

AN EVANGELICAL ASSESSMENT OF MUHAMMAD
(Part 1)

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I. A Bit of History

Typically Evangelicals have had an aggressive antipathy toward Muhammad. Some of this is theological at its roots. We inevitably take a dim view of anyone who would attempt to present a Christ other than the one the New Testament offers (Gal 1:6-9). This Muhammad does. We also inherit part of this antagonism toward Muhammad from our Reformation predecessors. The Reformation Fathers, influenced by the history of the Crusades—the struggle to set the Holy Land free from the Saracen—and then the progress of the Ottoman Turkish empire—the Saracen attempt to destroy Christendom - were not favorably disposed toward “the Turks” nor their “Lying Prophet.” G. K. Chesterton says of Islam: “It is quite peculiarly necessary to keep in mind that this Semite god haunted Christianity like a ghost; to remember it in every European corner....”¹ A similar situation is found within Catholic circles, where one sees that Fr. Henri Lammens had little affection for Muhammad.

For quite some time Christianity had only politically loaded contact with Islam, and Protestantism’s encounter with Islam was often as much an extension of colonialism as it was religious. Then, even without this political element, there has been avoidance of the Muslim world and their prophet. Bishop Jens Christensen notes:

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¹ Gilbert Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (London: Chatto and Windus Phoenix Library, 1930), p. 62.

Almost from the very start the Church has made a detour around the Muslim world (excepting the Crusades, where they confused a spiritual warfare with aggression!).... One look at a map depicting the Muslim world and present missionary effort will prove how the Church has gone out of her way to avoid Islam. The result has been that we have not been forced to rethink our Christian teaching in relation to Islam.²

This was written a number of years ago and the situation has improved some recently, but not dramatically. We also should note that Bishop Christensen is here ignoring the Eastern Church's presence and contact with the Muslim world. But as relates to the western part of the church, this comment is largely correct.

Eventually, as Evangelical missions encountered Islam, they largely conducted themselves as if they were involved in an intellectual equivalent to the Crusades: two armies, one under the banner of the Cross, the other under the crescent, step forward to battle to the death. Great apologists such as Pfander, Zwemer, Gairdner, Tisdall, their peers and their imitators preached and wrote books to "refute" Islam or doctrinal particulars thereof. Results from such an approach were very much less than impressive. Whole missionary careers were spent in the Muslim context without the missionary seeing one convert from Islam to Christ. The great Catholic mystic-priest-missionary Faucald celebrated the Eucharist every day in the Algerian desert alone until finally one elderly, blind woman joined him! Such was the expectation of his day.

Paltry results led to pragmatic experimentation in missionary technique. Somewhere around the 1940s some thinkers lifted up a call to a non-controversial approach to Islam. (Some earlier calls can certainly be recorded but they were not quite in the mainstream.) Some of these appeals were genuinely evangelical in design. The proponents of a non-controversial approach to Muslims still wanted to see converts from Islam to Christianity, just as their Reformer predecessors would have and as controversialists actively strove to see; they only disagreed with the techniques previously employed. This could be termed Evangelical-noncontroversialism.

These non-controversialists felt that they could gradually deepen a conversation between the Christian and the Muslim around shared teachings and sentiments until the Muslim saw the greater profundity and applicability of the Christian teaching, finally shifting his allegiance to Christianity. In some other cases however, this approach was more or less

² Jens Christensen, *The Practical Approach to Muslims* (Marseille: Ecole Radio Biblique, 1977), p. 4.

a resignation to failure on the part of Christians regarding their goal of seeing Muslims converted to Christianity. Some, influenced by ecumenical and liberal Christianity, changed their goal from seeing converts to being a Christian presence in fellowship with Muslim "brethren." Others, buffeted by consistently poor results, just gave up on the venture entirely. Unfortunately, one result of all this has been that the church largely has still not worked seriously at what Bishop Christensen called "re-thinking our Christian teaching in relation with Islam."

