhud with the memory of Badr in mind, and the battle was, in their terms, a reversal of the earlier result. But the reversal was not complete — the Meccans did not follow up to take Medina, and the Muslims remained in the town, and the battle ended without the Muslims being destroyed.

The chapter from this point turns to the way the defeat affected the Muslim community, the way the morale was restored, and the way the community continued to develop despite the loss. Uhud was a serious setback, but it was not a catastrophe. The Muslims remained in Medina. Their leadership was intact. Their faith, though shaken, was not destroyed. The defeat was a test, and the test was the subject of the Qur'anic response, which used the defeat as a lesson in discipline, obedience, and steadfastness.

The chapter ends here, with the Muslims having suffered a defeat they did not want, and with the reader understanding that Uhud was a serious loss, but that the community survived it, and that the next phase — the Battle of the Trench — would test them in a different way, and would require them to defend Medina itself rather than to meet the Meccans in the open field.

## The Trench

The third major military crisis of the Muslim community in Medina came in 627, when a large confederate force assembled against Medina itself, and the Muslims had to defend the town rather than meet the enemy in the open.

The background is the accumulation of the Meccan elite's hostility, the continuing rivalry, and the alliances that brought together the Meccans and their allies in a force large enough to threaten the

Muslims' survival. The tradition records that the Meccans, after Badr and Uhud, were still determined to destroy the Muslim community, and that they gathered a confederate force from Mecca and from the surrounding tribes — a force that was intended to attack Medina directly. The confederate army is traditionally given as a large force, and the Muslims, who were outnumbered, had to find a way to defend the town.

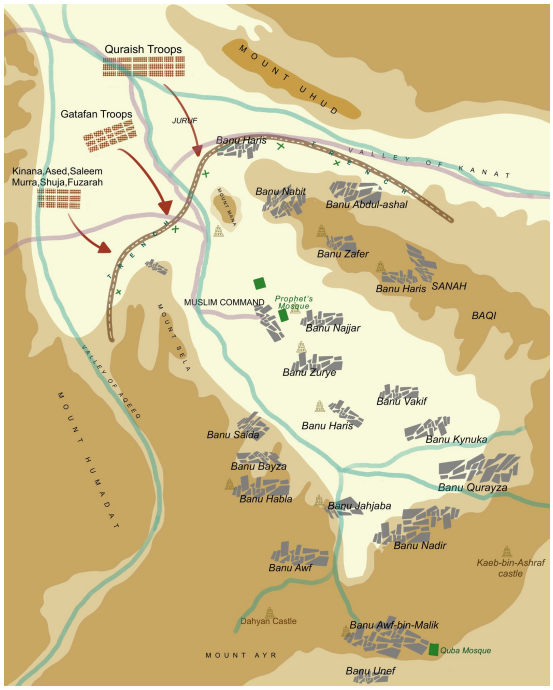


Figure: Medina in 627, showing the trench dug along the settlement's exposed northern side and the tribal quarters — Aws, Khazraj, and the Jewish tribes including the Qurayza and Nadir — spread across the oasis. (Image: DrZubairRashid, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The defense centered on a trench dug around the exposed side of Medina. The idea was to create a barrier that the confederate cavalry could not easily cross, and to force the enemy into a siege rather than a pitched battle on terms favorable to them. The trench is one of the most distinctive elements in the early Islamic military story, and it is one of the clearest examples of Muhammad's strategic thinking in Medina. The trench turned the battle into a siege, and the siege turned on the endurance of the Muslims, the weather, the mutual antagonisms within the confederate force, and the negotiations that eventually broke the siege.

The siege lasted for some weeks, according to the tradition, and the Muslims were under severe strain. The confederate army surrounded Medina, and the Muslims in the trench faced the enemy across the barrier, and the situation was tense, and the outcome was not assured. The pressure of the siege, the way it worked, and the way the Muslims held out are worth tracking carefully. The trench itself was an innovation — digging a ditch around the exposed side of Medina was not a standard Arabian tactic, and it reflected Muhammad's willingness to adapt the methods of warfare to the specific circumstances of this siege. The confederates expected to fight a pitched battle or to storm the town; they did not expect a defensive ditch that neutralized their cavalry. The surprise was mutual: the Muslims surprised the confederates by the existence of the trench, and the confederates surprised the Muslims by the stubbornness of their siege.

The confederate force did not remain united throughout the siege. The tradition records that the Meccans and their allies had their own internal tensions, and that the weather, and the failure of the siege to break, and the negotiations, led to a collapse of the confederacy. The siege ended with the confederates withdrawing, and the Muslims' survival was secured. The Battle of the Trench was not a victory in the sense of a field battle in which the Muslims defeated the enemy in open combat. It was a victory in the sense that the Muslims survived a siege that was intended to destroy them, and that the confederate force failed to take Medina.

For Muhammad, the siege was a test of a different kind from Badr or Uhud. In both of those battles, the Muslims had chosen to meet the enemy in the open — at Badr by intercepting a caravan and ending up fighting the Meccan force, at Uhud by taking the field north of Medina. At the Trench, the choice was defensive: to stay inside Medina, to dig the ditch, to wait. This was a decision about how to fight, and it reflected the changed circumstances of the community. By 627, the Muslims had been fighting for three years. They had won at Badr and lost at Uhud. They had a growing population in Medina and a network of alliances. The Meccan elite had not given up, but they had not succeeded in destroying the community either. The Trench was the moment when the community's survival was tested at its most serious, and when the defensive strategy — the trench, the refusal to come out and fight on the Meccans' terms — proved to be the right one. The decision to dig the trench rather than meet the confederates in the open was, in its way, as significant as the decision to fight at Badr.

The chapter from this point turns to the aftermath of the siege, the way the Muslim community had been tested severely, and the way the victory, such as it was, had consequences for the position of the community in Medina. The Battle of the Trench was a test of endurance, and it was a test that the Muslims passed. The siege had been one of the most serious threats the community had faced, and the survival of Medina was a real achievement.

The chapter ends here, with the Muslims having survived the siege, and with the reader understanding that the Battle of the Trench was a different kind of victory from Badr, and that the community had been tested in a way that Badr and Uhud had not tested it, and that the survival of Medina was the foundation for the next phase of the story. The next chapter — Chapter 25 — will look at the Jewish tribes of Medina, the conflicts that followed, and the way the conflicts resolved.

## The Jewish Tribes

By the time Muhammad had established the Muslim community in Medina and led it through Badr, Uhud, and the Trench, the relationship between the Muslims and the Jewish tribes of Medina had become one of the most difficult and consequential relationships in the early Islamic story.

The constitutional arrangement of Chapter 20 had brought Muslims, Meccan emigrants, Medinan helpers, and Jewish tribes into a single political community, the *umma*, with Muhammad as the final arbiter. The Jewish tribes — the Banu Qaynuqa, the Banu Nadir, the Banu Qurayza, among others — were parties to this arrangement, with their own religious identity intact, their own laws, their own synagogues, and their own position in Medina. The Constitution had recognized that the Muslims and the Jews were one community in the political sense while remaining distinct in the religious sense. That was the arrangement, and for a period it held.

The breakdown of the relationship did not happen all at once, and it did not happen for a single reason. It happened over the course of the Medinan period, in a series of episodes involving different tribes, in a context of war, treaty, and suspicion, and in a way that the sources — late, partisan in their survival, and shaped by the later tradition's need to explain what had happened — do not fully clarify.

The sources that tell us about the Jewish tribes are the same sources we have been using throughout: Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham's sira, al-Tabari's history, the hadith, and the Qur'an. They are all Islamic sources, all written decades and in some cases centuries after the events, and all shaped by the need to present the story in a form that made theological and political sense to the community that transmitted them. To read them honestly is to read them with the question in mind: what did the tradition want to say about the Jewish tribes, and what can we be sure actually happened?

The traditional account gives a sequence of three major episodes: the Banu Qaynuqa, the Banu Nadir, and the Banu Qurayza.

The Banu Qaynuqa, a Jewish tribe in Medina, came into conflict with the Muslims after the Battle of Badr. The tradition records that a dispute broke out between a Muslim and a member of the Qaynuqa, that tensions escalated, and that the Muslims besieged the Qaynuqa in their fortress. The Qaynuqa surrendered, and the Muslims expelled them from Medina, allowing them to leave with their families and their possessions, with the exception of their weapons, which were taken. The expulsion of the Qaynuqa was the first removal of a Jewish tribe from Medina, and it set a precedent for what would follow.

The Banu Qaynuqa were, like the other Jewish tribes of Medina, a community of merchants — their strength lay in trade, in their position in the market, in their skills with metalwork. The conflict with them came at a moment when the Muslims had just won at Badr and had gained confidence and momentum. The Qaynuqa's fort was in the southern part of Medina. The siege lasted for fifteen days, according to the traditional account, after which the Qaynuqa surrendered. Their expulsion was not, in the tradition, a massacre — they were allowed to leave — but it was a serious event, the first time a Jewish tribe had been removed from Medina, and it marked the beginning of the breakdown of the constitutional arrangement.

The Banu Nadir came next. The tradition gives a different reason for the conflict. It says that a Muslim was killed by members of the Nadir — or that the Nadir were involved in a plot against Muhammad — and that Muhammad summoned the Nadir to answer for it, and that they refused to accept the arbitration, and that the Muslims besieged them, and that they surrendered on terms that allowed them to leave with their possessions except for their weapons and land. The Nadir left Medina and went to Khaybar and other places, and their land and property became part of the Muslim community.

The Banu Nadir were different from the Qaynuqa in important respects. They were a wealthier tribe, with more land and more property, and their removal therefore had a larger material consequence for the Muslim community. Their land — the cultivated fields and the date palms — was distributed among the Muslims, and the wealth that came from it helped to support the community. The Nadir also had connections with the Meccan elite, and the tradition records that they sent messengers to Mecca to encourage the Quraysh to continue the fight against the Muslims. Whether that was a cause of their expulsion or a consequence of it is one of the questions the sources do not settle clearly. The

Nadir left Medina in 625, after the battle of Uhud, and their departure marked a second step in the breakdown of the arrangement with the Jewish tribes.

The Banu Qurayza were the last and the most serious. The episode came during or just after the Battle of the Trench, in 627. The traditional account says that the Qurayza had broken their treaty with the Muslims and had sided with the confederate army that was besieging Medina, and that after the siege failed, the Muslims turned on the Qurayza, besieged them in their fortress, and after a siege of their own, the Qurayza surrendered. The judgment on the Qurayza, according to the tradition, was made by an arbitrator — Sa'd ibn Mu'adh, a chief of the Aws, one of the Medinan tribes — and the judgment was that the men of the Qurayza who had reached puberty should be killed, and that the women and children should be taken captive. The tradition records the execution of the men.

This is the account that the sources preserve, and it is the account that has generated the most controversy, the most debate, and the most damage to the reputation of Islam in the minds of hostile readers, and the most pain to the minds of believing readers.

A careful reader of history has to read this account with several things in mind.

First, the sources are late. The story of the Jewish tribes is told by the Islamic tradition, and the tradition's account was shaped by the need to justify what had happened. We cannot be sure that every detail is accurate, or that the reasons given for the conflicts are the real reasons. The tradition gives reasons for the conflict with each tribe — the Qaynuqa for a personal dispute and general hostility, the Nadir for a murder or a plot, the Qurayza for treachery during the siege. These reasons may be true, or they may be the tradition's way of explaining events that had more complex causes. The honest account does not pretend that the reasons are settled beyond dispute.

Second, the numbers are disputed. The tradition gives specific numbers for the deaths of the Qurayza — the most famous figure is 600 or 700 men, but there are other figures, and the sources do not agree. The scale of the killing is a matter of historical debate, and the honest account does not present any single number as certain. What can be said is that a significant number of the Qurayza men were killed, and that the women and children were taken captive, and that this was a serious event by any standard.

Third, the context matters. The conflict with the Jewish tribes took place in a Medina that was at war, in a community that was under pressure, and in a situation in which the treaty relationships, the suspicions, the political alignments, and the military realities had all broken down. The expulsion of the Qaynuqa and the Nadir, and the killing of the Qurayza men, were the result of a political and military situation, not a theological or racial program. The Muslims did not set out to kill all the Jews of Medina. The conflicts with each tribe were specific, and they happened in the context of the Medinan war and the breakdown of the treaty arrangements.

Fourth, the killing of the Qurayza men happened. This is the fact that the honest biographer must not evade. Whatever the nuances, whatever the uncertainties about the numbers, whatever the arguments about the reasons, the traditional account is that the men of the Qurayza were executed after the siege. The killing was not a light matter. It was a serious violation, by modern standards, of the norms that we would apply to a civilian population. The honest account does not excuse it. The honest account does not pretend that the tradition's account is obviously wrong. The honest account sets out the fact, with the context, and lets the reader sit with it.

Fifth, the scholarly debate about the events is real, and it should be acknowledged. Some scholars — particularly those working from the later Western orientalists' tradition — have argued that the traditional account is exaggerated, that the numbers are inflated, that the reasons given for the conflict are insufficient, that the judgment was not as it is remembered, or that the event should be understood in a different way. The most prominent version of this argument is that the number of Qurayza killed — 600 or 700 men — is too high, and that the real number was much smaller, or that the killing was not the indiscriminate execution of all the men but a more limited punishment of the leaders and those directly involved in the breach of treaty. Other scholars — working both within and outside the Islamic tradition — have defended the broad shape of the traditional account, arguing that the Muhammad of Medina was a political leader operating in a context of total war, that the laws of war in that context did not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants in the way that modern international law does, and that the judgment of Sa'd ibn Mu'adh, however severe by modern standards, was the judgment of a recognized arbitrator within the terms of the Medinan constitution and Arabian custom.

The honest account does not take a side in this debate that cannot be settled. It presents the traditional account, it acknowledges the debate, and it acknowledges the uncertainties. It is worth noting, however, that the scholarly debate has itself been shaped by the passions the episode arouses. The readers who most want to reduce the numbers are often those who want to minimize the moral problem; the readers who most want to hold to the traditional numbers are often those who want to hold Muhammad to the full severity of the act. The honest reader should be aware of this dynamic and should not let it decide the question for them.

The other side of the chapter is the relationship between the Muslims and the Jews before the breakdown.

This chapter is the chapter most likely to be quoted against the book. It should be written for a reader who is a devout Muslim and for a reader who is a hostile critic, and it should leave both feeling that they were dealt with honestly. The goal is not to minimize the killing, or to deny it, or to excuse it, or to make it the centerpiece of the whole story. The goal is to tell the truth about what happened, with the context that makes it intelligible, without flinching and without sensationalizing.

The other side of the chapter is the relationship between the Muslims and the Jews before the breakdown. The Constitution of Medina had brought them together. The Jewish tribes had been parties to the agreement. There had been periods of cooperation, of trade, of mediation, of coexistence. The breakdown was not the whole of the relationship. The relationship had a history, and the history matters for the biography because it shows that the Muslims and the Jews of Medina did not begin in a state of permanent war. They began in a political arrangement, and the arrangement broke down.

The Jewish tribes of Medina were not a monolith. The three tribes were different from one another in their politics, their alliances, their traditions, and their relationship to the Muslims. The Qaynuqa, the Nadir, and the Qurayza did not all act the same way, and they did not all face the same outcome. The honest account keeps them separate, and it does not treat them as a single entity.

The chapter ends here, with the traditional account of the three episodes, with the uncertainties and the debates acknowledged, with the killing of the Qurayza men stated plainly, and with the reader left to decide what to make of it. The next chapter — Chapter 26 — will look at Muhammad's household,

the later marriages, the age question surrounding Aisha, and the way the Prophet's private life became, in the later tradition and in the later polemics, one of the most contested areas of his story.

## His Household

Muhammad's household in Medina was not a single thing, and it is one of the most contested areas of his life — in the Islamic tradition, in the modern historical scholarship, and in the public reception of his story.

After the death of Khadija in the Year of Sorrow, Muhammad married again, and over the years of the Medinan period he took several wives. The wives were not all of one kind. Some of them were widows of Muslims who had died in the battles or in the early years of the community, and their marriages to Muhammad were in part a protection and an honor for the families of the fallen. Some were political alliances, marriages that connected Muhammad to other tribes and to the leaders of the surrounding Arab groups, and that were a way of building relationships and securing alliances. Some were marriages that took place for other reasons, including the marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh, which was, according to the tradition, a public demonstration that a man could marry the woman his adopted son had divorced, and that the old Arab custom of adoption did not create a prohibition resembling the prohibition of blood kinship. The tradition records the marriages as they happened, and it records the reasons, and it records the fact that the Prophet's household was not a uniform institution.

The number of the wives and the timing of their marriages have been the subject of endless attention in the Islamic tradition and in the polemics of opponents. The Islamic tradition remembers that Muhammad's wives were "mothers of the believers," that they were women of standing, that they were to be treated with respect, and that the Prophet's household was held to a high standard. The polemics of opponents have focused on the number of the wives, on the ages of some of them, and on the marriage to Aisha in particular, in ways that have shaped the public understanding of Muhammad out of all proportion to what the sources actually say.

The marriage to Aisha bint Abi Bakr is the most discussed of all, and it deserves a careful, plain treatment.

The traditions in the Islamic sources — mainly the hadith collections of Bukhari and Muslim and the later biographical tradition — give Aisha's age at the time of the marriage. Two main figures appear: that she was married at the age of six or seven, and that the marriage was consummated when she was nine. These figures come primarily from the hadith collections of Bukhari and Muslim, and specifically from the reports transmitted through the chain that goes back to Aisha herself, in which she is reported as saying that she was seven or nine when the consummation took place. The most commonly cited report is the one in which Aisha states that the Prophet married her when she was six and consummated the marriage when she was nine. The other traditions in the same collections suggest a different chronology, and that she was older — that she was a young woman of marriageable age in the Arabian context at the time, perhaps in her mid-teens. The difference between the two traditions is not a small one, and it has been the subject of debate among Muslim scholars and Western historians for a long time.

