

AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM FOR JEWS

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Beginnings 1: Muhammad, up to Medina

1. RULES OF THE GAME: FIVE USEFUL PRINCIPLES AND A WARNING

- A. Avoid disputation
- B. Avoid proselytization
- C. Avoid syncretism
- D. Avoid relativism
- E. Avoid triumphalism

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

One of the reasons that religionists tend to think negatively of other religions is that they employ different methods for judging their own religion than they use to judge the religion of the other. Jews and Judaism have often been victimized by this problem over the ages as the ignorant or enemies try to prove that Judaism is a primitive or even evil religion. The simplest way this false comparison is made is to compare the ‘best’ of one religion with the ‘worst’ of another. One can do this with a variety of topics, but one particularly relevant topic today is war and peace. If one compares the peaceful verses of the Torah with the militant verses of the Qur’an, one will evaluate the two quite differently than if one compares the militant verses of the Torah with the peaceful verses of the Qur’an ... it is important to compare fairly and not to compare in order to score points.

2. BACKGROUND AND SOURCES

The Qur’an: basic facts

- Written in Arabic; consists of 114 *surahs*, each of which is made up of verses (*ayat*, singular: *ayah*, ‘sign’); non-narrative, non-chronological arrangement
- Muslims believe it was revealed to Muhammad bit by bit, between 610 & 632 CE
- Muslims believe it was collected after Muhammad’s death and the text standardized *c.* 650 CE by the caliph Uthman (‘the Uthmanic recension’)
- The earliest surviving manuscripts date from before 750 CE (recently found in Yemen), and the earliest quotations from the Qur’an anywhere are in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, dating from 690 CE.

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

[1] Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri told me [i.e. Ibn Is’haq] from ‘Ubayd ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Utba from ‘Aisha [the prophet’s favourite wife]

[2] that she used to hear the apostle say, ‘God never takes a prophet to Himself without giving him the choice.’ When he was at the point of death the last word I heard the apostle saying was, ‘Nay, rather the Exalted Companion of paradise!’ I said [to myself], ‘Then by God he is not choosing us!’ And I knew that that was what he used to tell us, namely that a prophet does not die without being given the choice.



The Near East before and during Muhammad’s lifetime

	Rome/Byzantium	Sassanian Persia
Official religion	(orthodox) Christianity	Zoroastrianism
Languages spoken	Greek, Syriac, Aramaic, Arabic, Coptic, Latin	Aramaic, Persian, Arabic, Armenian, Kurdish, etc.
Minor religions /heresies	Monophysite Christians, Nestorian Christians, Coptic Monophysites, many Christian ‘heresies’, Jews	Nestorian Christians, Monophysite Christians, Jews, Manichaeans, Buddhists, Hindus, Mazdakites
Trends of the 4th-7th centuries	Church councils; intense discussion of nature of Jesus; worship of saints and relics; tension with the Persian empire	Tension between Christians and Zoroastrians; Babylonian Talmud; Manichaeism spreads as far as China

Qur’an, 9: 30

The Jews say that ‘Uzayr is the son of God, and the Christians say that the messiah is the son of God.

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

... the Himyarites blocked his path, saying, ‘You will not enter Yemen because you left our religion.’ Then he invited them to his religion ... so they said, ‘Let’s test it by the fire.’ He agreed. There was a custom in the Yemen that a fire would judge between them when they had their differences. It would consume the guilty and let the innocent go unharmed. So the Himyarites went forth with their idols and their religious objects, and the two [Jewish] leaders came out with their sacred texts hanging like necklaces from

their necks. They stopped where the fire would blaze out. When it blazed forth [the Himyarites] were terrified and withdrew, but their comrades held them back and commanded them to be patient. So they held their ground until the fire consumed their idols, their offerings, and those who carried them. The two [Jewish] leaders then came out with their scripts hanging from their necks, their foreheads sweating but otherwise unharmed. So the Himyarites took on his religion from then on. This is the origin of Judaism in the Yemen.