II. Muhammad or Mohammad?

It is inevitable that the Evangelical interpret other religious ideas and doctrines through his own encounter with God in Christ Jesus. So as we come to Muhammad, we are not like clean slates. We have a very definite predisposition toward anyone that claims to have something to say about how one can come to God. As we turn to Islam's vision of Muhammad, we find its proponents claiming for him a role we have no choice but to evaluate critically. The Islamic creed consists of a double affirmation. It goes, "I testify that there is no god but Allah, and I testify that Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah." Evangelicals relate to this creed through their Christological understanding. Therefore, the Evangelical says that, in light of who Christ is, Muhammad cannot be who Islam claims he is.

In Islam, Muhammad plays the dual role of a historical messenger (Muhammad) and a supra-historical icon (Apostle of Allah). I mean that Muhammad in Islam is both a person and a doctrine, and as such, any interpretation of his person reflects on Islam's essential verity. The Christian has the same situation concerning Jesus Christ. He is the historical person (Jesus of Nazareth) and he is also the supra-historical entity (Christ/Messiah, our King, Priest and Savior.)

This shows up in scores of ways in all forms of Islam but none is more blatant than the Sufi Muslim devotionals to Muhammad. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Dirini is a good example of this. He wrote of Muhammad,

Adam knew him and made petition through him, and Muhammad took an oath from all the prophets to himself. He took the purity of Adam, the lamentation of Noah. A part of his teaching contains the knowledge of Idris. Included in his ecstatic experiences is the grief of Jacob. Within the mystery of his ecstasy is the endurance of Job. Enfolded in his bosom is the weeping of David. A part only of the riches of his soul exceeds the wealth of Solomon. He gathered into himself Abraham's intimate friendship with God. He attained the converse of Moses, God's

interlocutor, and was more exalted than the highest kings. He excels the prophets as the sun excels the moon or the ocean the single drop.³

Muhammad is both an historical personage and a supra-mundane, supra-historical entity in Islam. It is vital that one recognizes this is the case.

It is a very important point to note that none of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic prophets other than Jesus and Muhammad are conceived by Jews, Christians, or Muslims as playing this dual role. Moses brought a message from God, but his relevance as a person is completely circumscribed by the primacy of his message. For example, he is not mentioned in the *Shema* of Israel. (Maimonides [1135-1204] compiled what he referred to as the “*Shloshah-Asar Ikkarim*” [the Thirteen Articles of Faith] in his *A Commentary on the Mishnah*.⁴ He lists belief in Moses as the greatest prophet as the seventh of thirteen obligatory beliefs for the Jew. Probably, however, this is an imitation of the Christian and Islamic practice of elevating their respective prophets above all others.) Neither Isaiah, Jeremiah, nor Hosea or any other of the prophets is ever involved in any creedal statement for Jews or Christians. They are viewed primarily as a means (much like a telephone), employed for communicating God’s message to mankind.

This is not Jesus’ role according to Christianity. His person is intimately connected to his message and his message is about his person. In no small way, the same is true of Muhammad. If a person agrees to the Islamic doctrine of God, of judgment, of angels—in fact, accepts everything Islam prescribes and, further, practices all Islamic rituals, etc.—but does not accept that Muhammad (the historical person) is also God’s messenger/apostle (the supra-historical), all his faith and practice is invalid. In other words, one cannot accept something called an “Islamic ethic” (like one speaks of a Christian ethic) while still not submitting to the person of Muhammad. On the contrary, if one has this conviction that Muhammad is God’s apostle and confesses this to be the case, yet fails to do the things required by the Islamic religion, this faith is still salvific and outweighs a lack of religious practice. The Qur’anic call is for people to

³ Constance E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer Manuals in Common Use* (London, SPCK, 1961), pp. 170-71.

⁴ Maimonides Moses Maimonides or Moses ben Maimon, *Moreh Nebukhim* [Guide for the Perplexed] (circa 1190). Rambam was writing in part to explain the differences between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The *Yigdal* Jewish service also paraphrases these beliefs and they are sung at the end of the traditional synagogue service.

believe in Allah and submit to Muhammad. Ostensibly God says to Muhammad in Sura 4:80, “We have sent you as an Apostle to all mankind. Allah is your all-sufficient witness. He that obeys the Apostle obeys God.” Muhammad is always bracketed with deity in Islam.