The hadith that gives the nine-year figure is narrated by Aisha herself in Bukhari, and it is one of the most frequently cited pieces of evidence in the debate. The chain of transmission goes back to Aisha, and the report is therefore, in the terms of hadith scholarship, a direct narration from the wife herself — which is, in the context of hadith study, as close to a first-person account as the tradition provides. The counter-tradition, which gives an older age, is less prominent in the canonical collections but is found in other sources and has been argued by scholars who question whether the nine-year report should be taken at face value. The existence of the counter-tradition is not in doubt; what is in doubt is its weight relative to the nine-year report.

The honest account of this issue needs to register several things.

First, the traditions are not unanimous, and the earliest sources do not agree on the age. The figure of nine for the consummation is a well-known and well-attested tradition, but it is not the only tradition, and it is not the only figure. Some scholars — among them the conservative scholars of the Islamic tradition who hold to the reliability of the hadith collections — have argued that the traditional figure is the more reliable, and that Aisha was in fact young at the time of the marriage. They point to the direct narration from Aisha herself in Bukhari, to the consistency of the report across the collections, and to the fact that the nine-year figure has been the dominant understanding in the Islamic tradition for centuries. Other scholars — among them some Western historians and some Muslim scholars who have revisited the question — have argued that the alternative tradition, the one that gives her an older age, is also valid, and that the marriage took place when she was a young woman in the terms of seventh-century Arabia. These scholars point to the inconsistencies in the chronological reports, to the possibility that Aisha's own narration in Bukhari may have been shaped by the norms of the later tradition, and to the argument that the age of Aisha's sister Asma — who is reported to have been fifty at the time of the conquest of Mecca in 630, which would make her born around 580, and therefore older than Aisha by a significant margin — supports an older age for Aisha than the nine-year figure.

The debate between these two positions is not a small or marginal one. It goes to the heart of how the sources are to be read. The conservative position holds that the hadith collections are reliable enough to settle the question, and that the nine-year figure should be accepted. The revisionist position holds that the hadith collections, for all their careful preservation, were shaped by the concerns of the later tradition, and that the age question cannot be settled by the hadith alone. The honest account does not settle the question definitively, because the sources do not settle it definitively.

Second, the context of seventh-century Arabia matters. The age of marriage in the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century was not the same as the age of marriage in the twenty-first century, and the norms of the time and place were different. The tradition that Aisha was young at the time of the marriage needs to be read in the context of an Arabian society in which the age of marriage could be younger than it would be understood today, and in which a marriage of this kind would not have been regarded as anomalous. The honest account does not pretend that the facts, whatever they are, can be understood apart from the world in which they happened, and it does not pretend that the modern reader's instinctive response to the age question is the only legitimate one. At the same time, the honest account does not pretend that the modern instinctive response is illegitimate. A reader today, reading about a marriage to a girl of nine, will have a reaction, and that reaction is not a sign of bad

faith. The honest account allows the reader to have the reaction without insisting that the reaction settles the historical question.

Third, the purpose of the marriage in the tradition was not simply a personal arrangement. Aisha was the daughter of Abu Bakr, who was one of the first believers and who would become the first caliph. The marriage was, in part, a bond of alliance between Muhammad and the most important of the first believers, and it was a marriage that connected the Prophet to the man who would succeed him in the political leadership of the community. The political dimension of the marriage is not a secret in the tradition. It is part of the record, and it matters for understanding why the marriage took place and why it was important.

Fourth, the treatment of Aisha in the later tradition has its own history. Aisha was not simply the child bride of the Prophet. She was a woman who grew up in the household of the Prophet, who became one of the most important transmitters of hadith, who argued with Muhammad and outlived him by decades, and who was a central figure in the early Islamic political and intellectual life. The tradition remembers her as a woman of learning, of strong opinion, and of importance. The account of her marriage in the later tradition does not erase this, and the honest account does not erase it either.

Aisha's role as a transmitter of hadith is one of the most significant facts about her. She is reported to have narrated more than two thousand hadith, and she was one of the principal sources for the early biographical and legal tradition. Scholars of the Islamic tradition — men and women — studied with her, and her reports are found in all the major hadith collections. She was not a marginal figure in the early community. She was a central one, and her centrality is one of the things that the later polemics about her age tend to obscure. The honest account of Aisha should include the fact that she was a major intellectual figure in the early Islamic community, that she was a source of law and tradition, and that her later life was one of the most consequential in the early Islamic period.

Aisha's political role after Muhammad's death is also part of the story. She was involved in the conflict between Ali and those who demanded that the assassins of Uthman be punished, a conflict that led to the battle of the camel, in which Aisha led a faction against Ali. The battle was a defeat for her, and she was removed to Medina after it, where she spent the rest of her life as a scholar and transmitter of the tradition. The fact that she led a faction in a civil war is one of the things that the later tradition records with some ambivalence — she is remembered as a woman of strong opinion and as a figure who took a political side, and the later Sunni tradition in particular has not always known what to do with that fact. The honest account does not erase the political dimension of Aisha's life, and it does not reduce her to the age question alone. She was a woman of many dimensions, and the biography should reflect that.

The topic is handled without apologia and without anachronistic prosecution. The traditional reports are given. The scholarly arguments about their reliability are given. The different marital norms of seventh-century Arabia and of Mediterranean antiquity are set out. The reader is left to judge for himself, with the facts and the context in view.

Zaynab bint Jahsh is a different case, and it is worth a separate note. The marriage to Zaynab was, according to the tradition, a public demonstration that the old Arabian custom of adoption — the practice of making a son of a man's slave or of a close relative into a full son — did not mean that the adopted son's former wife was forbidden to the man in the way that a blood daughter-in-law was

forbidden. The marriage was arranged to make this point, and it was a demonstration of the new Islamic law's break with the old custom. The tradition records the episode as a deliberate move by Muhammad to show that the new law was in effect, and it records the way the community responded. The point of the chapter is to include this in the record of the household, as one of the marriages that was not only a personal arrangement but also a public act with a legal meaning.

The other wives, in the main, were women of different kinds — widows of fallen Muslims, women of political families, women who came into the household for reasons the tradition records. The list is not a list of equals in the sense of a moral or biographical taxonomy. It is a list of women who were in the household of the Prophet at different times, for different reasons, and whose lives in that household became part of the record.

Muhammad's private life, in Medina, was not a separate world from his public life. It was entangled with it — his wives were political alliances, his wives were mothers of the believers, his wives were transmitters of the hadith, his wives were the women who carried the memory of his life into the next generation. The household was not a retreat from the public story. It was part of it, and the way the household is remembered is part of the reason the public story of Muhammad has taken the shape it has.

The chapter ends here, with the household described in the terms that the sources allow, with the Aisha question treated plainly, and with the reader left to make up his own mind about the age question, as the honest historian must leave it. The next chapter — Chapter 27 — will look at the Treaty of Hudaybiyya, the treaty that looked like a defeat and was the making of the movement.

# Part Six: Return and Farewell

## The Treaty That Looked Like a Defeat

In the spring of 628, Muhammad and a company of Muslims set out from Medina with a purpose so modest that no one at the time could have called it the turning point of a religious movement. They wanted to perform a minor pilgrimage to Mecca — the *umrah* — to circle the Kaaba, to do what pilgrims did. They did not come with an army. They came in the clothing of pilgrims, with sacrificial animals walking beside them, with the plain intention of worship. The Meccan elite blocked the road. What followed — the standoff at Hudaybiyya, the negotiation, the treaty that the Muslims' own followers found intolerable, and the ten-year truce that made the conquest of Mecca possible — was the hinge on which the entire Meccan period turned.

The treaty has a reputation for paradox. It looked like a defeat when it was signed. It was understood by the Qur'an as a clear victory. Both things can be true at once. The first is about the feelings of the men standing in the dust at Hudaybiyya, furious at what they had been forced to accept. The second is about the strategic reality that only became visible in retrospect, once the truce had given the Muslims the breathing space they needed and the Meccan elite had watched their own alliances evaporate. The biographer's job is to hold both truths without letting either cancel the other.

**The journey to Hudaybiyya**

The Muslims left Medina in the month of Dhu al-Qa'da in the sixth year after the hijra. The number of those who came with Muhammad is traditionally given as fourteen hundred, though the sources vary and the exact figure is not something a historian can settle. The point is that it was a substantial body — large enough to be seen as a real force, small enough to be denied the pilgrimage by a blockade.

They traveled with sacrificial animals, seventy camels for slaughter, carrying the plain intention that they had come to perform the rites of the minor pilgrimage and then to go home. They did not expect resistance. The Meccan elite, however, had been watching. When news reached Quraysh that Muhammad had set out for the pilgrimage, they dispatched a force to intercept. The two sides met at Hudaybiyya, a place on the coast between Medina and Mecca, where a well supplied water. The Meccan force arrived first and blocked the Muslims from entering the town. A standoff ensued. The Muslims made camp. The Meccans prevented access. The pilgrimage that had brought them all this way was now impossible by the simple fact of being blocked.

The standoff could have become a battle. Muhammad had men with him. The Quraysh had men with them. Neither side wanted war at that moment, and the standoff was managed through negotiation rather than force. What is striking about the episode is how much of the early Muslim movement now ran on Muhammad's capacity to control his own followers in moments of acute frustration. The Muslims had every reason to be angry. They had traveled with sacrificial animals, with the intention of worship, and they had been stopped by a blockade. The natural response would have been to fight

through the blockade, to force the pilgrimage by violence. Muhammad chose negotiation instead, and the choice was controversial within his own camp.

There are also the negotiations with the Meccan representatives, including the moment when Muhammad sent Uthman ibn Affan, his own cousin by marriage and a man of standing, to speak with the Quraysh. Uthman was detained by the Meccans, and the story developed that he had been killed — a report that nearly provoked Muhammad to fight before the truth emerged. Uthman was in fact alive. The episode shows how close the standoff came to breaking, and how much depended on the discipline of the Muslim camp.

The Meccan side, meanwhile, was not a single mind. The Quraysh had sent the champion wrestler Khalid ibn al-Walid — not yet a Muslim, still one of their military leaders — along with others, including Ikrima ibn Abi Jahl and others from the leading clans. Even among the Quraysh, there were men who saw that a settlement might serve their interests, and men who wanted to fight. The negotiation that followed was shaped by this internal division.

**The negotiation**

The negotiations took place over the weeks of the standoff. They were not simple. They moved through several stages, and the tradition records a sequence of offers and counteroffers that ended in what became known as the Treaty of Hudaybiyya.

The first Muslim position was straightforward: let us come to Mecca and perform our pilgrimage, and we will go home. The Quraysh refused. They did not want Muhammad and his followers entering the town, even for a short pilgrimage. The sanctuary city was the center of their religious and economic life, and the idea of the Muslims entering for the rites — even without fighting — was unacceptable. The Quraysh offered instead that the Muslims should go back this year and try again the following year, and that if any Meccan wished to join the Muslims and go with them to Medina, he would be allowed to do so without interference, but that if any Muslim wished to return to Mecca, he would be sent back.

This was the Quraysh's opening position, and it was not what the Muslims wanted. Muhammad proposed modifications. The negotiation went back and forth. The tradition remembers the moment when Muhammad sat with his companions in the shade of a tree — or in the place where he made the agreement — and told them to write down the terms. He called for Ali ibn Abi Talib, his cousin and the young man who had grown up in his household, to serve as his scribe. Ali wrote the terms, and Mohammad recited them aloud, and the Muslims witnessed the agreement.

The terms of the treaty, as they appear in the tradition, are specific and revealing:

The Muslims and the Quraysh would observe a truce for ten years. Any tribe that wished to be allied with the Quraysh could do so, and any tribe that wished to be allied with Muhammad and the Muslims could do so — the field was left open, and tribes could choose their side without the agreement being violated. If a Meccan person went over to Muhammad without permission from his guardian, the Muslims would return him to the Quraysh. If a Muslim person went over to the Quraysh without permission, they would not be returned. The Muslims would withdraw from Mecca this year and would be free to return the following year for three days to perform their pilgrimage.

The terms that caused the most anger among the Muslims were the return clause — the one that said any Muslim who left Muhammad for Mecca would be sent back, but any Meccan who left Mecca for

Muhammad would not. This meant that if a Meccan slave or freedman converted to Islam and fled to Medina, he would have to be sent back to his Meccan master. The Muslims found this intolerable. It was one thing to negotiate a truce between two political forces. It was another thing entirely to agree to return a person who had found faith to the people who had persecuted him.

The other difficult clause was the asymmetry of the pilgrimage — the Muslims had to go home and wait a full year. They had come for the pilgrimage, and they were being sent away without having entered the town.

Muhammad accepted the terms. He did not consult his companions before accepting. He simply told them to write. When they heard the terms, many of them objected. The most famous reaction was that of Abu Bakr, who said to Muhammad, "Are you the Messenger of God and you accept these terms?" — a question that in its bluntness captures the disbelief of the moment. Another companion, Abu Hurayra, is remembered as saying that when the terms were read, he was so angry that he could not think clearly. The Muslims were not being asked to surrender militarily. They were being asked to accept a political settlement that recognized the Quraysh as a party of equal standing and that imposed on them a humiliating return clause. They did not like it.

Muhammad's response to their anger was to tell them to write and to accept. He did not explain at the moment why he had accepted. He simply said that he was the Messenger of God and that God would not let the truth be defeated. The tradition remembers that the Muslims were furious, and then that Muhammad's word carried them. This is one of the moments in the early story where leadership is most visible: a man who could not have imposed the treaty by force chose to impose it by the authority of his own conviction, and his companions — furious, disappointed, disbelieving — accepted it because of who he was.

**The terms in detail**

The asymmetry of the return clause deserves closer attention, because it is the term that looks worst on the face of the agreement and that therefore demands the most honest explanation.

The clause said that anyone from Quraysh who went to Muhammad without his guardian's permission would be returned, but that anyone from Muhammad's side who went to Quraysh without permission would not be returned. The apparent effect was that a Meccan who converted and fled to Medina would be sent back to his old life, while a Muslim who defected back to Mecca would be allowed to stay. The asymmetry looks like a reward for defection and a punishment for conversion.

The explanation that the tradition and the historians give is that the clause was about political allegiance, not about faith. The treaty was between two political entities — the Muslims and the Quraysh — and the clause was about the movement of people subject to the political authority of each side. Mecca was the Quraysh's city. A Meccan was a subject of the Quraysh. If he left and went to Medina without permission, the treaty required his return on the grounds that he had left his tribe's political orbit without authorization. The Muslims were not being asked to return a person on the grounds of his faith. They were being asked to observe an agreement about political desertion.

This is not a fully satisfying explanation, and the honest account should not pretend that it is. For the Muslims who heard the terms at Hudaybiyya, the practical effect was clear: a slave who had found faith could be sent back to his master. The moral force of that reality was not erased by the political

language of the treaty. The honest account holds both things — the political logic of the clause, and the human cost it implied — without letting either cancel the other.

The other clause that caused anger was the pilgrimage delay. The Muslims had come to perform the rites. They were being sent home and told to try again the following year. The following year, they would be allowed to enter Mecca for three days and perform the pilgrimage, and then they would leave. This was a real deprivation. They had traveled for the pilgrimage and had not been allowed to perform it.

The truce clause itself — ten years of peace between the Muslims and the Quraysh — was, in itself, a positive thing. The Quraysh had never agreed to a sustained truce with Muhammad before. The boycotts, the pressure, the assassination attempts, the battles — all of it had been continuous. A ten-year truce was an extraordinary concession from a political opponent. It meant, in practice, that the Muslims could operate in Medina and beyond without the constant threat of Meccan military action. But the truce was wrapped in terms that made it look like a Quraysh victory, and the combination produced the anger.

**Why the Quraysh agreed**

The Quraysh's motivation for signing the treaty is worth understanding, because the agreement makes more sense when you see what the Quraysh believed they were gaining.

At the moment of the standoff, the Quraysh were not in a strong position. They had blocked the Muslims from the pilgrimage, but they had not forced them to surrender or leave. The situation was a stalemate. The Muslims were camped with their sacrificial animals, with a substantial force, and with the moral energy of people who believed they were serving God. The Quraysh were outside, blocking the road. Neither side wanted to fight, but neither side had a clear way to win without concessions.

From the Quraysh's point of view, the treaty offered several things. It stopped the Muslims from entering Mecca this year, which was the primary objective. It established that the Muslims would have to come back next year and perform their rites in a controlled, limited way. It recognized the Quraysh as a party of equal standing in the agreement — not as a defeated enemy, not as an outlaw force, but as a power with which Muhammad was willing to make a formal settlement. The asymmetry of the return clause gave the Quraysh a tool for retaining control over their own people. And the ten-year truce, while appearing generous, gave the Quraysh a period in which they believed they could wait out the Muslims and let the movement weaken.

The Quraysh did not understand what they were signing. They believed they had secured a temporary advantage. They did not see that the truce would, over the following two years, allow the Muslims to make alliances with tribes all across the Arabian peninsula, to spread their message in a way that was impossible while the war with Mecca was active, and to build a network of relationships that would collapse the Meccan position when the truce finally ended.

The Quraysh's mistake was not in signing the treaty. It was in believing that the treaty was a victory for them. It was a defeat they did not recognize as a defeat until two years later, when the Muslims returned to Mecca without resistance.

**The reaction of the Muslims**

The anger at Hudaybiyya is one of the most human moments in the early story. The Muslims had followed Muhammad through persecution, boycott, exile, war. They had lost their homes in Mecca. They had lost their wealth. They had fought at Badr and Uhud and the Trench. They had believed that God was with them. And now, at the moment when they believed they had reached the city of their sanctuary, they were being sent home with terms that looked like a surrender.

