

AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM FOR JEWS

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Beginnings 2: Muhammad's later life to the early spread of Islam

1. Muhammad's last years

Devarim / Deuteronomy 18: 15-22

¹⁵The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. ¹⁶For this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, 'Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.' ¹⁷The Lord said to me: 'What they say is good. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. ¹⁹If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. ²⁰But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death.' ²¹When you say in your heart, 'How can we recognise the word that God has not spoken?' ²²If the prophet will speak in the Name of God and that thing will not occur and not come about – then that is the word that God has *not* spoken; with presumption has the prophet spoken it, you should not be afraid of him.

Qur'an 3: 78 9

There is a group among them who distort scripture with their tongues so that you would consider that it is from scripture when it is not from scripture; and they say it is from God when it is not from God; and they knowingly tell a lie against God. God would not give scripture and wisdom and prophethood to one person, that the person then say to the people, 'Be devotees of me instead of God.' Rather be devotees of God, as you have taught scripture and you have studied.

Reuven Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*, p. 36

What both sides often fail to take into account is the Jews and Muslims of Medina related to one another on an even playing field, and they were all playing by the same set of rules. Both communities engaged in behaviours that would be unacceptable in an enlightened, democratically governed society that supported equal rights and privileges for all religious communities. But 7th century Medina was not such a place.

Qur'an 4: 46

There are some Jews who change the words from their places by saying: 'we hear and disobey' [*samina wa 'asayna*].

Reuven Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*, p. 38

Western, non Muslim thinkers have criticized this act as barbaric and unbecoming of a principled and respectable religious leader. Muslim critics have considered it a just end determined by the rules of arbitration that were acceptable to both parties. It was not considered

unreasonable, taking into account the deceit and treason of the Jews for acting as a fifth column on behalf of Medina's enemies, despite having signed [the Constitution of Medina] as trustworthy allies. The reader will of course make his or her own judgement, but Jews should keep in mind that biblical patriarchs and kings engaged in massacres of the enemies of Israel in similar numbers. However, one decides, it must be kept in mind that in both cases we are observing the behaviours of peoples living in a society with very different norms and expectations than our own.

Joshua 6: 21

They exterminated everything in the city with the sword: man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and ass.

Ibn Is'haq, *Life of the Messenger of God* (mid 8th century CE)

[She] inquired what joint he preferred. When she learned that it was the shoulder, she put a lot of poison in it and poisoned the whole lamb. Then she brought it in and placed it before him. [Muhammad] took hold of the shoulder and chewed a morsel of it, but he did not swallow it. Bishr ibn al Bara, who was with him, took some of it as the apostle had done, but he swallowed it, while the apostle spat it out, saying, 'This bone tells me that it is poisoned.' Then he called for the woman and she confessed, and when he asked her what had induced her to do this, she answered, 'You know what you have done to my people. I said to myself, if he is a king I shall rid myself of him, and if he is a prophet he will be informed [of what I have done].' So the apostle let her off. Bishr died from what he had eaten.

Ibn Is'haq, *Life of the Messenger of God* (mid 8th century CE)

O people, listen to my word. I do not know whether I shall ever meet you in this place again after this year. Your blood and your property are sacrosanct until you meet your Lord, as this day and this month are holy. You will surely meet your Lord and He will ask you of your works. I have told you. He who has a pledge, let him return it to the one who entrusted him with it; all usury is abolished, but you have your capital. Wrong not and you shall not be wronged... All bloodshed in the pagan period [*jahiliyya*] is to be left unavenged ... You have rights over your wives and they have rights over you ... Lay injunctions on women kindly, for they are prisoners with you, having no control of their persons. You have taken them only as a trust from God ... I have left you with something which, if you will hold fast to it, you will never fall into error—a plain indication, the book of God and the practice of His prophet, so give good heed to what I say. Know that every Muslim is a Muslim's brother, and that the Muslims are brethren. It is only lawful to take from your brother what he gives you willingly, so do not wrong yourselves. O God, have I not told you?

Qur'an 33: 21

You have an excellent example in the messenger of God for anyone who looks forward to God and the Last Day, and who frequently refers to God.

2. Finding a successor: developments after Muhammad's death

The Rashidun (Rightly Guided Caliphs)

Caliph	Dates	Method of election	Principal events in reign
Abu Bakr	632-34	Chosen by inner circle	Wars of <i>rida</i> (apostasy) against seceding tribes of Arabia
'Umar ibn al-Khattab	634-44	Appointed by predecessor	Arab conquests of Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Egypt; assassinated by a slave
'Uthman ibn Affan	644-56	Chosen by six leaders from among themselves	Conquest extends to N Africa, Persia; 'Uthman supported by Meccans, opposed by Medinans and finally assassinated; official collection & edition of Qur'an
'Ali ibn Abi Talib	656-61	Son-in-law of Muhammad, won Battle of the Camel over succession	First <i>fitna</i> ('schism' = civil war); 'Ali fought 'Uthman's supporters (Umayyads) at Battle of Siffin (657); assassinated by a Kharijite

3. The spread of Islam: the early conquests

A excellent gif of the spread of Islam from 632 to 655 CE:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f1/Mohammad_adil-Rashidun_empire-slide.gif

Al-Tabari (838-923), *The Battle of al-Qadisiyya and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine: AD 635-637*, trans. Y. Friedmann, 1992

God has sent us and has brought us here so that we may extricate those who so desire from servitude to the people [here on earth] and make them servants of God; that we may transform their poverty in this world into affluence, and that we may free them from the inequity of the religions and bestow on them the justice of Islam. He has sent us to bring His religion to His creatures and to call them to Islam. Whoever accepts it from us, we shall be content. We shall leave him on his land to rule it with us; but whoever refuses, we shall fight him, until we fulfill the promise of God.

Timeline

570-632	Life of Muhammad
632-4	Reign of Abu Bakr
634-44	Reign of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (murdered)
638	Capture of Jerusalem
644-56	Reign of 'Uthman ibn Affan (murdered)
656	First <i>fitnah</i> : 'Ali wins Battle of the Camel
656-61	Reign of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (murdered)
661-80	Reign of Mu'awiyya (first Umayyad caliph)

Further Reading

David Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.

Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Islam*, London: Phoenix, 2000.