So for missions to the Muslim world to be valid, the Evangelical must interpret Muhammad. In doing so he takes up a dual-aspect task: 1) interpreting a particular Arab man—Muhammad ben Abdullah, born in 571 AD in Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia; and 2) concurrently interpreting this man in his metaphysical/supra-mundane role as God’s permanent spokesman. Evangelicals too seldom approach this task seriously. And when they approach it, their suggestions seem to be still divided into either the controversialist’s “demonization” of Muhammad, or the non-controversialist’s avoidance of conflict. Demonization—the so-simple and simplistic “I’m completely right, you are entirely wrong” answer—seldom allows for any serious exchange and interaction. However, the non-controversialist approach does little justice to Evangelical interpretation of the scripture.

There are serious Christian interpretations of Muhammad. The French Catholic writer Charles J. Ledit uses Jungian psychology and an interpretation of St. Thomas’s view of a type of second class prophecy to come up with a sympathetic view of Muhammad. But Ledit’s goal is to integrate Islam and its prophet into a new broader vision of Christianity that is opposed to atheistic materialism. This not only tosses aside the formerly accepted Roman Catholic dictum (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, or “Outside the Church none are saved”), but it is totally at odds with the Evangelical vision of Christianity and mission. Still, some of his suggestions are stimulating and provoking.

Giulio Basetti-Sani approaches the subject differently claiming the right to reinterpret Muhammad and the Qur’an, as he claims, is giving us a Christian reinterpretation of Islam.⁵ He feels that the Christian can approach the Qur’an as doing the Old Testament and reading it in accordance with the New Testament. This gives the Christian reader almost complete freedom with the Qur’anic text and the Sira of Muhammad. The Christian is free to convert Muhammad into a slightly uncatechized Christian prophet or to place him alongside David and Moses as a Semetic prophet without the benefits of having had Christ’s teachings. This is very friendly of Basetti-Sani and no doubt it is the result of what he calls his “eyes of love” approach to Islam. Yet undoubtedly anyone who tries to use

⁵ Giulio Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in Light of Christ: A Christian Interpretation of the Sacred Book of Islam* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), pp. 184-88.

this approach in practice will find that his Muslim friends will not quite appreciate being treated like little children just in need of a kind Christian tutor to lead them into a correct grasp of their own religious text and prophet.

The Episcopal clergyman Montgomery Watt and Islamicists like him have taken this task of interpreting Muhammad seriously from a liberal Christian perspective. While their suggestions are stimulating, the religious pluralism therein is not acceptable to Evangelicals. Kenneth Cragg has also been involved in this task. His conceptions are “Protestant,” but one cannot say either that his writings have been focused on the task of missions or that he has been sensitive to Evangelical objectives. Still, his writings offer a fruitful group of suggestions. Particularly significant is his challenge to sensitivity to who Muhammad was. His comment concerning the Qur’an could be well applied to Muhammad. He says:

A care for the Qur’an, as that which happened, can be separated from dogma about its occurrence, at least until the sense of the event no longer needs the protection of the dogma in its rigorous form... So the Muslim’s Qur’an can be the non-Muslim’s with a difference with divides their standpoints but need not debar a unity of attention.⁶

In this paper I hope to outline an approach to the person of Muhammad that takes seriously both the historical evidence that is available and the biblical data to which Evangelicals hold. To paraphrase Cragg, I am aiming for a perspective of Muhammad as an historical figure separated from Islamic dogma about this occurrence. My main purpose is to lay down some suggestions that allow the Evangelical missionary or pastor to deal with Muhammad as seriously as the Evangelical would like the Muslim to deal with the historical Jesus of Nazareth. In this intellectual application of Christ’s golden rule, we are “doing unto Muslims as we would like them to do unto us.” We must show ourselves willing to honestly relate to Muhammad and his message if we hope to have the moral and intellectual credibility to call Muslims to an honest dealing with Jesus Christ and his message. To fail to do so makes our rejection of Islam appear to be built on mere prejudice—(Is it possible that mere prejudice plays a bigger role than we’d like to admit?)—or obstinacy and thereby undercuts our credibility with the Muslim.