The tradition records several specific reactions. Abu Bakr, as noted, questioned Muhammad directly. Umar ibn al-Khattab was reportedly so angry that he went to Muhammad and complained, and Muhammad told him to be patient. Other companions are remembered as being silent, or as accepting with difficulty, or as expressing their frustration in private. The overall picture is of a group of men and women who were emotionally honest about their disappointment and who found it difficult to believe that the terms were the right ones.

This is an important moment for the honest method. The tradition does not hide the anger. It preserves it. The honest account does the same. This was not a moment when everyone calmly agreed that the treaty was wise. It was a moment of genuine frustration, and the frustration matters because it refutes any reading that treats the early Muslims as a monolithic group of uncritical followers. They were human. They reacted like human beings to a settlement that they did not understand and did not like.

The one person whose reaction was different was Muhammad himself. He received the terms with the calm of a man who believed that the outcome was in God's hands and that the settlement, however it looked, would prove to be what God had intended. The tradition's account of his reaction is not detailed — the sources are more interested in the companions' anger than in Muhammad's interior state — but the difference between his calm and their fury is itself part of the story. He had seen something they had not yet seen.

**The Qur'anic response**

The Qur'an's response to the treaty came later, in the form of the sura known as al-Fath, the "Victory." The sura was revealed after the Muslims had returned from Hudaybiyya and after the terms had begun to take effect. It is one of the clearest examples in the Qur'an of a passage that looks back on an event and reframes it.

The sura declares, in its opening verses, that God has granted a clear victory. It speaks of the pledge of allegiance that the Muslims gave under the tree at Hudaybiyya — the *bay'at al-ridwan*, the pledge under the tree — and treats it as a sign of God's approval. It promises that the Muslims will enter the sacred mosque in Mecca in safety, if God wills, and that He will know what they know. It announces that God will punish those who opposed the Muslims and that the believers will be favored.

The framing is unmistakable: the treaty is called a victory. The apparent humiliation of the terms is reinterpreted as a strategic triumph. The Qur'an's language is not diplomatic. It is the language of victory, of divine assistance, of a turning point that the believers may not yet fully see but that God has already decreed.

For the biographer, the Qur'anic response is important for two reasons. First, it shows that the Muslim community itself struggled to understand the treaty in the immediate aftermath, and that the reframing came as a revelation that helped them accept what had happened. The anger at Hudaybiyya was real, and the Qur'an's response was the community's way of processing that anger into

understanding. Second, it shows the way the Qur'an functioned in the early community: not as a detached record of events, but as a voice that spoke into the community's experience, reframing setbacks as victories and disappointments as signs of God's plan.

The Qur'an's language of victory is not propaganda. It is the Islamic community's own understanding of what happened, preserved in the form of revelation. The biographer who treats the Qur'an as the earliest source for what Muhammad was saying should read al-Fath as part of that record — a piece of the community's self-understanding at a moment when the settlement had just been made and the future was still uncertain.

**The consequences**

The treaty's immediate consequence was the breathing space it created. For the next two years, the Muslims were not at war with the Quraysh. The truce held. During those two years, the Muslims were able to expand their reach in ways that had been impossible before.

The most significant development was the spread of Islam into new tribes and regions. Before the treaty, the Muslims' energy had been concentrated on survival and defense. The Meccan threat had absorbed almost all of their political and military attention. With the truce in place, Muhammad and the Muslims could turn outward. Delegations came from tribes across the peninsula. Letters were sent to rulers and leaders. The message spread into the Hijaz and beyond. The treaty did not cause the spread — the message itself did that — but it removed the barrier that had been preventing the spread from happening at full speed.

The treaty also shifted the balance of alliances. The clause that allowed tribes to ally with either side became a real political opportunity. Various tribes chose to side with the Muslims, recognizing that the Muslim community was growing and that neutrality was no longer the safest position. The Meccan elite watched these defections with increasing alarm, but the treaty prevented them from acting. They had agreed to a truce, and the truce held.

By the time the truce broke — when a tribe allied to the Quraysh violated the agreement by attacking a tribe allied to the Muslims, and the Quraysh's protection of that violation made the treaty void — the Muslims had changed in ways that the Quraysh had not anticipated. Their numbers had grown. Their alliances had expanded. Their position had strengthened. The return to Mecca that followed was not the return of a persecuted minority. It was the return of a force that the Quraysh could no longer resist.

The treaty, then, was the hinge. Without it, the Muslims would have remained locked in a struggle for survival against the Meccan elite. With it, they had the space to grow into a power. The conquest of Mecca two years later was made possible by the treaty. The amnesty that followed the conquest was made meaningful by the discipline the Muslims had shown at Hudaybiyya. The entire final phase of the Meccan period — the return, the purification of the sanctuary, the general amnesty — rests on the foundation laid at Hudaybiyya.

**The tree and the pledge**

One of the most enduring images of the treaty is the pledge of allegiance given under a tree at Hudaybiyya. The tradition records that the Muslims gave Muhammad their pledge of loyalty at a tree near where they had made camp. The pledge was a statement of commitment — that they would obey Muhammad, that they would stand with him, that they would not abandon him. The Qur'an

refers to this pledge in al-Fath, and the image of the pledge under the tree became, in later Islamic memory, one of the emblematic moments of the early community.

The pledge matters because it captures the moment of commitment right before the truce. The Muslims were about to accept terms that looked like a defeat. They were about to go home without having performed the pilgrimage. They were about to watch the Quraysh retain control of Mecca for another year. And at that moment, they gave their pledge — not just to Muhammad as a political leader, but as a community affirming its bond to him and to the message. The pledge under the tree is the emotional counterpoint to the legal terms of the treaty. The treaty was the political settlement. The pledge was the human commitment that made the settlement possible.

**The difficulty of reading the treaty honestly**

The treaty of Hudaybiyya is one of the episodes that tests the biographer's commitment to honesty. It is tempting to explain it away — to say that the terms were not really as bad as they looked, that the return clause was only about political allegiance, that the Muslims were foolish to be angry, that the Qur'an's framing shows the truth. Each of these explanations contains a piece of truth, and each is incomplete.

The honest account says this: the terms were, by the standards of the Muslims at the moment, humiliating. They were angry. The anger was justified by the terms as they understood them. The return clause did have the practical effect of sending some converts back to their Meccan masters. The Qur'an's later reframing does not erase the anger; it addresses it. The treaty was a political settlement that looked like a defeat to the men who signed it and a victory to the community that inherited it. Both readings are part of the story. The honest account presents both without forcing the reader to choose between them.

The treaty also matters for the larger argument of the book. It is a counterexample to the idea that Muhammad's career was one of continuous and uncomplicated triumph. It was not. It was a career of setbacks that were reframed as victories, of moments that looked like the end and turned out to be the turning point. The boycott failed to break the Muslims. The assassination plot failed. The stoning at Ta'if was the lowest point of Muhammad's life. And the treaty at Hudaybiyya was the moment when the Muslims' own followers thought he had made a mistake, and were wrong. The pattern is consistent: the movement faced threats that appeared decisive, and survived them in ways that only became clear in retrospect.

## Mecca

The return to Mecca in 630 was, by the standards of Arabian conquest, remarkable. The Muslims entered the town with a force large enough to overwhelm any resistance, and the resistance collapsed before they arrived. The town that had boycotted Muhammad for three years, that had tried to kill him, that had driven him into exile, surrendered without a siege, without a massacre, without the blood that the story might so easily have contained. The conquest was bloodless, and the amnesty that followed it was, in the judgment of the tradition, one of the most extraordinary decisions of Muhammad's political life.

The chapter that follows is about the return to Mecca and the decision that made that return more than a military success. The amnesty is the center of the story. Everything else — the violation of the treaty, the march north, the entry, the removal of the idols, the submission of the Meccan elite — is context for the decision that Muhammad made when he stood in the town that had been his enemy and declared that his enemy was now free.

**The breaking of the treaty**

The Treaty of Hudaybiyya, signed two years earlier, had held. For most of that time, the truce had worked as intended: the Muslims had used the breathing space to grow, to make alliances, to spread their message across the Arabian peninsula. The Meccan elite had watched this happen and had been unable to act, because the treaty bound them. Then, in the eighth year after the hijra, the treaty broke.

The traditional account names the incident that ended the truce. A tribe allied to the Quraysh — the Banu Bakr — attacked a tribe allied to the Muslims — the Banu Khuza'a — at night, in a raid that fell within the terms of the treaty's protection. The Khuza'a had been allies of Muhammad, and the attack on them was a violation of the agreement by the Quraysh's side. Muhammad, when the news reached him, considered the treaty void. The Meccan elite had failed to restrain their allies, and their failure meant the truce was over.

The sequence is worth tracing carefully, because it shows the Meccan elite's position unraveling in a way they had not anticipated. The treaty had not only prevented the Muslims from attacking Mecca. It had also prevented the Meccan elite from acting against the Muslims' allies without the whole agreement collapsing. When the Banu Bakr attacked the Khuza'a, they had done so under the assumption that the truce would protect them. Instead, the truce became the mechanism by which their action was judged unlawful. The Quraysh had violated their own agreement, and the violation gave Muhammad the legal and moral basis to act.

The Meccan elite realized, at this point, that they had lost control of the situation. Their tribe's allies had attacked Muhammad's allies. The treaty had been broken by their side. And the man with whom they had made the truce now had the grounds to march on Mecca. They sent an envoy to Muhammad to try to negotiate a settlement, to offer reparations, to explain that the violation had not been authorized by the Quraysh's leaders. Muhammad's response, according to the tradition, was to set conditions that were so stiff that the Meccan envoy returned and told his masters that no settlement was possible on those terms. The door to negotiation had closed.

**The march north**

Muhammad began to assemble the force for the march on Mecca. The traditional number given for the Muslims who accompanied him is ten thousand, though the sources vary and the exact figure is not something a historian can settle. The point is that it was a force large enough to overwhelm any resistance the Quraysh could have offered. It included the Meccan emigrants who had left their homes, the Medinan helpers, the men who had fought at Badr and Uhud and the Trench, and the men who had grown in number during the years of the truce.

The march was not secret. It was known. Muhammad sent ahead men to instruct the Muslim camps along the way to move quietly, to avoid alerting the Meccan scouts. The force moved through the night where it could. They camped at stages on the road. The secrecy was not concealment — the Meccans ultimately knew what was coming — but it was a precaution against a surprise resistance

that might have changed the outcome. By the time the Muslims arrived at Mecca, the Meccan elite had had time to understand what was coming and had had time to decide that resistance was futile.

The approach to Mecca was the moment when the whole shape of the Meccan period became visible in a single movement. Muhammad was coming back to the town that had rejected him, not as the man who had fled in secrecy and danger, but as the head of a community that had outgrown the town's capacity to resist. The force that came to Mecca was the embodiment of everything that had happened in the twenty years since Muhammad had left the cave of Hira and the town had first heard his message.

**The entry**

The entry into Mecca is remembered with the detail that the tradition gives to the most significant moments of Muhammad's life. The Muslims entered the town in the morning. Muhammad had instructed his commanders that no one was to be fought except those who actively resisted. He had given strict orders that the conquest was to be conducted without slaughter, without revenge, without the kind of violence that a conquest of this kind might have produced.

The Meccan elite had gathered at the Kaaba, or in the streets, or in the positions they thought might allow them to resist. When the Muslims arrived in force, the Meccans saw that resistance was impossible. The leadership of the Quraysh had already decided. The town was not going to fight. Some of the Meccan leaders submitted immediately. Others held out briefly and then submitted. The surrender was rapid, and the Muslims' entry was bloodless by the standard of what a city captured by force usually produced.

One of the most vivid moments in the tradition is the entry into the sanctuary itself. The Kaaba was filled with idols — the statues of the Meccan gods, the images of the gods of the surrounding tribes, the collection that had been the center of the town's religious and economic life for generations. Muhammad stood at the Kaaba and ordered the idols to be removed. The tradition gives the image of the idols being taken down, one by one, and destroyed. The sanctuary was purified. The house that had been the center of the polytheist worship of Mecca was now, in the Muslim understanding, the house of God alone, the one God who had sent Muhammad.

The removal of the idols is one of the symbolic moments of the whole story. It is also the moment when the Meccan elite's world — the sanctuary, the pilgrimage, the trade, the prestige that had all been built around the Kaaba and its idols — was visibly undone. The idols were the material expression of the Meccan elite's claim to authority. Their removal was the visible sign that that authority was over.

Muhammad is remembered as declaring, as he stood in the Kaaba, that God had fulfilled His promise and given the Muslims victory. He said that every Meccan who did not fight the Muslims, who did not oppose them, would be forgiven and would be free. The declaration of amnesty was made in the sanctuary, in the most public possible place, and it covered the town.

**The amnesty**

The amnesty is the extraordinary decision at the center of the chapter, and it deserves the fullest weight the biographer can give it.

The Meccans had been Muhammad's enemy for years. They had boycotted his clan. They had pressured his followers. They had tried to kill him. They had stoned him at Ta'if. They had fought

him at Badr and Uhud. The battles had killed Muslims. The boycott had brought hunger. The persecution had cost lives. The Meccan elite had done all of this. And now Muhammad stood in their city, having defeated them by force, and he declared that they were free.

The amnesty was not forced on Muhammad by circumstance. It was a choice he made. He had the men, the force, the anger of his followers. He had the right, under the laws of war, to take revenge. He did not. He declared the Meccans free, and he ordered that no one was to be harmed except those who had actively fought against the Muslims and refused to submit.

The decision is extraordinary for several reasons. First, it was the decision of a man who had every reason to take revenge. The Meccans had not simply opposed Muhammad politically. They had persecuted him personally, his family, his followers. They had destroyed his standing in his own town. They had driven him into exile. A less disciplined leader, or a movement less committed to restraint, could easily have turned the conquest into a massacre. The amnesty was the overcoming of that temptation.

Second, the amnesty was broad. Nearly the entire population of Mecca was included. The exception was a small number of individuals — the men who had been most directly responsible for killing Muslims, or who had committed specific crimes against the Muslims, or who had been leaders of the opposition in a way that made their continuing presence a threat. The tradition names some of those who were excluded — the men who had led the persecution, the men who had been most responsible for the violence against the Muslims. But the number of those excluded was small, and the number of those forgiven was large.

Third, the amnesty changed the meaning of the conquest. A military conquest of a hostile town usually ends in the punishment of the conquered. The amnesty turned the conquest into something different — not just a military success, but a moral one. The Meccans were not massacred. They were not enslaved. They were not stripped of their property by general confiscation. They were forgiven. The town was spared. The decision made the conquest a moment of mercy as much as victory.

The general amnesty was one of the most extraordinary decisions of Muhammad's political life. The decision deserved to be given its full weight. It is not enough to mention the amnesty in passing. It must be presented as the decision that made the conquest more than a military event, the decision that transformed the return to Mecca from the end of an enemy into the beginning of a new relationship between the Muslims and the town they had conquered.

The amnesty also matters because of what it did to the Meccan elite. The leaders who had opposed Muhammad for years were not killed. They were not imprisoned. They were given a place in the new order. Many of them submitted and became Muslims. Others remained non-Muslims but accepted the political reality. The amnesty allowed the Meccan elite to be absorbed rather than destroyed. This was a political act as much as a moral one: the decision to forgive the enemy rather than destroy it was also the decision to build the future rather than settle the past.

**The men who were excluded**

A careful account does not pretend that the amnesty was total. The tradition records that a small number of individuals were excluded from the general pardon, and the account is clear about who they were and why.

The most commonly named among those excluded are the men who had been directly responsible for killing Muslims. The tradition names Ikrama ibn Abi Jahl — the son of the man who had been one of the most relentless opponents of Muhammad in the Meccan period — as among those who were initially excluded, though he later submitted and was forgiven. The tradition also names others who had led the persecution, and the general principle is that those who had committed acts of direct violence against the Muslims and had not submitted before the entry were at risk of being excluded.

The exclusion of individuals is not a contradiction of the amnesty. It is the limit of the amnesty. The general pardon covered the town. It did not cover those who had committed specific crimes against the Muslims and who had not submitted. The distinction is important: the amnesty was broad and it was real, and it did not cancel the principle that those who had killed Muslims might answer for it. The honest account does not flatten the distinction into "everyone was forgiven" or into "some were punished, so the amnesty was not real." The amnesty was real and partial. That is the honest description.

The biographies of those who were excluded and then forgiven are also part of the story. Ikrima, for example, fled to Abyssinia at first, fearing the consequences of the amnesty, and then returned and was forgiven by Muhammad. The detail is remembered because it shows that the amnesty was not just a legal formula. It was a real decision that was applied in specific cases, and that the application of it was itself a kind of mercy.

**The reaction of the Meccans**

The Meccans' reaction to the entry is remembered with some complexity. Some submitted immediately. Some had believed that the Muslims would massacre them and had prepared for that. When they learned that the amnesty had been declared, they were relieved, and some of them were astonished. Muhammad's words as he entered Mecca — that God had given them victory and that the Meccans were free — were heard by the town, and the town had to come to terms with what they had heard.

The honest account does not read the Meccans' reaction as simple gratitude. They had been defeated. Their town had been taken. Their sanctuary had been purified. Their idols had been removed. Their authority had been ended. The amnesty did not erase the fact of defeat. But the amnesty did give them something they had not expected: a place in the future rather than punishment for the past. The Meccans who submitted accepted that Muhammad was now the ruler of their town, and that the sanctuary was now the sanctuary of his community. For many of them, this was a change they could accept. For some, it was a change they could not accept, and they left Mecca rather than submit.

The most important single reaction is the reaction of the Quraysh's leaders. The men who had opposed Muhammad for years, who had boycotted him, who had tried to kill him, now had to decide what to do. Some of them submitted and became Muslims. Abu Sufyan, a leader of the Banu Umayya and the man who had led the Meccan caravan that the Muslims set out to intercept at Badr, is remembered as having been one of the last to submit, and as having asked Muhammad for protection when he finally came to submit. Muhammad gave him protection. Abu Sufyan became a Muslim, and his conversion — the conversion of one of the most obstinate opponents of the early period — was a sign of the completeness of the conquest.