3. THE LIFE OF MUHAMMAD

Qur'an 2: 136

Say: We believe in God and in what was brought down to us and what was brought down to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Tribes and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We do not distinguish between any of them; we are submitters [*muslimun*] to Him.

Qur'an 3: 3-4

God brought down the Book to you in truth, verifying what was before it. God brought down the Torah [*tawrat*] and the Gospel [*injl*] before as a guide to humanity, and He brought down the *furqan*. Those who deny the signs of God will have a terrible punishment. God is almighty, able to exact revenge.

Qur'an 96: 1-5

Recite in the name of your Lord who created
created the human from a clot.
Recite your Lord is all-giving,
Who taught by the pen,
taught the human what he did not know before.

Qur'an 68: 1-2

By the pen, and what they write
you are not, by God's favour, possessed.
In fact you have an endless reward,
and a powerful inner strength.

Quran 93

By the morning hours,
by the night when it is still,
your Lord has not abandoned you
and does not hate you.
What is after will be better
than what came before.
To you the Lord will be giving,
you will be content,
Did he not find you orphaned and give you shelter,
find you lost and guide you,
find you in hunger and provide for you?
As for the orphan—do not oppress him,
and one who asks—do not turn him away,
and the grace of your Lord—proclaim.

Constitution of Medina (as recorded by Ibn Is'haq, 8th century CE)

This is a document from Muhammad the prophet (governing the relations) between the Believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib, and those who followed them and joined them and laboured with them. They are one community [*umma*] to the exclusion of all men. The Quraysh emigrants according to their present custom shall pay the blood-payment within their number and shall redeem their prisoners with the kindness and justice common among Believers. The Banu Awf according to their present custom shall pay the blood payment they paid in the *jahiliyya*; every section shall redeem its prisoners with the kindness and justice common among Believers. The Banu Sa'ada, the Banul-Harith, and the Banu Jusham, and the Banul-Najjar likewise ...

The God-fearing Believers shall be against the rebellious or him who seeks to spread injustice, or sin or enmity, or corruption between Believers; the hand of every man shall be against him even if he be a son of one of them ... God's protection [*dhimma*] is one; the least of them may give protection to a stranger on their behalf ... To the Jew who follows us belong help and equality. He shall not be wronged nor shall his enemies be aided. The peace of the Believers is indivisible. No separate peace shall be made when Believers are fighting in the way of God. Conditions must be fair and equitable to all ...

The Jews of the Banu Awf are one community with the Believers—the Jews have their religion and the Muslims theirs—their freedmen and their persons, except those who behave unjustly and sinfully, for they hurt but themselves and their families. The same applies to the Jews of the Banul-Najjar, Banul-Harith, Banu Sa'ada, Banu Jusham ... Loyalty is protection against treachery. The freedman of the Thalaba are as themselves. The close friends of the Jews are as themselves. None of them shall go out to war save with the permission of Muhammad, but he shall not be prevented from taking revenge for a wound. ... The Jews must bear their expenses and the Muslims their expenses. Each must help the other against anyone who attacks the people of this document.

Timeline for the life of Muhammad

570 CE	Born in Mecca, to Abdullah and Amina, of the Quraysh tribe
610	First revelation
622	The Hijra—emigration of Muhammad and his followers to Madina
624	Muhammad and followers win the Battle of Badr against the Quraysh
625	Muhammad and followers lose to the Quraysh in the Battle of Uhud
627	Battle of the Trench: both sides claim victory; men of the Jewish tribe of Qurayza massacred
628	Treaty of al Hudaibiyya between Muhammad and the Quraysh, starting a 10 year truce; capture of the Jewish settlement of Khaybar
630	Muhammad takes Mecca without a battle
632	Muhammad's 'farewell pilgrimage' and death

Bibliography

Reuven Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008

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