⁶ Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of the Qur’an* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1994), p. 22. His *Muhammad and the Christian: A Question of Response* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999) is valuable.

III. Sources and Our Approach

The Christian who wishes to interpret Muhammad faces many difficulties such as linguistic-cultural distance, personal bias, and ingrained social antipathy. However, if one works through all of these and crosses these barriers, he or she is then faced with yet another more difficult barrier, that being, the lack of reliable sources for researching Muhammad. The Qur'an is not a neutral portrayal of Muhammad ben Abdullah. The Hadith is largely unreliable and is entirely biased. The Sira accounts of Muhammad's life are mostly developed out of Ibn Hisham's (d. 833) revision of Ibn Ishaq's (d. 767) *Sirat ar-Rasool*, and are all designed to prove that Muhammad ben Abdullah is in fact the Apostle of God. All the materials we have for approaching Muhammad are interpretive. They all are involved in a kerygmatic (proclamative) presentation of Muhammad as Apostle of God and a polemic designed to evidence the same.

The Hadith accounts are interpretive and used for creating an ideological/theological basis for the orthodox control of the Islamic community. John Burton, assenting to Ignaz Goldhizer's view of the Hadith, comments:

The literature of the Muhammedan tradition, the Hadith, represented less a corpus of information from and about the Prophet as transmitted with verbal fidelity by successive generations after him than a reflection of the social, political and religious ideals of the transmitters themselves and of the societies or groups they served as spokesmen. By *sunna* was to be understood, not the inherited instruction of the Prophet, but the *ius consuetudinis* of a group or party large or small. By *hadith* is meant the vehicle of that *sunna*, a report verbal or written, conveying a description of the relevant practice, opinion or custom approved by the disseminators of the report.⁷

Then later he adds that the Muslim reports (especially as relate to the origins of the Qur'an) are "a mass of confusions, contradictions and inconsistencies. By their nature, they represent the product of a lengthy process of evolution, accretion and 'improvement.' They were framed in response to a wide variety of progressing needs."⁸

⁷ John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 5.

⁸ Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an*, p. 225.

Further we have no “negative press” on Muhammad recorded by any of his contemporaries. No antagonistic or neutral contemporary of Muhammad has left us with a record of the “other side of the story.” We only have Muhammad as he is mediated to us through his followers’ interpretation of him. Inevitably these followers view Muhammad in a light that would be different from that of an antagonistic contemporary. The purpose of these Muslim accounts of Muhammad’s deeds and teachings is not to present a historical picture of him, but rather to confirm his role as Apostle of God. A second goal in these accounts is to provide an interpretive structure for the Qur’anic text. This aspect shows up in the extensive studies on what is termed *Asbab an-Nazul* (reasons for the sending down, i.e., of certain Qur’anic passages) which takes events from Muhammad’s life and ties these events to Qur’anic verses, thereby giving the “rationale” for the appearance of these verses.

We find something similar within the Christian church’s experience, though less extreme. (Negative accounts of Jesus are given. Writers such as Celsus ridiculed and lampooned Jesus of Nazareth and his followers, and his writings give us a very different view of Jesus than that of the canonical gospels.) It could be well argued that when Jesus was crucified the world at large knew nothing of him, and that part of the world that knew of him considered him of very little consequence. What importance he did have was only that of a potential political insurgent. Josephus mentions Jesus but the text has almost certainly been tampered with. If we take out the blatant Christianizing of Josephus’ description of Jesus, we see how very differently he viewed Jesus of Nazareth than did the writers of the gospels. Without the gospels and Christian writings we would know very little about Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore the Jesus the gospels and the church give us is very much the Christ of faith. I am an Evangelical missionary, and as such I am convinced that the Christ of the church’s faith is, in fact, correctly identified with the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless, I recognize Jesus’ contemporaries did not uniformly interpret his behaviors or his person as did the church. Therefore, when one reads the gospels (canonical or apocryphal), one is reading a faith-reconstruction, or put more religiously, a very specific *confessio fidei*, of the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Similarly, the Muhammad that the Muslim community gives the world is the Apostle of God of their faith and piety, and not merely Muhammad ben Abdullah. This faith-reconstruction of the historical Muhammad into the Apostle of Allah has very definitely affected all the available sources through which we encounter Muhammad. This is a crisis for anyone wanting to separate Islamic dogma concerning Muhammad the Apostle of