The conversion of Abu Sufyan is a good example of the way the amnesty worked in practice. He had been among the leaders of the opposition. He had led the Meccan forces against the Muslims at Uhud

and the Trench. He could have been excluded from the amnesty. Instead, he submitted, and Muhammad forgave him. The decision was not automatic. It required Muhammad to make the choice. The choice was the amnesty.

**The removal of the idols and the reorganization of the sanctuary**

The removal of the idols is the most visible act of the conquest. The Kaaba had been filled with statues — the gods of the Meccan tribes and of the surrounding groups, each with its shrine and its following, all gathered in the sanctuary that was the center of Mecca's religious and economic life. Muhammad ordered the idols to be taken down and destroyed. The tradition gives the image of this happening, and the image is one of the most powerful moments in the early story.

The removal of the idols was not just a symbolic act. It was the practical undoing of the Meccan elite's religious authority. The sanctuary had been the center of the polytheist worship of Mecca. Its purification — the removal of the idols, the declaration that it was now a house for God alone — was the sign that the Meccan elite's world had been fundamentally changed. The pilgrimage would continue, but it would be a Muslim pilgrimage, and the Kaaba would be a Muslim sanctuary.

The reorganization of the sanctuary also included the destruction of the idols around the Kaaba, and the cleansing of the sanctuary of the symbols of the old worship. The tradition records that the walls of the Kaaba were washed, and that the symbols of the old worship were removed. The sanctuary was made into what the Muslims understood it to be: the house of God, the qibla, the direction of prayer, the most sacred place in the Muslim world.

This was a transformation of the town's central institution. The Meccan elite had built their wealth and prestige on the sanctuary and the pilgrimage. The purification of the sanctuary changed the meaning of both. The pilgrimage continued, but it was now a Muslim pilgrimage, and the Meccan elite's role in it was now as Muslims, or as subjects of the Muslim community, rather than as guardians of the polytheist shrine.

**The aftermath of the conquest**

After the entry and the amnesty and the removal of the idols, the Muslims established their presence in Mecca. The town was not destroyed. It was taken over and reorganized. The Meccan elite were not massacred. They were given a place in the new order. The sanctuary was purified. The idols were gone. The town that had been Muhammad's first adversary was now his town, and the sanctuary that had been the center of his opposition was now the sanctuary of his community.

The conquest of Mecca changed the balance of power in the Arabian peninsula. The Quraysh, the dominant tribe of Mecca, had been the main opponent of Muhammad in the Meccan period. Their power had been based on the sanctuary, the pilgrimage, and the trade. The conquest removed those foundations and replaced them with the Muslim community's control of the sanctuary and the pilgrimage. The Quraysh's power as a polytheist elite was over. The Quraysh as individuals — or many of them — became Muslims and became part of the Muslim community.

The conquest also changed the position of the surrounding tribes. Many of the tribes that had been watching the struggle between Mecca and Medina now saw that Mecca had fallen and that the Muslims had won. The conquest accelerated the spread of Islam into the peninsula, because the defeat of the Quraysh demonstrated that the Muslim community was now the dominant force in the region. Tribes that had been neutral or hostile now had reason to submit.

The conquest was not the end of the struggle — there were still tribes that resisted, and there were still campaigns to be fought, including the expedition to Hunayn and the siege of Ta'if that followed the conquest of Mecca. But the conquest of Mecca was the turning point after which the Muslim community's dominance of the peninsula became the clear direction of events. The town that had persecuted Muhammad for years was now his town, and the sanctuary that had been the center of his opposition was now the sanctuary of his community.

**The meaning of the conquest**

The conquest of Mecca is the moment in the story when the movement that had begun in a cave outside the town returned to take that town. The return was bloodless. The amnesty was declared. The idols were removed. The sanctuary was purified. The Meccan elite submitted, and the town that had been Muhammad's first adversary became his town.

The honest account does not let the amnesia of the later tradition flatten the conquest into a simple victory. It was a victory, and it was a bloodless one, and the amnesty was extraordinary. But the conquest also had a cost, and the cost should not be erased by the amnesty. The Meccans had lost their town, their sanctuary, their idols, their authority. The amnesty spared their lives, but it did not spare them from defeat. The honest account holds both things — the mercy of the amnesty and the reality of the defeat — without letting either cancel the other.

The conquest also matters for the argument of the book. It is the moment when the movement that had been persecuted in Mecca returned as the power that had outgrown the persecution. The amnesty is the decision that made the return more than a military conquest. It was the decision that turned the conquest into a moral event, the decision that showed what kind of leader Muhammad was at the moment when he had the most reason to take revenge and the least reason to show mercy. The amnesty is the most extraordinary decision of his political life, and it is the decision that should be given its full weight.

## The Last Year

In the tenth year after the hijra, Muhammad performed what is remembered as the farewell pilgrimage — the last time he would go to Mecca, the last time he would preach to the Muslims gathered at Arafat, the last time he would speak to the community he had built as a whole. The pilgrimage and the sermon that accompanied it became, in the Islamic tradition, the crystallization of the message at the end of his life. For the biographer, the farewell pilgrimage is the moment when the man who had been an orphan from a middling clan in a desert town stood at the summit of what he had achieved and turned to the things that mattered most — the equality of the believers, the rights of the vulnerable, the sanctity of the Muslim's life and honor, and the warning that came at the end of a life: remember this, and do not forget.

Figure: The reach of the Muslim community by the time of Muhammad's death in 632, and its position between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. (Image: Fazoffic, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The year was also the year of the tribal delegations — the moment when the Arabs of the peninsula, the tribes that had not yet submitted to Islam, came to Medina to make their peace, to accept Islam, or to agree to terms. The delegations were the sign that the peninsular revolution had become a fact, that the Muslim community had become the power that the Arabian interior had to reckon with, and that the man who had begun as a preacher in Mecca had become the leader of a peninsula.

And the year was the year of the illness. The tradition records that Muhammad grew sick in the latter part of the year, that his illness was not dramatic but persistent, that he tried to continue his duties as long as he could, and that he died in Medina in the room of his wife Aisha, in the presence of those who loved him, at the end of a life that had changed the world.

**The pilgrimage to Mecca**

The farewell pilgrimage took place in the month of Dhu al-Hijja in the tenth year after the hijra. Muhammad and his followers — the tradition gives the number as over a hundred thousand, though the precise figure is not something a historian can settle — traveled from Medina to Mecca for the rites of the pilgrimage. It was the first and last time Muhammad performed the pilgrimage in person, and it was the last pilgrimage he presided over as the living head of the community.

The pilgrimage itself was the ritual that had been the center of Mecca's religious and economic life before Islam — the circumambulation of the Kaaba, the standing at Arafat, the running between Safa and Marwa, the sacrifice. The Muslims performed the rites in the way that Muhammad had taught them, with the sanctuary now purified, the idols gone, the direction of prayer now toward Mecca rather than Jerusalem. The pilgrimage that had once been the center of the polytheist worship of Mecca had become the central ritual of the Muslim community, and Muhammad stood at its center as the living leader of that community.

The detail that matters for the biographer is not the number of the pilgrims. It is the fact that Muhammad was there, in Mecca, leading the community he had built in the most sacred place of the Arabian peninsula, after the conquest that had made it possible. The man who had been boycotted in this town, who had fled it in danger, who had been exiled from it, had returned to perform the pilgrimage at the head of a community that had outgrown the town's capacity to resist. The farewell pilgrimage was, in that sense, the full circle of the Meccan story — the return of the man who had been rejected, at the moment when the rejection was history and the acceptance was present.

**The sermon at Arafat**

The sermon is the most famous of Muhammad's speeches, and it is the speech that carries his teaching forward into the Islamic tradition in a concentrated form. The tradition records the sermon as delivered at Mount Arafat, the place where the pilgrims stand on the day of the pilgrimage, and it records the substance of what Muhammad said.

The sermon, as it is remembered, covered several themes, and each of them was a message that Muhammad had spent his life developing.

First, the sermon declared the end of the old tribal feuds. Muhammad told the Muslims that the blood vengeance of the pre-Islamic period was over, that the tribal wars that had characterized Arabian life before Islam were ended, and that the believers were now one community. The reference was specific — the old tribal disputes that had defined the Arabian interior, the blood feuds that had been the law, the revenge cycles that had produced violence for generations — and the declaration was that Islam had ended that cycle. The sermon was, in this respect, a statement about the new order replacing the old.

Second, the sermon declared the equality of all Muslims before God. Muhammad told the pilgrims that the Arab had no superiority over the non-Arab, that the white man had no superiority over the black man, except in piety and good deeds. The statement was, in its context, a radical declaration. It said that the tribal and racial hierarchies that had defined the Arabian world before Islam were no longer operative within the Muslim community. The only distinction that remained was piety.

The declaration of equality was not an abstract proclamation. It was addressed to a crowd that included Arabs and non-Arabs, free men and slaves, men of the peninsula and men from beyond it. It was a statement about the community they had become. The sermon declared that the old markers of status — clan, tribe, skin color — were no longer the measure of a person within the Muslim community. The measure was piety.

Third, the sermon declared the rights of the vulnerable. Muhammad spoke about the orphan, the wife, the slave, the poor. He declared that the orphan's rights were to be honored, that the wife's rights were to be respected, that the slave's rights were to be protected, that the poor were to be cared for. The sermon was, in this respect, a summary of the moral and legal teaching of Islam regarding the vulnerable — the concern with the orphan that had run through the Qur'an from the beginning, the concern with the wife that reflected the marital and inheritance reforms that Muhammad had instituted, the concern with the slave that reflected the manumission ethic that was part of the Islamic tradition.

Fourth, the sermon declared the sanctity of the Muslim's life, property, and honor. Muhammad told the pilgrims that the life, property, and honor of every Muslim were sacred to every other Muslim,

and that no one was to violate them. The declaration was a statement about the internal order of the Muslim community — that the believers were now bound to each other in a way that made violence against one another forbidden. The sermon was, in this respect, the ending of the internal raiding and feuding that had characterized the pre-Islamic period, and the establishment of a community in which the believer's life was protected by the community itself.

Fifth, the sermon declared the prohibition of usury. Muhammad told the pilgrims that usury was abolished, and that the old debts that had been contracted on the basis of usury were forgiven. The reference was to the financial practices of the pre-Islamic period — the interest-based lending that had been part of the commercial life of Arabia — and the declaration was that such practices were no longer permitted within the Muslim community. The sermon was, in this respect, a statement about the economic reform that Islam had instituted.

Sixth, the sermon declared the responsibility of the believers for one another. Muhammad told the pilgrims that they were all responsible for each other, that the community was bound together by mutual obligation, and that no one was to be left unprotected. The sermon was, in this respect, a statement about the mutual responsibility that the Muslim community had established — the principle that the believers were responsible for each other's welfare, and that the community as a whole had an obligation to its members.

The sermon ended with Muhammad telling the pilgrims that he was leaving them with two things — the Book of God and his own example — and that if they held to these, they would not go astray. The reference to the Book of God was the Qur'an. The reference to his example was the sunna, the way of Muhammad. The two things together were the inheritance that the community would carry forward after his death.

**The sermon's authority and the sermon's limits**

The tradition records the sermon as a single speech, delivered at Arafat, and transmitted in a form that has been preserved in the Islamic sources. The honest account does not pretend that the sermon is a verbatim transcript of what Muhammad said on that day. The sermon is remembered in the tradition, and the tradition shaped it. The sermon as it survives is a memory of what Muhammad said, shaped by the later tradition's need to preserve the substance of the teaching in a form that could be transmitted and used.

At the same time, the honest account does not pretend that the sermon has no authority as a historical record. The sermon is one of the most firmly established pieces of the early Islamic memory. The substance of the sermon — the declarations of equality, the rights of the vulnerable, the sanctity of the Muslim's life, the prohibition of usury, the responsibility of the believers — is consistent with what the Qur'an says and what the early community understood Muhammad to have taught. The sermon is not an invention. It is the crystallization of a teaching that Muhammad had been developing for twenty-two years, and that he delivered at the end of his life to the community he had built.

The honest account treats the sermon as a real speech, remembered in a form that the tradition preserved, and carrying the substance of what Muhammad taught at the end of his life. The biographer does not pretend that every word is certain. The biographer does not pretend that the substance is uncertain.

**The tribal delegations**

After the farewell pilgrimage, and in the same year, the Arabs of the peninsula came to Medina in delegations. The tradition records that the tribal delegations arrived throughout the last year of Muhammad's life, and that they came from all parts of the peninsula — from the Hijaz, from the Najd, from the Yemen, from the tribes that had not yet submitted to Islam, from the tribes that had been watching the Muslim community's growth and had now decided to join it.

The delegations were the sign that the peninsular revolution had become a fact. The tribes were coming to Medina to make their peace with Muhammad, to accept Islam, or to agree to treaties. The number of the delegations was large, and the number of the tribes they represented was large, and the fact of the delegations was the fact that the Muslim community had become the power that the Arabian interior had to reckon with.

The delegations are important for the biographer because they show the scope of what Muhammad had achieved. At the beginning of his career, he had been a preacher in Mecca, rejected by his own town, persecuted by his own tribe. At the end of his career, he was receiving delegations from the tribes of the entire peninsula, and the tribes were coming to him to accept his authority, to join his community, to make their peace. The change from the beginning to the end was total, and the delegations were the visible sign of that change.

The delegations also show the character of the community Muhammad had built. The Muslims had not conquered the whole peninsula by force. They had grown by persuasion, by alliance, by the attraction of the message and the power of the community. The delegations were the result of that growth. They were the tribes coming to join, not being forced to join. The fact of the delegations was the fact that the Muslim community had become a movement that the tribes of the peninsula wanted to be part of.

The delegations were not only a political event. They were also a social and religious event. The tribes that came to Medina brought their own practices, their own customs, their own understandings of religion. Muhammad received them, taught them, and arranged the treaties or conversions that brought them into the Muslim community. The delegations were the moment when the Muslim community became the center of the Arabian peninsula's religious and political life, and when Muhammad became the leader not just of the Medinan community but of the peninsula as a whole.

The delegations must be made visible as a sign of the scope of what Muhammad had achieved. They should not become a footnote. They are part of the story of the last year, and they are part of the story of the man who had gone from a persecuted preacher in Mecca to the head of a community that was receiving the representatives of the Arabian tribes.

**The illness**

The illness that took Muhammad began in the latter part of the tenth year. The tradition records that he became sick, that he grew weaker, that he continued to lead the prayers as long as he could, and that he eventually died in Medina. The illness was not dramatic in the way the earlier episodes of his life were dramatic. It was a quiet illness, a decline, a death that came in the room of Aisha, his wife, and in the presence of those who loved him.

The tradition remembers several details of the illness. Muhammad received thesacrifice of the pilgrimage, and then he grew sick. He led the prayers as long as he could, and then he could no

longer lead them. He asked for instructions about the prayers, and he told the community to pray at the times of the prayers. He grew weaker, and he died in the room of Aisha.

The illness is remembered as a fever. The tradition gives the name of the illness as a fever, and it records that he was treated with remedies that were typical for the time — cooling applications, care, attention. The illness was not a sudden catastrophe. It was a decline that came over him gradually, and that he met with the same patience that he had met the other events of his life.

The detail that matters is the human fact of the illness. Muhammad had been through the revelations, the persecution, the migration, the battles, the constitution, the conquest. He had done the work of a lifetime, and he was now at the end of it, tired, ill, and preparing for the end. The illness was not a dramatic end to a dramatic life. It was a quiet end to a life that had been full. The dramatic events of the earlier parts of the story should not make the illness seem less significant. The illness is the end of the life, and the end of the life is the end of the story.

The death came in the room of Aisha. The tradition records the scene — Muhammad in Aisha's room, surrounded by those who loved him, growing weaker, and then dying. The room was the place where he had spent his last days, and where he died. The detail is human. It is the detail of a man dying in the company of his wife, in the room that had been his, with the people who had been closest to him. The death should not become an abstract fact. It was a human death, in a human room, with human beings around him.

**The character of the last year**

The last year of Muhammad's life was the year of the farewell pilgrimage, the sermon, the delegations, and the illness. It was the year in which he stood at the summit of what he had achieved, and the year in which he began to approach the end.

The character of the year was the character of a man who had done the work of a lifetime and who was now turning to the things that mattered most. The preaching, the migration, the battles, the constitution, the conquest — all of that had been done. The last year was the year of consolidation, of farewell, of the slow approach of death. It was not a period of new revelation in the sense of a new phase of the message. It was the period of the message's crystallization, of the sermon that summarized it, of the delegations that showed what it had become, of the illness that brought it to an end.

The atmosphere of the last year should be clear. Muhammad was tired. He was ill. He had done the work of a lifetime — the preaching, the migration, the battles, the constitution, the conquest — and he was now at the end of it, turning to the things that mattered most, receiving the delegations, and preparing for the end. The last year was not a period of new revelation in the sense of a new phase of the message. It was a period of consolidation, of farewell, of the slow approach of death.

The last year was also the year in which Muhammad's teaching reached its most concentrated form. The sermon at Arafat was the moment when he spoke to the community he had built and declared the things that mattered most — the equality of the believers, the rights of the vulnerable, the sanctity of the Muslim's life and honor, the prohibition of usury, the responsibility of the believers for one another. The sermon was the crystallization of the message, and it was the message that the community would carry forward after his death.

The last year was the end of the life of Muhammad, and the end was approaching, and the death would come in the room of Aisha, and the death would be reported to the community in a way that would test their faith — the announcement that the Prophet was dead, and the crowd that refused to believe it, and the speech of Abu Bakr that broke through the denial and reminded the Muslims that Muhammad was mortal.

The next and last chapter will look at the death, in Aisha's room, the failure of the community to believe it at first, and Abu Bakr's speech to the crowd, and the closing on the man rather than on the empire.

## He Died in Her Room

The illness that had been building through the last year of Muhammad's life now closed in on him. He had been weak for days. He had been tired in a way that sleep did not fix, and ill in a way that the remedies of the time could not reverse. The fever had come and stayed. He was in the room of his wife Aisha in Medina, and the people outside that room — his wives, his companions, the members of his household — were waiting, and the community of Medina was unaware, and the Arabian peninsula was moving toward a new shape that no one yet understood would begin the moment this man stopped breathing.

Muhammad died on a Monday in the month of June in the year 632, by the reckoning of the West, in the eleventh year after the hijra, in the room of Aisha. The tradition records the scene in some detail, and the detail matters because it is the last moment in which the sources give us access to the interior of Muhammad's life — the last time, after the death, that the story becomes something other than what the man himself experienced.

The tradition remembers that Muhammad asked for something to be brought to him — a vessel of water, the small practical things that a dying man asks for — and that he performed the ritual ablutions, and that he wrapped himself in his cloak, and that he lay down, and that his breathing changed, and that he died. He was, at the end, in the room of Aisha, his wife, the daughter of Abu Bakr, the woman who had been among the youngest of his wives and who had been with him in the last years of his life, the woman whose chamber became the place where the story ended.

The scene in the room is one of the few moments in the whole biography where the sources allow us to be present at the end of a life that is not a legend and not a sermon and not a battle. It is a room. A man is dying in it. His wife is with him. His companions are waiting outside. The death is not dramatic in the way the earlier episodes of his life were dramatic — the cave, the boycott, the stoning at Ta'if, the battles, the treaty that looked like a defeat. It is quiet. It is a man closing his eyes. The quietness should not be mistaken for insignificance. The quietness is the point. The most extraordinary life in the book ends the way most lives end — in a room, with a body that fails, with a breath that stops, with people who are close to the man grieving what they have lost.

The death is the moment at which the story of the man ends and the story of the empire begins. This is not a distinction the book invents. It is a distinction the tradition itself knew. The community that had built itself around Muhammad had to learn, in the hours after his death, how to continue without him. The empire that Muhammad had left — the Muslim community, the conquest of Mecca, the

submission of the tribes, the constitution, the laws, the sanctuary — was real. It would grow in the years after his death, under Abu Bakr and then Umar and the Rashidun, and then under the Umayyads and the Abbasids, and then across the world. But the book has not been the story of that empire. It has been the story of the man who built it. The death is where the book ends, and it is where the book should end — on the man, in the room, with the death.

**The scene in the room**

The tradition gives the death scene with a kind of careful attention that distinguishes it from the legendary elaboration that surrounds other moments of Muhammad's life. The companions who were present in the house reported what they saw. Aisha, who was there, reported what she saw. The account that survives is the account that these people gave, and it is one of the more solid pieces of the early memory.

Muhammad asked for something to drink, or for water to be brought. He had been feverish. He had been weak. His body was failing in the way that an elderly body fails, and the fever had added to the failure. He was not in pain in any sharp sense; he was tired and ill and coming to the end of his strength. He asked Aisha, who was with him, to do what needed to be done, and she prepared the small acts of care that a wife performs for a dying husband — the water, the cloths, the presence.

Then he made the ablutions, or asked for them to be made for him — the ritual washing that a Muslim performs before prayer, the small ceremony that marked the end of his life as a Muslim and the beginning of his life as a dead man. He wrapped himself in his cloak. He lay down. His breathing changed. He died.

The companions who were outside, or who came in as the death approached, saw what was happening. They were not a large crowd. They were the people of his household, the people who had been closest to him, the people who had been waiting for this moment without quite believing that it would come. When it came, they were, in the way of people who have lost someone central to their life, suddenly bereft in a way that the certainty of the death did not prepare them for.

Aisha's account of the death is the most detailed of the early memories. She remembered the time of day, the season, the physical details of the room. She remembered Muhammad's last words, if he had spoken them — the tradition records his last words as being of a kind that spoke of the care of the believers, of the reminder that what he had taught them was true, of the concern for the community he was leaving. She remembered the manner of his death — the way he lay, the way he breathed, the way the body changed when life left it.

The death scene is one of the most intimate moments in the early Islamic memory, and it is one of the moments that should not be overwritten. The tradition has given us a death scene that is modest and specific and human. That should be respected. The scene is not a spectacle. It is a death. A man dies in a room. His wife is with him. That is enough.

**The denial**

When Muhammad died, the news had to go out. The community outside the house had to know. Those who knew first — the companions in the house, Aisha, the men who had been with Muhammad in his final days — understood that the death was real. But the community at large did not.

The tradition records that when the news was announced, there was denial. Some of the Muslims, hearing that Muhammad was dead, refused to believe it. They thought that he was not really dead, or that he would come back, or that there had been a mistake. The denial was not a small thing. It was, in the memory of the tradition, a significant reaction — the community so used to Muhammad's presence, so used to the idea that he was the Prophet and would not die, that the announcement of his death met with a refusal to accept it.

The denial is one of the most human things in the memory of the death, and it is one of the things that should not be skipped. The story of the death is not just the fact of death. It is the fact of death plus the reaction to it, and the reaction is as important as the death. The Muslims, who had built their whole life around Muhammad, found it hard to accept that he was gone. The denial was the shape of their grief, and it was the shape of their inability to imagine the community without him.

The denial was not disbelief in the religious sense. It was not that the Muslims did not believe that Muhammad was a prophet, or that they did not believe that he had been sent by God. It was that the death of a man who had been the center of their life for twenty-two years — who had been their guide, their leader, their judge, their head of state — was a fact that the mind resisted. The community had become so organized around Muhammad's presence that the removal of that presence left a gap that the mind could not immediately fill.

The tradition remembers that some of the Muslims were so overcome that they did not know what to do. They stood in the lanes of Medina, or in the mosque, or at the door of the house, waiting for the news to become real. The death was true. The denial was human. Both should be presented without letting the denial become a charge against the community or a virtue of the community — it was simply what grief does. It refuses, for a time, to accept what has happened.

**Abu Bakr's speech**

The speech that broke the denial came from Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr had been the closest friend of Muhammad in the earliest days, the man who had believed in him when he came down from the cave shaking and convinced he was mad. He had been the man who had migrated to Medina with Muhammad, who had been with him in the cave of Thawr during the escape from Mecca, who had been chosen by the community to succeed him as the first caliph. He was now the man who had to take the news of the death to the community that refused to believe it.

Abu Bakr came to the house, and he saw Muhammad, and he confirmed the death. He came out and addressed the crowd that had gathered. The words he said are remembered as the speech that established the reality of the death, and the words are among the most important in the early Islamic memory.

The words were not Abu Bakr's own. They were a quotation from the Qur'an — a verse that the community knew, a verse that had been revealed in a different context but that now, in this moment, had the force of a reminder that Muhammad was mortal. The verse was this: "Muhammad is only a messenger, and messengers have passed before him. If he dies or is killed, will you turn back on your heels?"

The speech was short. It was a single verse. Abu Bakr came out to the crowd that was in denial, and he said the words, and he said them in a way that made them land. The denial ended. The crowd

understood that Muhammad was dead. The community, which had built its whole life around Muhammad's presence, had to face the fact that he was gone.

The speech is one of the most powerful moments in the early Islamic memory, because it is the moment at which the community learned, in the most direct possible way, that Muhammad was human. The Qur'an had said all along that Muhammad was only a messenger, that messengers had died before him, that the faith did not depend on the physical presence of any one man. But the community had not fully internalized that until the moment when Abu Bakr said it to them after the death. The speech was the reminder that the community had needed, and that it had not known it needed until the death came.

Abu Bakr's speech also established the continuity of the community. By quoting the Qur'an, by reminding the Muslims that messengers had died before Muhammad and that the faith would continue, Abu Bakr showed that the community could survive the death of its leader. The denial broke, the reality took hold, and the community began the work of continuing without Muhammad. The speech was the moment at which the community turned from grief into continuation.

**The preparation of the body**

After the death, the body of Muhammad had to be prepared. The tradition records the small acts that followed — the washing of the body, the shrouding, the placing of the body in the room where he had died. The body was not moved far. It remained in Aisha's room, in the place where he had died, and it was there that the community came to pay its respects, and it was there that the memory of his last days was preserved.

The preparation of the body is one of the moments in the early memory that should be treated with care. The tradition records the acts of washing and shrouding with the modesty that distinguishes the early Islamic account from the legendary elaboration that surrounds some other moments. The body was washed by the men who were closest to Muhammad — by Ali and by others of the household — and it was shrouded in the simple garments that a Muslim is shrouded in at death. The preparation was not elaborate. It was the preparation of a man who had died in Medina, in the room of his wife, with the community outside grieving and waiting and then beginning to accept the death.

The body remained in Aisha's room. This is one of the facts that the tradition preserves with some care, and it is a fact that matters for the biography because it keeps the death connected to the room and to Aisha and to the human setting of the last years. Muhammad died in Aisha's room, and his body remained there. The room became the place where the memory of his death was kept, and where the community came to remember him, and where the brief, powerful moments of his final illness and death were preserved.

The room itself is part of the story. It was Aisha's room. Aisha had been one of the youngest of Muhammad's wives, the daughter of Abu Bakr, the woman who had been with him in the years after Khadija's death, the woman who would outlive him by decades and become one of the most important transmitters of the tradition about his life. The room was hers, and it was the place where Muhammad died, and it was the place where the body was kept. The connection between the death and the room and the woman who had been Muhammad's wife is one of the human details that the tradition has preserved, and that should not be lost.

**The funeral**

The funeral of Muhammad was not a large spectacle. The tradition records that the Muslims gathered in Medina, that they prayed for him, that they buried him in the room where he had died, in the chamber that became the site of the mosque that would later be built around it. The burial was simple. The body was placed in the grave that was prepared in the room, and the community paid its respects, and the memory of the death was sealed in the place where it had happened.

The funeral is one of the moments that the tradition treats with the modesty that is its most valuable characteristic. There is no elaborate description of the funeral procession. There is no story of the crowd weeping in a way that would be legendary. There is the fact of the gathering, the fact of the prayer, the fact of the burial, and the fact that the body was laid to rest in the room of Aisha, in Medina, where it remains in Islamic memory to this day.

The burial place is itself part of the story. The room of Aisha became the site of a mosque, and the mosque became a place of pilgrimage, and the place where Muhammad died became a place that Muslims would visit for centuries. The fact that the room became a mosque is a historical fact, and it should be recorded without making it the center of the chapter. The center of the chapter is the death, not the building that later grew around it. The death happened in the room. The mosque came later. The sequence should be kept clear.

The funeral is also the moment at which the community began to organize itself around the absence of Muhammad. The gathering in Medina was not just grief. It was the beginning of the work of continuing without him. The community had to bury its leader. It had to begin the work of succession. It had to begin the work of carrying forward the message that Muhammad had brought. The funeral was the moment at which the death became a community event, and the community began the work of living with the death.

**What Muhammad left behind**

Muhammad left behind a community that had been built over twenty-two years, from the cave of Hira to the room of Aisha. The community had its constitution — the document that had bound Muslims, pagans, and Jewish tribes into a single political community in Medina. It had its laws — the inheritance rules, the marriage rules, the rules of war and peace, the rules of the market and the weights and measures, the rules of the orphan and the debtor and the captive. It had its army — the men who had fought at Badr and Uhud and the Trench, the men who had learned to fight and to win and to lose and to survive. It had its sanctuary — the Kaaba in Mecca, purified of idols, facing the qibla, the direction of prayer, the most sacred place in the Muslim world. It had its revelation — the Qur'an, the word of God in the Islamic understanding, the record of a man's experience in the historical reading, both things true at once. And it had its message — the message of one God, of the equality of the believers, of the rights of the vulnerable, of the sanctity of the Muslim's life and honor, the message that had been delivered at the farewell pilgrimage and that would be carried forward after his death.

Muhammad left behind a community that was already a power in the Arabian peninsula. The tribes had submitted. The delegations had come. The conquest of Mecca had made the sanctuary Muslim. The amnesty had shown what kind of leader Muhammad was at the moment when he had the most reason to take revenge and the least reason to show mercy. The community had its constitution and its laws and its army and its sanctuary and its revelation. The empire was real. It would grow. But the book has not been the story of the empire. It has been the story of the man.

**The man at the end**

Muhammad at the end was the man who had been an orphan. He was the boy whose father had died before he was born and whose mother had died when he was six, and whose grandfather had died when he was eight, and whose uncle Abu Talib had protected him without, on the best reading of the evidence, becoming a Muslim. He was the boy who had been sent to the desert to be nursed by Halima among the Banu Sa'd, who had grown up with the desert Arabic that would later appear in the Qur'an, who had returned to Mecca and entered the caravan trade.

He was the man who had married Khadija, the wealthy widow who had proposed to him, who had been the first believer, who had stood by him when he came down from the cave thinking he was mad, who had died in the Year of Sorrow, leaving him without his wife and without his protector in the same year. He was the man who had been known in Mecca as al-Amin, the trustworthy, and al-Sadiq, the truthful, who had solved the dispute over the Black Stone by spreading his cloak on the ground and inviting each clan to lift it together.

He was the man who had come down from the cave of Hira convinced he had lost his mind, who had been told by Khadija and by Waraqa that he had not, who had waited through the silence, who had begun to preach, who had been mocked and boycotted and threatened. He was the man who had sent the first Muslims to Abyssinia, who had lost his wife and his protector in the Year of Sorrow, who had gone to Ta'if and been stoned and driven out, who had received the night journey and the ascension.

He was the man who had migrated to Medina, who had established the Constitution of Medina, who had become a statesman, a judge, a tax collector, a legislator, a general, a head of state. He was the man who had fought Badr and won, who had fought Uhud and lost, who had fought the Trench and survived. He was the man who had dealt with the Jewish tribes — the Qaynuqa expelled, the Nadir expelled, the Qurayza judged. He was the man who had taken several wives after Khadija's death, who had married Aisha, who had married Zaynab bint Jahsh, who had married the widows of fallen Muslims and the women of political alliances.

He was the man who had made the Treaty of Hudaybiyya, the treaty his followers had found intolerable and that had turned out to be the turning point. He had conquered Mecca with an amnesty, with the general forgiveness of the enemy that had persecuted him for years. He had performed the farewell pilgrimage, had delivered the sermon at Arafat, had declared the equality of the believers and the rights of the vulnerable and the sanctity of the Muslim's life and honor. He had received the tribal delegations in the last year, and the tribes had come to Medina to make their peace, to accept Islam, to agree to treaties.

And he was the man who had died in the room of Aisha, tired and ill, in the presence of the woman who had been his companion in the last years, in the presence of the community that had built itself around him and that now had to learn to live without him.

**The close**

The death closes the book on the man, not on the empire. The empire that Muhammad had built, or that the community had built under his leadership, was already there. It would grow in the years after his death. The story of that growth is not the story this book has been telling. This book has told the story of a man — an orphan, a husband, a trader, a preacher, a persecuted leader, a migrant, a

statesman, a judge, a general, a head of state, a man who had received revelations he believed were from God, and who had to live out those revelations in the practical life of a real community, and who had done all of it, and who had died.

The reader who has followed the story from the cave of Hira to the room of Aisha should now have a sense of a life. Not a saintly life. Not a sinful life. Not a life smoothed of its edges. Not a life treated as a prosecution brief or a defense brief. A life. The life of a man who believed, with his own initial terror, that God was speaking to him, and who then had to be a husband, a general, a judge, and a head of state while it kept happening, and who did all of it, and who died.

The death is the moment at which the story of the man ends. The story of what happened after the death — the caliphate of Abu Bakr, the suppression of the tribal rebellions, the conquests of the Syrian and Egyptian and Persian lands, the empire that grew across the world — is a different story, a story that is part of the Islamic tradition but that is not the story of Muhammad's life. This book has told the story of Muhammad's life. It ends with the death.

The death is a human death. It happens in a room. A man dies. His wife is with him. His companions are outside. The community grieves. The denial breaks. Abu Bakr speaks. The body is prepared. The funeral is held. The body is laid to rest in the room where he died, and the room becomes a mosque, and the place where he died becomes a place of memory for centuries. But the death itself is a man closing his eyes, in a room, in Medina, in the eleventh year after the hijra, in the month of June in the year 632 by the reckoning of the West.

The man is dead. The empire is left. The book ends.

# Appendices

## Timeline

**c. 570 CE** — Birth of Muhammad ibn Abdullah in Mecca. Traditional birth year is the "Year of the Elephant," associated with the story of Abraha's invasion of the Hejaz. The traditional date is 570.

**570–c. 576** — Early childhood. According to tradition, Muhammad is sent as an infant to be nursed by Halima bint Abi Umayya of the Banu Sa'd, a Bedouin tribe, in the desert. He spends his early years with Halima's family.

**c. 576** — Return to Mecca. Muhammad is brought back to his mother Amina. The tradition says Amina died when Muhammad was about six years old, on the journey to Medina for her burial.

**576–c. 580** — Life with grandfather Abd al-Muttalib. After his mother's death, Muhammad goes to live with his grandfather, the head of the Banu Hashim and the custodian of the Zamzam well.

**c. 580** — Death of Abd al-Muttalib. Muhammad's grandfather dies when Muhammad is about eight (the tradition gives the age as eight). Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib becomes his protector.

**580–c. 590** — Life in Abu Talib's household. Muhammad grows up in Mecca, traveling with caravans to Syria and Yemen. He earns the reputation for trustworthiness that gives him the nicknames al-Amin ("the trustworthy") and al-Sadiq ("the truthful").

**c. 590–595** — Work with Khadija. Muhammad works for Khadija bint Khuwaylid, a wealthy widow of the Quraysh. He leads one of her caravans to Syria.

**595** — Marriage to Khadija. Khadija proposes marriage. Muhammad, about 25, marries Khadija, about 40. The marriage lasts 25 years and is monogamous for all but the last few years of Muhammad's life. The couple has children: Qasim and Abdullah (who die in infancy), and Fatima (who survives into the Medinan period).