God from Muhammad ben Abdullah, for one can very seldom say with any assurance that what we receive from the Muslim community is historically accurate. We must accept that every piece we are given is molded by the Muslim conviction that Muhammad ben Abdullah is the Apostle of God. To uncritically accept the information the Islamic nation gives concerning Muhammad is a tacit acceptance of the identification of the historical figure Muhammad ben Abdullah with the supra-historical character of the Apostle of God.

Andrew Rippin notes:

In teaching undergraduate students, I have often encountered individuals who come to the study of Islam with a background in the historical study of the Hebrew Bible or early Christianity, and who express surprise at the lack of critical thought that appears in introductory textbooks on Islam. The notion that "Islam was born in the clear light of history" still seems to be assumed by a great many writers of such texts...such naive historical study seems to suggest that Islam is being approached with less than academic candor.⁹

I agree wholeheartedly with Rippin, and further, in my opinion, Evangelicals, because of their fundamentalist approach to their own holy scripture, are doubly apt to uncritically accept the Muslim community's faith-reconstruction of Muhammad as if it were an attempt at a historical portrayal. We Evangelicals can forget that in the Islamic source material one sees a very definite theological/ideological and political back-reading of Muhammad's person and actions and the history around them.

We Evangelical Protestants are predisposed to dealing with holy texts uncritically, or, perhaps we should say, in a fundamentalist fashion. By doing so in our approach to the Qur'an, Hadith and Sirat, we naively grant the Islamic sources nearly the same historical credibility as we give to our own scriptures. I would suggest that such an uncritical attitude is one reason for the "demonization" of Muhammad in Evangelical and Protestant missions. Since the materials given us by the Muslims are not mere historical sketches but are their faith-reconstructions of the person of Muhammad as the supra-mundane Apostle of God, and since we as Evangelicals have rejected this faith-reconstruction, we lose any sympathetic approach to Muhammad the historical personage. My suggestion is that we separate the two. By doing so, I believe we will find

⁹ Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. ix.

ourselves capable of relating empathetically with Muhammad ben Abdullah as we've separated him from Muhammad the Apostle of God.

Evangelicals would ask Muslims to do at least this much with Jesus of Nazareth. We do so being convinced that if a person honestly interacts with Jesus of Nazareth, he will eventually be led to accept the faith-conception of him that the church holds. We further believe that an empathetic, honest interaction with Muhammad ben Abdullah is morally incumbent on persons who wish to comment on and critique the Islamic faith conception of him as the Apostle of God to humanity. Nevertheless, this task of separating the historical Muhammad from the Islamic community's faith conception of him in the source materials is an arduous one.

Examples of the Muslim community's inclination to invent a Muhammad in accordance with their theological conception of him as the Apostle of God abound, and many contradict each other. Al-Bukhari says that he waded through 600,000 hadith sayings to find the 7,275 that he considered as sahih (accurate). This shows the Muslim community's propensity toward inventing stories about Muhammad and putting words in his mouth. The Qur'an itself mentions this human trait and says to the Christians: "Do not exaggerate in your religion" (Sura 4:171) concerning their faith-conception of Jesus the Messiah as God and Son of God. All our sources for the study of Muhammad, including the Qur'an, have been subject to the following theological litmus test: only things that fit the faith-conception of Muhammad that was held by what became the orthodox school were accepted; things that were not were suppressed or reinterpreted.