**595–610** — The Meccan period before revelation. Muhammad lives as a merchant and husband in Mecca, known for his trustworthiness. He participates in the reconstruction of the Kaaba and resolves the dispute over the Black Stone by inviting each clan to lift the stone together on a cloak.

**610** — The first revelation. Muhammad retreats to the cave of Hira on Mount Nur outside Mecca for meditation, as was his custom during Ramadan. According to tradition, the angel Gabriel appears to him and commands him to "Read" (or "Recite"). Muhammad returns to Khadija in terror, believing he has been possessed. Khadija takes him to her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a Christian who recognizes the experience as a divine communication. Khadija becomes the first believer.

**610–613** — The silence. After the first revelation, there is a gap during which no new revelation comes. The traditions vary on the exact length — months to a year or more — but the effect is consistent: Muhammad waits, uncertain whether the communication will continue. The Qur'an preserves traces of this period in the early Meccan suras, which speak to a man under pressure, called to be steadfast.

**613** — The resumption of revelation and public preaching begins. The second revelation comes, traditionally remembered as the command to "arise and warn." Muhammad begins to preach his message publicly: the oneness of God, the rejection of idols, the warning of a coming judgment, the concern for the orphan and the vulnerable, the burial of infant girls condemned.

**613–615** — The early opposition. Muhammad's message begins to draw opposition from the Meccan elite. The Quraysh mock him, call him a poet, a magician, a possessed man, a fabricator. The early believers include Khadija, Ali (his cousin), Abu Bakr, Zayd ibn Haritha (a freed slave), and Bilal ibn Rabah (an Abyssinian slave). Bilal is famously tortured on hot ground for refusing to renounce Islam; his only response is to repeat "One God, One God" — *Ahad, ahad*.

**615** — The emigration to Abyssinia. A group of Muslims, including some of the first believers, flee Mecca for Abyssinia (the Christian kingdom of Axum, modern Ethiopia and Eritrea) seeking protection from the persecution. They cross the Red Sea in small boats. The Negus, the Christian ruler of Abyssinia, gives them protection after hearing Ja'far ibn Abi Talib recite from the Qur'an — specifically from Sura Maryam, the chapter about Mary and the birth of Jesus.

**615–616** — A second wave of emigration to Abyssinia. A larger group of Muslims follow, including more of the early believers. The Meccan elite send an envoy to demand the Muslims be returned, but the Negus refuses after hearing Ja'far's recitation. The Muslims remain in Abyssinia under the Negus's protection.

**616–619** — The boycott. The Meccan elite impose a boycott on the Banu Hashim and the Banu Muttalib (Muhammad's clan and his uncle's clan). The clans are cut off from trade, marriage, and contact. The boycott lasts for three years. The Banu Hashim and the Banu Muttalib live in a sealed area outside Mecca, surviving on what they have and on the help of a few sympathizers who break the boycott at great risk. The hardship is severe; the boycott is remembered as one of the most harrowing periods of Muhammad's early life. The boycott fails to break Muhammad's clan.

**619** — The Year of Sorrow. Khadija dies. Abu Talib dies. Muhammad loses his wife and his protector in the same year. The year is called the "Year of Sorrow" in the tradition. Muhammad is left without his wife, his protector, and the practical support of the early community. The Meccan opposition, sensing his vulnerability, prepares to escalate.

**619–620** — The period after the Year of Sorrow. Muhammad continues to preach in Mecca, but the opposition intensifies. The Meccan elite, having failed to crush the Muslims by boycott, prepare an assassination plot.

**620** — The Night Journey and the Ascension (Isra and Mi'raj). Muhammad is taken by night from Mecca to Jerusalem (the Isra), and then ascends through the heavens (the Mi'raj). In the tradition's memory, he meets the prophets of old in Jerusalem, ascends through the heavens, and is given the commandment of the five daily prayers. The event is remembered as a comfort and confirmation at the lowest point of his life. The Qur'an mentions the night journey in a single verse, but the details come from the later tradition.

**621** — The first pledge of Aqaba. A group of men from Yathrib (later Medina) meet Muhammad at the pilgrimage season and pledge to follow him if he comes to their town. This is the beginning of the negotiations that will lead to the hijra.

**622** — The second pledge of Aqaba. A larger group from Yathrib pledges to protect Muhammad as they would their own families. The negotiations for the migration are finalized. The Muslims in Mecca begin to leave for Yathrib in small numbers.

**622 (September)** — The hijra. Muhammad and Abu Bakr flee Mecca by night, pursued by the Quraysh who intend to kill Muhammad. They take refuge in the cave of Thawr outside Mecca for three days. Ali Ibn Abi Talib sleeps in Muhammad's bed as a decoy. Muhammad and Abu Bakr make their way to Medina, arriving in Quba on the outskirts. The migration marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar (year 1 AH).

**622 (September–October)** — Arrival in Medina. Muhammad enters Medina (then called Yathrib). He is welcomed by the Ansar ("helpers"), the Medinan Arabs who receive the Muslims and support them. The Muhajirun ("emigrants") from Mecca and the Ansar form the early Muslim community in Medina.

**622–624** — Establishment of the Muslim community in Medina. Muhammad establishes the Muslim community as a political entity. The Constitution of Medina is established, creating a single political community (the *umma*) that includes Muslims, the Meccan emigrants, the Medinan helpers, and the Jewish tribes, with Muhammad as the final arbiter. The Muslims begin to organize their lives, establish the prayer times, set up the collection of zakat (alms), and organize the defense of the settlement.

**624 (March)** — The Battle of Badr. The first major battle of the Muslim community. Muhammad and the Muslims intercept a Meccan caravan returning from Syria, but the caravan escapes. A Meccan force comes to defend the caravan and then confronts the Muslims at Badr, a place between Mecca and Medina. The Muslims are heavily outnumbered (traditionally about 300 Muslims against 1,000 Meccans) but victorious. The victory is the first major military success of the Muslim community and transforms the community's understanding of itself. Several Meccan leaders are killed in the battle, including Abu Jahl.

**624–625** — Aftermath of Badr. The Muslims take prisoners and divide the spoils. The treatment of prisoners becomes an episode in the early story — some are released for ransom, some for nothing, some on the condition that they teach Muslims to read and write. The Meccan elite are determined to recover from the defeat.

**625 (March)** — The Battle of Uhud. The second major battle. The Meccan force under Abu Sufyan attacks the Muslims at Mount Uhud, north of Medina. The Muslims are defeated after some of their fighters disobey Muhammad's orders and leave their position to pursue the Meccan army, exposing the Muslim lines. The Meccans inflict serious losses. Muhammad is wounded. A rumor spreads that he has been killed, and the rumor is disproved when he is found alive afterward. The defeat is serious but not catastrophic. The Qur'an's response to Uhud is one of the most direct pieces of evidence for the way the early community processed a military defeat — somber, instructional, honest.

**625–626** — Aftermath of Uhud. The Muslims' morale is shaken but not destroyed. Muhammad continues to lead the community. The Qur'an addresses the defeat as a lesson in discipline and steadfastness. The Muslims remain in Medina.

**626–627** — The Battle of the Trench (also called the Battle of the Confederates). A large confederate force of Meccans and their allies assembles against Medina itself. The Muslims, under Muhammad's

direction, dig a trench around the exposed side of Medina to defend the town. The confederate army surrounds Medina and the siege lasts for several weeks. The Muslims hold out under severe strain. The confederate force does not remain united; internal tensions, the weather, and the failure of the siege to break lead to the collapse of the confederacy. The siege ends with the confederates withdrawing, and the Muslims' survival is secured. The battle is a test of endurance that the Muslims pass.

**627** — Aftermath of the Trench. The immediate consequence of the siege is the judgment on the Banu Qurayza, the third Jewish tribe of Medina. According to the traditional account, the Qurayza had broken their treaty with the Muslims and sided with the confederate army during the siege. After the siege failed, the Muslims besiege the Qurayza, who surrender. An arbitrator, Sa'd ibn Mu'adh (a chief of the Aws, one of the Medinan tribes), is chosen to judge them, and his judgment is that the men of the Qurayza who have reached puberty should be killed, and the women and children taken captive. The traditional account records the execution of the men. The numbers are disputed, but the account states that a significant number of the Qurayza men were killed, and the women and children were taken captive. This is the most serious and the most controversial of the episodes with the Jewish tribes.

**627–628** — Expulsion of the Banu Nadir. The second Jewish tribe of Medina, the Banu Nadir, comes into conflict with the Muslims after a dispute. According to the traditional account, a Muslim is killed by members of the Nadir, or the Nadir are involved in a plot against Muhammad. Muhammad summons the Nadir to answer for it, and they refuse to accept the arbitration. The Muslims besiege them, and they surrender on terms that allow them to leave with their possessions except for their weapons and land. The Nadir leave Medina for Khaybar and other places, and their land and property become part of the Muslim community.

**628 (March)** — The Treaty of Hudaybiyya. Muhammad and a company of Muslims set out from Medina for a minor pilgrimage to Mecca (the umrah). The Meccan elite block the road and prevent the Muslims from entering the town. A standoff ensues at Hudaybiyya, a place on the coast between Medina and Mecca. The Muslims negotiate with the Quraysh, and a treaty is signed. The terms include a ten-year truce, the return of any Muslim who goes from Mecca to Medina without the permission of his guardian, and the withdrawal of the Muslims from Mecca for the year, with the agreement that they will be allowed to perform the pilgrimage the following year. The treaty is deeply unpopular with the Muslims at the time — they think it is a humiliation — but the Qur'an later calls it a clear victory. The treaty is the turning point that makes the conquest of Mecca possible.

**628–629** — Aftermath of the treaty. The truce holds. The Muslims use the breathing space to spread their message, make alliances with tribes that had previously been in the Meccan orbit, and build up their strength. The Meccan elite watch the Muslims grow, and the truce ends with the Muslims' return to Mecca in force.

**630** — Conquest of Mecca. The Meccan elite break the treaty — a tribe allied to the Quraysh attacks a tribe allied to the Muslims, and the Quraysh's failure to restrain their allies makes the treaty void. Muhammad declares the treaty at an end and marches on Mecca with a large force (traditionally said to be about 10,000). The Muslims enter Mecca without a major fight. The Quraysh's power is broken, the sanctuary is taken, and the idols in the Kaaba are removed. Muhammad declares a general

amnesty — the Meccans are forgiven, the town is spared, the Meccans are not massacred. The amnesty is one of the most extraordinary decisions of Muhammad's political life.

**630** — Aftermath of the conquest. Muhammad reorganizes the sanctuary, establishes the Muslims' presence in Mecca, and deals with the remaining opposition. The expedition to Hunayn follows, and the siege of Ta'if. The conquest of Mecca is the end of the Meccan opposition.

**630** — The expedition to Hunayn. A battle is fought at Hunayn, in which the Muslims defeat a force of the Hawazin and Thaqif tribes. The Muslims take captives and booty. The battle is a victory, but the Muslims face the aftermath of the conquest and the integration of the new territories.

**630–631** — The siege of Ta'if. After the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad besieges Ta'if, a town that had rejected him earlier. The siege does not end in a major battle; the town eventually submits.

**631** — The delegations from the Arabian tribes. In the last year of Muhammad's life, delegations of Arabs from the peninsula come to Medina to make their peace with Muhammad, to accept Islam, or to agree to treaties. The delegations are the sign that the Muslims' power has spread, and that the Arabian interior is coming into the Muslim orbit. The tribal delegations are the work of the man who has, in twenty-two years, gone from a persecuted preacher in Mecca to the head of a community that is receiving the representatives of the Arabian tribes.

**632 (February–March)** — The farewell pilgrimage. Muhammad performs the pilgrimage to Mecca in the company of his community. He delivers the farewell sermon at Mount Arafat. The sermon covers several themes: the end of the old tribal feuds, the equality of all Muslims before God, the rights of the orphan, the wife, the slave, and the poor, the sanctity of the Muslim's life, property, and honor, the prohibition of usury, and the responsibility of the believers for one another. The sermon is the crystallization of Muhammad's teaching at the end of his life. The pilgrimage and the sermon are the last time Muhammad performs the pilgrimage in person.

**632 (June)** — The illness and death of Muhammad. Muhammad becomes ill in the latter part of the year. He grows weaker, continues to lead the prayers as long as he can, and eventually dies in Medina. He dies on a Monday in the month of June 632, in the room of his wife Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakr. The death comes after the farewell pilgrimage and the tribal delegations and the work of the final phase of his life. He is tired, ill, and weak for days. The tradition remembers the scene of his death — the moments in Aisha's room, the way he leaned on her, the way the community gathered outside and waited, and the way the news came out.

**632 (June)** — The denial and Abu Bakr's speech. When Muhammad dies, the Muslims outside his house find that the news is not immediately believed. Some of the Muslims think that he is not really dead, or that he will come back, or that the death is a misunderstanding. The denial is not just grief. It is a measure of the place Muhammad had in the life of the community. Abu Bakr, the first caliph, goes to the house, sees Muhammad, confirms the death, and comes out to address the crowd. He quotes the Qur'an: "Muhammad is only a messenger, and messengers have passed before him. If he dies or is killed, will you turn back on your heels?" The speech is the moment when the denial ends and the reality of the death takes hold.

**632 (June)** — The burial. Muhammad's body is prepared, washed, and shrouded. He is buried in the room of Aisha, in the place where he died. The burial place becomes a site of memory, and later a mosque, and a place of pilgrimage.

**632–634** — The caliphate of Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr succeeds Muhammad as the first caliph. He faces the immediate problem of the tribal rebellions — the tribes that had accepted Islam or treaties under Muhammad now rebel, or refuse to pay the zakat, or claim that their loyalty was to Muhammad personally and not to the Muslim community. Abu Bakr suppresses the rebellions, and the Muslim community is held together. The Qur'an is collected in written form under Abu Bakr's caliphate, according to the traditional account.

**634** — Death of Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr dies after two years as caliph. He is succeeded by Umar ibn al-Khattab.

**634–644** — The caliphate of Umar. Umar expands the Muslim community into the former Byzantine and Sasanian territories. Syria and Palestine fall to the Muslims. Egypt falls. The Sasanian empire is conquered. The Muslim community becomes an imperial power. Umar establishes many of the institutions of the early Islamic state.

**644** — Death of Umar. Umar is assassinated. He is succeeded by Uthman ibn Affan.

**644–656** — The caliphate of Uthman. Uthman continues the expansion. The Muslim community grows. Uthman organizes the navy, and the Muslim fleet operates in the Mediterranean. The Qur'an is compiled in a standardized form under Uthman's caliphate, according to the traditional account. Uthman is assassinated in 656.

**656–661** — The caliphate of Ali. Ali succeeds Uthman as the fourth caliph. His caliphate is marked by the first Islamic civil war (the fitna), between Ali and the forces of Muawiyya, the governor of Syria, and by the conflict with the Kharijites. Ali is assassinated in 661 by a Kharijite.

**661–685** — The caliphate of the Umayyads. Muawiyya establishes the Umayyad caliphate, the first hereditary Islamic dynasty. The capital is Damascus. The Umayyad caliphate expands the Muslim empire further.

**685–750** — The later Umayyad caliphate. The Umayyad caliphate continues to expand and consolidate. The caliphate reaches its greatest extent under the Umayyads.

**750** — The Abbasid revolution. The Abbasids overthrow the Umayyads. The capital is moved to Baghdad. The Abbasid caliphate begins.

*This timeline is a guide to the main events in the life of Muhammad and the early Islamic period. It is not a complete chronology, and it does not include all the events and details that are recorded in the sources. It is intended as a reference for the reader who wants to situate the events of the book in time*.

## Glossary

Arabic and technical terms used in this book, glossed once in plain English.

**Glossary (built so far)**

**Qur'an** — The sacred text of Islam, regarded by Muslims as the word of God revealed to Muhammad. It is the earliest and most secure contemporary source for his life — not a biography, but it speaks from inside the events of his lifetime.

**Sura** — A chapter of the Qur'an. The suras are arranged roughly by length, not chronologically; the earliest Meccan revelations tend to be shorter and clustered at the end of the standard text.

**Meccan** — Of or relating to the revelations and period before the *hijra*, when Muhammad and his followers were still in Mecca. Meccan suras are generally shorter, more focused on judgment, the vulnerable, and the afterlife.

**Medinan** — Of or relating to the period after the *hijra*, when Muhammad and his followers had moved to Medina. Medinan suras tend to be longer and more concerned with law, community organization, and the conduct of a state.

**Sira** — A prophetic biography — the life of Muhammad told as a continuous narrative. The earliest surviving sira was written by Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), more than a century after Muhammad's death, and is preserved mainly through Ibn Hisham's later edition.

**Hadith** — Reports of what Muhammad said or did, transmitted as discrete units with chains of transmission (*isnad*) tracing them back through narrators. The major collections of Bukhari and Muslim were compiled in the ninth century.

**Isnad** — The chain of transmission in a hadith report, listing the line of narrators from the present back to someone who may have heard the report from a participant. Scholars used the isnad as a tool for assessing reliability.

**Al-Tabari** — Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, early tenth-century historian whose *History of the Prophets and Kings* preserves substantial material from Ibn Ishaq, including episodes Ibn Hisham omitted.

**Ibn Ishaq** — Ibn Ishaq (c. 699–767), an eighth-century scholar of Medina and Baghdad who collected oral traditions about Muhammad's life into the earliest surviving sira. His original text does not survive intact.

**Ibn Hisham** — Ibn Hisham (d. 833), who edited and abridged Ibn Ishaq's sira. His version is the main surviving form, but he omitted material — some of it controversial — and added his own comments.

**Bukhari** — Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (810–870), compiler of one of the six canonical hadith collections, known for applying rigorous critical method to the chains of transmission.

**Muslim** — Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (821–875), compiler of the second of the six canonical hadith collections, also known for careful scrutiny of narrators and chains.