IV. Competing Visions of Muhammad within Early Islam

There are numerous examples of this process of the Islamic community evaluating and adapting various views of Muhammad and his role. We see this even within the Qur'anic text itself. For example, he is in some texts described as being a messenger for the Arabs alone, this being an early view of his role as we find in Sura 42:7:

Thus we have given to you by inspiration an Arabic Qur'an: That you may warn the Mother of Cities (Mecca) and those that dwell around it of the Day of Assembly of which there is no doubt. A party will be for the Garden and a party for the Blazing fire.

Then, in accordance with later theological/ideological and political developments, is conceived as being a messenger to all humankind (S. 34:28). The fact that his Qur'an remains Arabic seems not to have been considered an obstacle, for those who foresaw Muhammad as a universal prophet also foresaw a universal Arabization. We see, in fact, how such was the case everywhere early Islam conquered.

Another case of competing interpretations of Muhammad shows up in the records which relate stories of men trying to ascribe divine status to Muhammad and him correcting them. We find the story of the men of Al-Kashi. A man came to Muhammad and said, "Peace upon you, oh my Lord." Muhammad replied, "God, your Lord and my Lord, curse you...." He went on to explain that he accepted no deification of himself. This is an example of competing faith-reconstructions of Muhammad. According to what has become the orthodox Sunni school, Muhammad is to have said that his followers were to take him as a slave of God first, then as God's Apostle.¹⁰ Such a statement reflects an interpretation of Muhammad very much at odds with the one previously mentioned.

Within the Muslim community, a group wanted to elevate Muhammad to the status to which they had heard Christians had raised their prophet, Jesus. A second group resisted this. This later group progressively wins the day over the next 20 to 80 years and they form the "orthodoxy." The orthodox party wins politically, and by that victory becomes the section of the early Islamic community that wins the right to interpret Muhammad to the world and successive generation of Muslims by spreading their faith-reconstruction of the man and crushing all others. They become the guardians and creators of Muhammad's image and message.

An excellent example of this process of orthodoxy winning the right to interpret Muhammad to the world is related to Muhammad's physical death. Abd ar-Rasool al-Ghafar records for us the following:

There was exaggeration regarding the prophet (*pbuh*) in Umar ben al-Khattab's saying concerning the prophet's death: "Whosoever said that Muhammad died, I killed that man with my sword; he (the Apostle) was merely lifted up to the heavens as was Jesus."

When the Apostle died Aisha said, "Umar and Mughaira ben Sha'ba sought permission to enter unto him (Muhammad). They entered and pulled off the cover from his face. Umar said: 'What a deep swoon the prophet is in.' Then they rose, and upon leaving the doorway Mughaira

¹⁰ 'Abd ar-Rasool Al-Ghafaar, *Shibhat al-Ghulwa 'and al-Shi'a* (Beruit: Dar Al-Mahaja al-Baida', 1415/1995), p. 49.

said: 'Oh Umar, by God the Apostle of God has died.' Umar replied: 'You have lied!' The Apostle has not died. You being a mere man are confused. The Apostle will never die until all the hypocrites are destroyed."

Furthermore, Umar threatened to kill anyone who claimed Muhammad had died. Tabari said Ibn Hamid said...Abu Huraira said when the Apostle of God died, Umar ben al-Khattab stood and said, "Some of the hypocrites are claiming that the Apostle of God has died, but by God he has not died, but he has gone to his Lord just as Moses son of 'Imran disappeared from his people for forty nights then returned. It had been said that he had died. By God the Apostle of God will return and cut off the hands and feet of those that assert the Apostle of God has died."¹¹

There are frequent references in the histories of the companions of the prophet that relate the story of Umar's conflict with other companions concerning Muhammad's death. He is reported to have argued with Abu Bakr, Mughaira, and Abbas ben Abdul Mutallib about this. All these are men of renown in early Islam. Muhammad is to have said of Umar: "If there were to be a prophet after me, surely he would be Umar from whom Satan fled and by whom the faith has been announced and the call to prayer raised." When one comes to such stories one needs either remarkable gullibility or a supreme faith to view them as mere history. I seriously doubt that a man of Umar's stature would be so foolish as to maintain that the dead man he had just seen was only in a swoon! Beyond that, how can we picture him threatening the life of anyone who claimed Muhammad had died when Aisha, the prophet's wife, had been responsible for preparing Muhammad's body for burial, as Umar himself had seen according to this story?

What we have in this story is a contrived account that falls between history and parable. Apparently some group of those in positions of influence had desired to interpret Muhammad along lines similar to the Christian portrayal of Christ as victor over death. We see this same technique was later used successfully by the Shi'a to claim that the Twelfth Imam, Abul-Qasim (circa 880) did not die but was lifted bodily into heaven. They await his return even today and he still is considered the actual if unseen ruler of the Shi'a Muslim world. He guides his people through ayatollahs to whom he communicates. In our story, Umar represents this group that is pushing for near-divine status for their prophet as the conqueror of death role would allow him. We know Umar later

¹¹ Al-Ghafaar, *Shibhat al-Ghulwa 'and al-Shi'a*, pp. 50-53.

became the third caliph of the Islam nation, which points to the dominant, orthodox school prophesying their own victory.

It is interesting to note that the Shi'a accounts of Muhammad's last days differ wildly from the Sunni accounts. In Shi'a accounts, Ali plays the central role that Abu Bakr plays in the Sunni account. The reason for this discrepancy is obviously that the two accounts are both more than mere history. They each offer opposing faith-reconstructions of Muhammad designed to affirm political ambitions of one side or the other in a factional dispute.

How different would Islam have looked if the group that Umar here symbolically portrays had won the right to become the "orthodox" school of Islam? What if this group had mediated to us their faith conceptions of a Muhammad raised victorious over death, a Muhammad that ascended to his Lord? (Remember, to a Sunni Muslim this question would be the same as asking an Evangelical to consider how different Christianity would have been had Arianism won the day politically and come to be recognized as the orthodox Christian view.)

Undoubtedly what we have here is the "orthodox" (meaning, politically dominant) interpretation of Muhammad vanquishing a second interpretation of him that had elevated Muhammad to deity status. Some traces of these various failed or defeated interpretations of Muhammad seem to have partially survived in Shi'a and Sufi Islam, but they are not much in evidence in Sunni Islam, or when they are found they are interpreted downward. Ismaili Islam made their living Imam an emanation of Allah. Perhaps this was the view of Muhammad that was being espoused by the group Umar here represents. We find in Tirmidhi and Dhahabi a record of comments, ostensibly from Muhammad, in which he claims to have had a pre-incarnate state. "They said, 'O Apostle of God, when was prophethood imposed upon you?' He said, 'When Adam was between spirit and flesh.'"¹² We can see in this a degeneration of what perhaps started as a doctrine of Muhammad as the Eternal Logos incarnate. Had this view of Muhammad—or the Sufi doctrine of the quasi-eternal Light of Muhammad (*nur Muhammadi*), or some version of it—become the orthodox view of Muhammad, then Hadith stories and Qur'anic texts that did not reflect adequately this faith-reconstruction of Muhammad would have been suppressed.

This willingness to suppress variant views of Muhammad and his message is nowhere more blatantly shown than in the collection of the

¹² *Sahih Al-Bukhari. Kitab al-Anbiya', Chap. Adhkar fi al-Kitab Mariem*, volume 4, book 55, number 651, and volume 4, book 55, number 652.

Qur'an itself. It is very difficult to trust the sources on this subject, for as Andrew Rippin states of them: "the contradictory nature of the accounts within the multiplicity of different versions of the story has raised grave doubts on the part of many scholars as to their motivations."¹³ We give here a brief synopsis of the Muslim account of the collection of the Qur'an as Sunnis recount it. (Again the Shi'a and Sunni accounts differ wildly.)

According to normal Islamic sources, Muhammad did not leave a written text, but presumably numbers of his followers had memorized various portions of the Qur'an. Then, after Muhammad's death and because of argument over discrepancies over textual matters, Abu Bakr finally is prevailed upon to collect the Qur'an in a written form. Muslims are following the Qur'anic readings given by various leaders of the community. He commissioned Zaid ben Thabit, who had been Muhammad's secretary, to collect the Qur'an. Zaid supervised the collection and writing of a single version of the text, which they deposited with Hafsa, the prophet's wife. However, the variant readings apparently continued in use within certain areas.