**Doctrina Iacobi** — A Greek Christian text, probably from around 634, that mentions a prophet named Muhammad among the Saracens — one of the earliest non-Muslim references to him.

**Thomas the Presbyter** — A Syriac document attributed to Thomas the Presbyter, dated to around 640, recording a battle between the Romans and "the Arabs of Muhammad" in Palestine — an early outside witness.

**Sebeos** — An Armenian chronicler writing in the 660s whose *History* gives a more detailed account of Muhammad, his followers' emigration, and the military campaigns — the most substantial of the early outside witnesses.

**Hagarism** — Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (1977), a revisionist argument about the earliest evidence for Islam. Mostly not sustained, but the questions they raised must still be engaged.

**Meccan Trade** — Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (1987), a revisionist challenge to the traditional picture of Mecca's economy. Mostly not sustained, but still must be engaged.

**Muhammad and the Empires of Faith** — Sean Anthony, the current state of the art on what the earliest evidence can and cannot support. To be read before writing.

**Muhammad at Mecca / Muhammad at Medina** — W. Montgomery Watt, still the spine of the Western scholarly account, though dated in places.

**Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources** — Martin Lings, the traditional account, beautifully written, uncritical by design. Read for texture; check facts against Watt or Anthony.

**Muhammad and the Believers** — Fred Donner, the early community as an ecumenical monotheist movement. Reshapes how Part Five is written.

**Seeing Islam as Others Saw It** — Robert Hoyland, the outside witnesses, including the *Doctrina Iacobi*, Thomas the Presbyter, and Sebeos.

**Images of Muhammad** — Tarif Khalidi, the reception history of Muhammad's image in later tradition.

**The Lives of Muhammad** — Kecia Ali, what every previous biographer did with the same material and why. Read early.

**Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time** — Karen Armstrong, sympathetic and accessible; a model for tone, if not always for rigour.

**Hadith** — Jonathan A. C. Brown, the best explanation of how the Islamic tradition assessed its own sources.

**Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction** — Jonathan A. C. Brown, accessible overview from a scholar of hadith.

**The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates** — Hugh Kennedy, the wider context of the early Islamic period.

**The Venture of Islam, vol. 1** — Marshall Hodgson, depth and context for the wider Islamic story.

**The Life of Muhammad (Sirat Rasul Allah)** — Ibn Ishaq, trans. A. Guillaume, the earliest sira in English. Read cover to cover.

**Part One glossary additions**

**Kaaba** — The cube-shaped stone building at the center of Mecca's sacred precinct, toward which Muslims pray. Before Islam it housed a large number of idols representing the gods of the Meccan and surrounding tribes; it was also a pre-Islamic pilgrimage site and a sacrosanct neutral zone.

**Zamzam** — The well in Mecca's sacred precinct, traditionally associated with the story of Hagar and Ishmael and revered as a source of water in an otherwise arid valley. Its water was a practical and symbolic resource for pilgrims.

**Haram** — The sacred precinct around the Kaaba in Mecca, in which violence was traditionally forbidden. The haram made Mecca a place of truce and pilgrimage, and it functioned as one of the main economic reasons the city existed at all.

**Quraysh** — The dominant tribe of Mecca in the sixth and early seventh centuries, to which Muhammad belonged through his grandfather Abd al-Muttalib. The Quraysh controlled the Kaaba and the pilgrimage trade, and they were the main opponents of Muhammad in the Meccan period.

**Bahira** — A Christian monk or hermit, according to later tradition, who is said to have recognized a young Muhammad on a Syrian caravan journey as a future prophet. The story is part of the later tradition, not contemporary evidence, and is best treated as a tradition about how the community remembered his early years rather than as a historical fact.

**Hanifs** — In pre-Islamic Arabian usage, people who sought the original monotheism of Abraham and rejected the polytheism around them. The Qur'an uses the word positively as a description of those who turned away from idol worship. The number of actual hanifs before Muhammad was small, but they are a useful sign that monotheizing ideas were already present in Arabia before Islam.

**Uhud** — A mountain north of Medina, site of a major battle in 625 in which the Muslims were defeated after some of their fighters disobeyed Muhammad's orders. Uhud was a serious blow but not a catastrophe, and it had lasting consequences for how the early community understood itself.

**Jahiliyyah** — The Islamic term for the pre-Islamic period, often translated as the "Age of Ignorance." In the traditional Islamic narrative, it described a time of paganism, injustice, and moral disorder, set against the light that came with Islam. Historians today do not use the term as a neutral description of pre-Islamic Arabia, because it is a theological judgment, not a historical category. The habit of treating pre-Islamic Arabia as simply violent and ignorant is one of the things this book tries to avoid.

**Part Two glossary additions**

**Abu Talib** — Muhammad's uncle, a son of Abd al-Muttalib, who protected Muhammad after the death of Abd al-Muttalib and throughout the Meccan period, and who died in the Year of Sorrow. He protected Muhammad without, on the best reading of the evidence, becoming a Muslim.

**Banu Hashim** — The clan of the Quraysh to which Muhammad belonged through his grandfather. The Banu Hashim was a respected but not wealthy clan, and was the clan that protected Muhammad during the Meccan period.

**Al-Amin** — "The trustworthy," the nickname given to Muhammad in Mecca before his prophethood, reflecting his reputation for honesty and truthfulness. The reputation was a social fact in Mecca, and it is one of the reasons the town trusted him before the revelation and the reason the opposition had to contend with his standing.

**Al-Sadiq** — "The truthful," the other nickname of Muhammad before his prophethood, reflecting the consistency of his word with his action.

**Halima** — The wet-nurse of Muhammad in his early childhood, a woman of the Banu Sa'd, under whose care Muhammad spent his early years in the desert. The story of Halima is one of the most memorable early episodes, and it reflects the custom of sending children to the desert to be nursed.

**Banu Sa'd** — A Bedouin tribe of the Hawazin, among whom Muhammad was nursed in his early childhood. The desert environment of the Banu Sa'd gave Muhammad the early Arabic that would later appear in the Qur'an.

**Waraqa ibn Nawfal** — A cousin of Khadija, a Christian who knew Hebrew and had some knowledge of the scriptures, who heard Muhammad's account of the first revelation and told him that it was of the same kind as the great divine communications of the prophetic tradition. Waraqa was the first external validation of Muhammad's experience in the tradition's own terms.

**Bahira** — The Christian monk who, according to tradition, recognized young Muhammad on a Syrian caravan journey. The story is part of the later memory, not contemporary evidence.

**Year of the Elephant** — The traditional name for the year of Muhammad's birth, derived from the story of Abraha's invasion of the Hejaz and the miraculous repulse by "the birds of Ababil." The year is traditionally given as 570, and the story is a legend around a real event.

**Amina** — Muhammad's mother, of the Banu Zuhra, a clan of the Quraysh. She died when Muhammad was about six, on the journey to Medina for her burial, and her death was the first of the losses that made Muhammad an orphan.

**Qasim and Abdullah** — The two sons of Muhammad and Khadija, named in the tradition, who died in infancy. The deaths are remembered as losses, and the names are the elements of the memory that survive.

**Fatima** — The daughter of Muhammad and Khadija, who survived into the Medinan period and became the ancestor of the line that carried the family forward, and who married Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law.

**Part Three glossary additions**

**No glossary additions for Part Three.**

**Part Four glossary additions**

**Abyssinia** — The kingdom of Axum, across the Red Sea from Arabia, a Christian kingdom with a navy and a serious state, to which the first Muslims emigrated in the hijra before the migration to Medina. The Negus of Abyssinia gave the Muslims protection, and the encounter with the Negus is one of the first pieces of evidence for the way the Muslim message was understood from the outside.

**Hijra** — The migration of the Muslims from Mecca to Medina, which marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar and the beginning of the Muslim community as a political entity in Medina. The hijra is the year zero of the Islamic calendar.

**Constitution of Medina** — The document, or the arrangement, that is remembered in the tradition as the foundation of the first Muslim community in Medina. It established a single political community, the *umma*, that included Muslims, Meccan emigrants, Medinan helpers, and Jewish tribes, with Muhammad as the final arbiter.

**Umma** — The community of the believers, the single political and religious entity that Muhammad established in Medina. The word is used in the Qur'an for the Muslim community, and it is the word that the Constitution of Medina used for the political community that included the various groups of Medina.

**Ansar** — The "helpers," the Medinan Arabs who received the Muslims and supported them in Medina after the migration.

**Musharikun** — The "associators," the polytheists of Mecca and the surrounding tribes, the opponents of the Muslims in the Meccan period and the main enemy in the Medinan period.

**Ghazu** — Raiding, the standard Arabian practice of organized raiding, which ran alongside the caravan trade and which was the normal form of warfare in the Arabian interior before Islam. The raiding was brutal, reciprocal, and normal in the context.

**Badr** — The first major battle of the Muslim community in Medina, fought in 624 against the Meccan force, and won by the Muslims. The battle was the first military success of the community, and it transformed the community's understanding of itself.

**Uhud** — The mountain north of Medina, site of the second major battle in 625, in which the Muslims were defeated after some of their fighters disobeyed Muhammad's orders. The defeat was serious, but not a catastrophe, and the Qur'an's response to Uhud is one of the most instructive pieces of the early record.

**The Trench** — The battle of the trench, fought in 627, in which the Muslims defended Medina against a large confederate force by digging a trench around the exposed side of the town. The siege ended with the withdrawal of the confederates, and the Muslims' survival was secured.

**Sa'd ibn Mu'adh** — The chief of the Aws, one of the Medinan tribes, who was chosen as the arbitrator in the judgment on the Banu Qurayza, and whose judgment was that the men of the Qurayza should be killed.

**Banu Qaynuqa** — The first Jewish tribe of Medina to come into conflict with the Muslims, expelled after Badr, and allowed to leave Medina with their families and possessions except for their weapons.

**Banu Nadir** — The second Jewish tribe of Medina to come into conflict with the Muslims, expelled after a dispute, and allowed to leave Medina with their possessions except for their weapons and land. The Nadir left for Khaybar and other places.

**Banu Qurayza** — The third Jewish tribe of Medina, which came into conflict with the Muslims during and just after the Trench, and which, according to the traditional account, was besieged, surrendered, and then judged by Sa'd ibn Mu'adh. The men were killed, and the women and children were taken captive. This is the most serious and the most controversial of the episodes with the Jewish tribes.

**Khaybar** — A Jewish settlement north of Medina, to which the Banu Nadir went after their expulsion from Medina. The Muslims later attacked Khaybar, and the settlement was taken.

**Aws and Khazraj** — The two main Arab tribes of Medina, the Aws and the Khazraj, who had been fighting each other before Muhammad arrived, and who turned to Muhammad as a mediator. The two tribes became the Ansar, the helpers, and they were the core of the Medinan Muslim community.

**Negus** — The ruler of Abyssinia, to whom the first Muslims went for protection, and who gave them protection and refused to return them to Mecca. The Negus recognized the truth of the Muslim message in the hearing with Ja'far, and his decision to protect the Muslims was one of the early pieces of evidence for the way the message was understood from outside Arabia.

**Ja'far ibn Abi Talib** — Muhammad's cousin, who had emigrated to Abyssinia with the Muslims, and who recited from the Qur'an to the Negus in the hearing that led to the Muslims' protection. Ja'far's recitation was from Sura Maryam, and it was the point at which the Negus recognized the Muslim message.

**Satanic Verses** — A controversial episode, reported by al-Tabari and not by Ibn Hisham, in which Muhammad is said to have temporarily acknowledged the goddesses of the Quraysh in a revelation, and then to have retracted it. The episode is not part of the standard Islamic narrative, and it is rejected by most modern scholars. The honest account does not take a position that cannot be settled, but it notes that the episode exists in the sources and that it is rejected by the later tradition's preferred version.

**Part Five glossary additions**

**Aisha** — The daughter of Abu Bakr, who married Muhammad in Medina, who became one of the most important transmitters of hadith, who argued with Muhammad and outlived him by decades, and whose age at the time of her marriage is the subject of the most discussed controversy in the public reception of Muhammad's life. The traditional figure for her age at consummation is nine, but there are other traditions that give her an older age, and the sources do not agree.

**Zaynab bint Jahsh** — A wife of Muhammad, married after the divorce of his adopted son Zayd ibn Haritha, in a marriage that was a public demonstration that the old custom of adoption did not create a prohibition resembling the prohibition of blood kinship. The marriage was a legal point made public.

**Zayd ibn Haritha** — A slave or freedman of Muhammad's household, one of the earliest believers, and a man of the household who was treated with a special closeness by Muhammad. Zayd was the adopted son of Muhammad in the old Arabian sense, and the marriage to Zaynab was the public act that broke with the old custom.

**Hudaybiyya** — The place on the coast between Medina and Mecca where the Treaty of Hudaybiyya was signed in 628, between Muhammad and the Quraysh. The treaty was deeply unpopular with the Muslims at the time, and it was later called a clear victory by the Qur'an. The treaty was the turning point that made the conquest of Mecca possible.

**Treaty of Hudaybiyya** — The treaty signed at Hudaybiyya in 628, which included the return of Muslim fugitives to Mecca, the withdrawal of the Muslims for the year, and a truce of ten years. The treaty was a humiliation at the moment, and a victory in retrospect.

**Conquest of Mecca** — The return of the Muslims to Mecca in 630, after the Meccan elite's breaking of the treaty. The conquest was bloodless, the Meccans were given a general amnesty, the idols were removed, and the sanctuary was purified. The amnesty was one of the most extraordinary decisions of Muhammad's political life.

**Abu Bakr** — Muhammad's close friend, one of the first believers, the man who migrated to Medina with him, the man who was in the cave with him during the migration, and the first caliph after Muhammad's death. Abu Bakr was the one who gave the speech that broke the denial of Muhammad's death.

**Farewell Pilgrimage** — The pilgrimage to Mecca that Muhammad performed in 10 AH, with his community, and at which he delivered the farewell sermon that became the crystallization of his teaching at the end of his life.

**Farewell Sermon** — The sermon delivered by Muhammad at the farewell pilgrimage, which declared the end of the tribal feuds, the equality of the Muslims, the rights of the vulnerable, the prohibition of usury, and the sanctity of the Muslim's life, property, and honor. The sermon was the summary of the message at the end of the life.

**Part Six glossary additions**

**Abu Bakr's speech** — The speech delivered by Abu Bakr after Muhammad's death, which broke the denial of the Muslims and established the reality of the death, and which quoted the Qur'an's reminder that Muhammad was only a messenger, and that messengers had died before him.

## Further Reading

The following is a guide to the books that were most useful in writing this biography, and that the reader may find useful in going further. It is not a comprehensive bibliography. It is a selection, with a note on what each book does.

**Primary sources**

**The Qur'an.** The Qur'an is the only source contemporary with Muhammad's lifetime. It is not a biography, and it does not tell his story. But it is the most secure source for what Muhammad was saying, and it is the source that the book relies on most heavily for the interior moments — the verses that console him, rebuke him, answer his enemies, and tell him off for frowning at a blind man. The standard English translations are by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford) and by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (many editions). The Abdel Haleem translation is the more readable for a general reader. The Ahmed Ali translation is also worth knowing. For a reader who wants to go to the source, the Abdel Haleem translation is the best place to start.

**Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad* (Sirat Rasul Allah), trans. A. Guillaume.** Ibn Ishaq (c. 699–767) was the earliest surviving biographer of Muhammad. His original text does not survive intact, but it survives in substantial part through Ibn Hisham's edition and in parts through al-Tabari. Guillaume's translation is the standard English edition. It is the main source for the early biographical narrative — the childhood, the cave, the cave's terror, the boycott, the emigration, the battles, the conquest of Mecca. Read it cover to cover. It is the source behind most of the biographical details in this book. It is also, as a source, late by 130–150 years, and the biographer should know that.

**Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari* (Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk),** in the English translation published by SUNY Press. Al-Tabari (early tenth century) is the broadest and most ambitious of the early Islamic historians, and his history preserves a great deal of material from Ibn Ishaq that Ibn Hisham omitted — including the controversial episode of the Satanic Verses. The English translation is in many volumes. It is an indispensable source for the later parts of Muhammad's life, and for the episodes that Ibn Hisham omitted. It is also a source that the honest reader should read with the question in mind of how much of it is Ibn Ishaq and how much is al-Tabari.

**Ibn Sa'd, *The Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir* (The Book of the Major Classes),** in the English translation by Dashti and Necked. Ibn Sa'd (early ninth century) is the biographical dictionary of the early Islamic community. It is a source for the lives of the companions, the wives, the early believers, and the events of the Medinan period. It is a source that the biographer uses for the texture of the community, the names of the people, the details of their lives.

**Al-Waqidi, *Kitab al-Maghazi* (The Book of Military Expeditions),** in the English translation by Watt. Al-Waqidi (d. 823) is the source for the military campaigns of Muhammad. It is a source that the biographer uses for the expeditions, the battles, the negotiations, and the military detail.

**The Hadith collections: Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim.** The hadith are the reports of what Muhammad said and did, transmitted in short, discrete units with chains of transmission. Bukhari and Muslim are the two most authoritative collections, compiled in the ninth century, and their compilers applied real critical judgment to the chains of transmission. They are sources for the small, human moments: how Muhammad ate, how he treated a servant, what he said on particular occasions, the texture of daily life. They are less useful for the broad shape of events. For the hadith, the English translation is by M. M. Khan for Bukhari, and by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui for Muslim.

**The Doctrina Iacobi, Thomas the Presbyter, and Sebeos.** The earliest non-Muslim references to Muhammad are sparse but real. The Doctrina Iacobi is a Greek Christian text, probably from around 634, that mentions a prophet named Muhammad among the Saracens. Thomas the Presbyter is a Syriac document, dated to around 640, recording a battle between the Romans and the Arabs of Muhammad in Palestine. Sebeos is an Armenian chronicler writing in the 660s whose history gives a more detailed account of Muhammad, his followers' emigration, and the military campaigns. These are the earliest outside witnesses, and they confirm the basic outline of the story from outside. Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, collects these documents with translation and commentary.

**Secondary sources — the framework**

**W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* and *Muhammad at Medina*.** Watt is the spine of the Western scholarly account of Muhammad's life. His two books, one on the Meccan period and one on the Medinan period, are the standard English-language accounts, and they are the baseline against which the other secondary sources are measured. They are dated in places — Watt wrote in the 1950s and 1960s, and the scholarship has moved on — but they are still the most useful single guide to the whole life. They are the books to read first, and the books to keep on the shelf.

**Sean Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith*.** Anthony represents the current state of the art on what the earliest evidence can and cannot support. He engages the source criticism, the revisionist challenge, and the wider context of the late antique Near East. He is the book to read before writing a word, and the book to read again before writing any chapter that rests on the early evidence.

**Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*.** Donner reframes the early community as an ecumenical monotheist movement — a movement that initially included Christians and Jews who accepted the authority of the Prophet. The book reshapes how Part Five of this biography is written, and it is the book that changes the question from "How did Islam become a separate religion?" to "How did the early movement develop into the distinct religion that it became?" It is one of the most important books for the Medinan period.

**Michael Cook, *Muhammad* (Very Short Introduction).** Cook's short book is the most useful single introduction to the scholarly issues. It is short, sharp, and consistently sceptical in the best sense — sceptical in the way that a historian of late antiquity should be, aware of the limits of the sources and unwilling to pretend that they are more certain than they are. It is the book to read for the questions that the sources cannot answer.

**Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction* and *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*.** Brown is the best guide to how the Islamic tradition assessed its own sources. His *Hadith* book is the best explanation of the chain-of-transmission system, and of how the scholars of the tradition developed a genuinely sophisticated method for assessing reliability. His *Very Short Introduction* to Muhammad is the most useful short book on the life, and it is the book to read for the relationship between the tradition's own account and the modern scholarly account.

**Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*.** Lings's biography is the traditional account, beautifully written, uncritical by design. It is the book to read for the texture of the life, for the human moments, for the sense of Muhammad as a man whom the tradition loved and honored. It is the book to read for the literary quality of the narrative. It is not the book to read for the critical assessment of the sources. Read it for the texture, and check the facts against Watt or Anthony.

**Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time*.** Armstrong's biography is sympathetic and accessible, and it is the book to read for the tone. It is a model for how to write about Muhammad with respect without being devotional. It is not always as rigorous as it might be, but it is the book to read for the sense of the man as the tradition understood him.

**Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad: Islam's Prophet in the Western Imagination*.** Ali's book is the book to read early. It is the reception history of Muhammad's image in the Western tradition, and it shows what every previous biographer did with the same material and why. It is the book that will show the reader the range of the Western reception, from the hostile to the sympathetic, and it will show the reader the questions that the biographer has to answer before writing a word.

**Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad*.** Khalidi's book is the other end of the reception history, concentrating on the image of Muhammad in the Islamic tradition itself — the way the image developed from the earliest sources to the medieval and modern period. It is the book to read for the legacy of the image, and for the way the image of Muhammad has been one of the central issues in the Islamic tradition.

**Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*.** Kennedy is the best guide to the wider context — the world of the seventh century, the empires, the tribes, the politics, the settlements, the battles, the expansion. It is the book to read for the context of the Medinan period and the early conquests.

**Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, volume 1: *The Enterprise of Islam*.** Hodgson's three-volume history is the most ambitious of the modern accounts of Islamic civilization, and volume 1 is the most useful for the life of Muhammad and the early period. It is the book to read for the depth, the context, the sense of the wider Islamic story.

**Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*.** The revisionist challenge. Crone and Cook argued, in 1977, that the earliest evidence for Islam was too late and too unreliable to support the traditional account, and that the early Islamic history had been constructed in the ninth century from a different set of materials. The argument was important, and it raised questions that had to be answered. It is mostly not sustained, and the questions it raised have been answered in various ways, but it is the book to read for the revisionist challenge, and the book to read for the questions that the biographer has to answer.

**Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*.** Crone's later book challenged the traditional picture of Mecca's economy, and argued that Mecca may not have been the great trading center that the traditional account described. The argument is mostly not sustained, but it is the book to read for the challenge to the traditional picture of Mecca, and for the importance of the debate about the economy of Mecca.

**Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: The Origins of Islamic Self-Image in Late Antiquity*.** Hoyland's book is the best collection of the outside witnesses — the Doctrina Iacobi, Thomas the Presbyter, Sebeos, and the others. It is the book to read for the earliest non-Muslim references to Muhammad, and for the way the Islamic self-image developed in relation to the outside world.

**A note on reading**

The books listed above are the books that were most useful in writing this biography. They are not the only books that could be read. The reader who wants to go further will find plenty more. The books listed above are the books that the biographer read, and the books that shaped the book. They are the books that the reader should read first, and the books that the reader should read again, and the books that the reader should keep on the shelf.

## Maps

The geography below is real: every map and photograph in this appendix is a genuine historical or cartographic source, freely licensed and drawn from Wikimedia Commons, not an illustration generated for this book. In keeping with the production rule stated in the author's note, no image anywhere in this text depicts Muhammad as a human figure; the images here are confined to maps, a battlefield diagram, and a photograph of an early Qur'anic manuscript page.

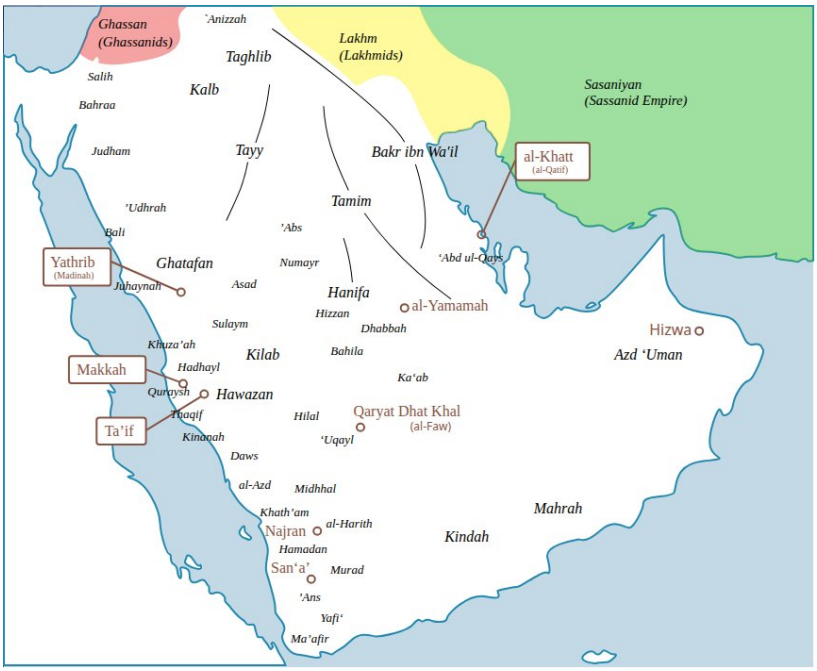


Figure 1: Arabia around 600 CE. The map shows the major tribal confederations of the peninsula and the two client kingdoms — Ghassanid in the northwest, allied to Byzantium, and Lakhmid in the north, allied to the Sasanian empire — that mediated between the desert tribes and the two great powers described in Chapter 4. Mecca, Yathrib (Medina), and Ta'if are marked along the Hejaz, the western mountain corridor where the book's events take place. Adapted by Murraytheb from an earlier tribal map; released to the public domain. (Image: Murraytheb, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.)

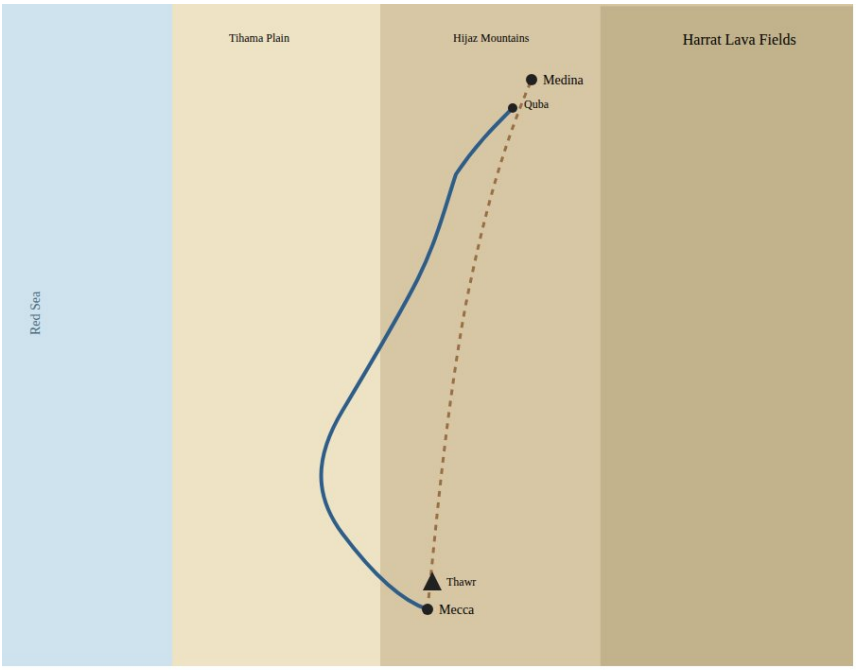

Figure 2: The hijra route. The map traces the traditional path of Muhammad's and Abu Bakr's migration in 622: south from Mecca to the cave of Thawr, where the tradition remembers them hiding for three days while the Quraysh searched for them, then north along the coastal side of the Hijaz mountains, avoiding the main caravan road, to Quba and Medina. The route shown is approximate — no single road is attested — but it reflects the geography the sources describe. (Image: SPQR10, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

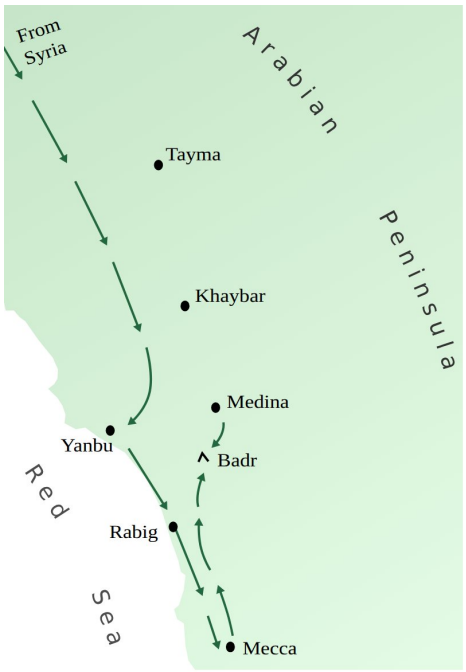


Figure 3: The Badr campaign of 624. The diagram shows the three forces converging on the wells at Badr, between Mecca and Medina: the Meccan trade caravan under Abu Sufyan approaching from the northwest along the coast road, the Muslim army moving out from Medina to intercept it, and the Meccan army sent from Mecca to protect the caravan arriving from the southeast after the caravan itself had already slipped past. The three-way convergence is what turned an attempted raid into the first pitched battle of the Muslim community. Base geography from islamonline.net. (Image: Tom66, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

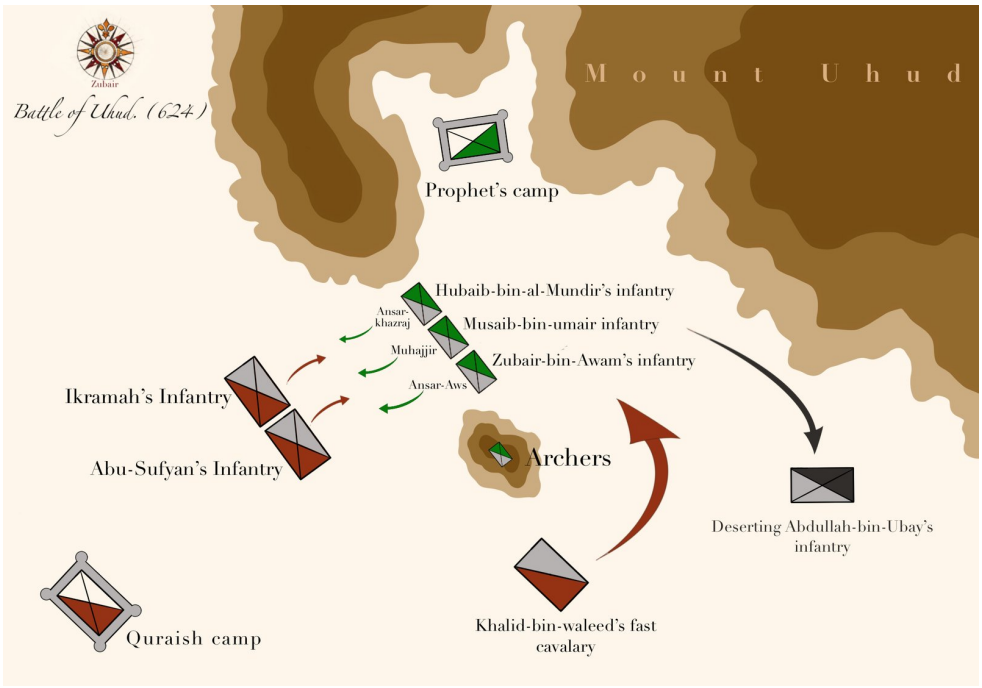


Figure 4: The Battle of Uhud, 625. The diagram shows the Muslim line drawn up with Mount Uhud at its back, the detachment of archers posted on the rise to guard the flank, and the Meccan cavalry under Khalid ibn al-Walid swinging around once the archers left their position to join the pursuit of a retreating Meccan line. The maneuver that decided the battle is visible in the arrow sweeping from the cavalry position around the exposed Muslim flank. (Image: DrZubairRashid, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

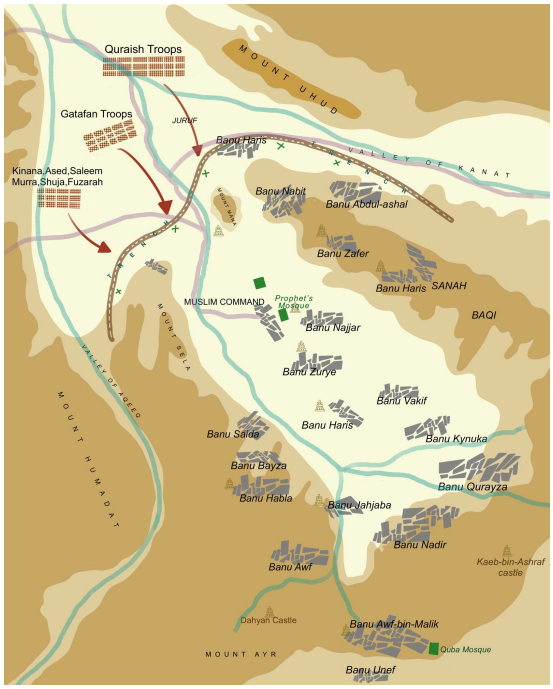


Figure 5: Medina and the Battle of the Trench, 627. Unlike Mecca, Medina was never a single-tribe town: this map shows the oasis settlement's separate quarters, each associated with a different clan —

the Ansar clans of the Aws and Khazraj, and the Jewish tribes, including the Banu Qurayza and Banu Nadir discussed in Chapter 25 — spread across the cultivated land between the lava fields. The trench itself, dug along the one side of the settlement left open to attack, runs across the top of the map, with the confederate forces of Quraysh and their allies shown converging from the northwest. (Image: DrZubairRashid, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

Figure 6: Arabia at Muhammad's death, 632. The shaded area shows the approximate extent of the community's political reach at the end of his life — built up through the campaigns and treaties marked on the map, from the hijra in 622 through Badr, Uhud, Khaybar, the conquest of Mecca, Hunayn, Ta'if, and the expedition to Tabuk in the last years — set against the much larger Byzantine and Sasanian empires to the north. Individual campaign dates on the source map are approximate and, in a few cases, differ by a year from the dates used in this book's own chronology; the shape and scale of the expansion are what the map is included to show. Based on the historical atlas tradition associated with Malise Ruthven's *Historical Atlas of Islam*. (Image: Fazoffic, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

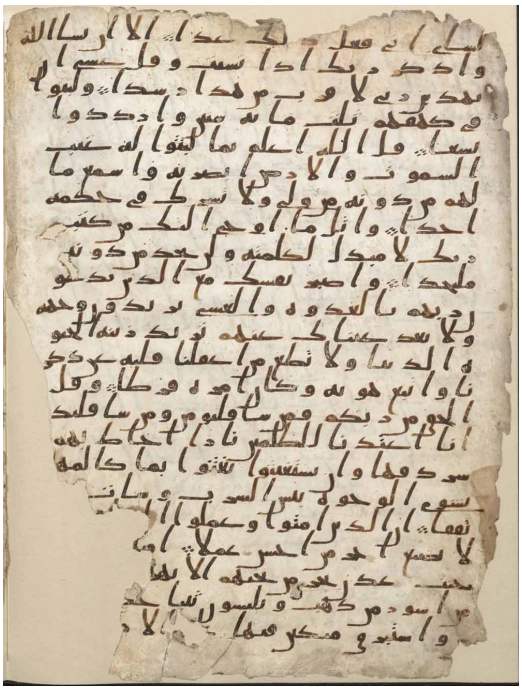

Figure 7: A folio from the Birmingham Qur'an manuscript (University of Birmingham, Mingana Collection). Written in the early angular Hijazi script on parchment, the leaf was radiocarbon-dated in 2015 to between 568 and 645 CE, placing it within a generation of Muhammad's lifetime — among the earliest surviving physical fragments of the Qur'anic text anywhere. The manuscript is discussed as an artifact, not reproduced as a devotional object; it contains no image of any person. (Image: public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.)