After Abu Bakr's death, Uthman was pressed into producing a *textus receptus* for the Islamic community, for sharp division had arisen over the content of the Qur'an. Uthman re-commissioned Zaid and a committee to produce the official written edition of the Qur'an. The committee produced between four and six copies by consulting all materials available. Then all other versions were collected and burned. Amazingly, even the copy Zaid had originally written under Abu Bakr's guidance and left as the first "official" text of the Qur'an was eventually burned by Mu'awiya.

Making sense of this story is very difficult, but this isn't the place to discuss it at length. We wish only to note here that force imposed uniformity in the matter of the Qur'anic text. All but the revised, orthodox version of the Qur'an were destroyed. Even the one version that Zaid himself had initially written was apparently no longer adequately in sync with the developing orthodox faith-reconstruction of Muhammad and his teachings, so it was destroyed. It is impossible to believe they would have destroyed it if it had agreed with the newer texts. Further the text must have differed so much as to make the idea of just destroying some pages of it or somehow amending it untenable.

Apparently as the orthodox school's faith-reconstruction of Muhammad evolved, passages that may have been allowable earlier became unacceptable to those leading the Islamic community. It is

¹³ Rippin, *Muslims*, p. 24.

important to note that the Christian Al-Kindi noted this matter around 830 AD and said:

...in your book, histories are all jumbled and intermingled; this is evidence that many different hands had been at work therein causing discrepancies, adding whatever they wished, subtracting what they wished.¹⁴

All this is to press home to the reader that while we must try to separate the Muhammad of history from the Apostle of Allah, it is no easy task, for all our sources are interpretive and have been influenced by the faith-reconstruction of Muhammad that the Islamic community wished to promote. To weave our way through these accounts and distinguish between what is factual and what is faith-reconstruction is not easy. Nevertheless, it will be necessary if we are to get to a place of sympathetic dealing with the person of Muhammad.

V. Muhammad

Muhammad was the posthumous son of Abdullah son of Abdul Mutallib of the Hashimite family of the Abd al-Manaf clan of the Quraysh tribe. He was supposedly born in the Year of the Elephant, which was named after the military invasion of the Hijaz area by Abraha, ruler of southern Arabia, which Muslims set at 570 AD. Unfortunately for those looking for historical accuracy, inscription evidence indicates that the actual invasion was probably nearer to 540 AD. At any rate, by most accounts Muhammad was born near 570 AD and then, before he was one month old, in keeping with the traditions of his tribe, he was given to a nursemaid, Suwaibah, a slave girl of his uncle Abu Lahab. (Abu Lahab was later to become a fierce opponent of Muhammad. Muhammad wrote the 111th Sura of the Qur'an as a curse on this uncle.)

After probably less than three months with Suwaibah, he was transferred to the care of a second nursemaid, Halima, of the same tribe. We do not know the reason for this dislocation. Later Muhammad was to say: "I am the most perfect Arab among you; my descent is from the Quraysh and my speech is of the tongue of Banu Sa'd"¹⁵ He stayed with

¹⁴ William Muir, *The Apology of Al-Kindi in the Court of Al-Mamun* (London: SPCK, 1887), p. 77-78. A "modernized" Arabic edition has been released by Call of Hope.

¹⁵ "Mohammed, Lahore," *Dictionary of Islam*, ed. Thomas Patrick Hughes

Halima for not less than two years—and probably three or more—then went back to live with his mother. At some point between Muhammad's sixth and eighth year of life, he and his mother, Amina, took a trip together. On this trip she died, apparently as the result of an accident. He then was sent to live with his grandfather. He stayed there for approximately four years, and then his grandfather died. Then he went to live with his uncle Abu Talib, a relatively poor caravan merchant.

One need not have a terribly fertile imagination to see that this traumatic beginning to life would have indelibly marked Muhammad's psyche. Muhammad's comments on how the orphan is to be compassionately treated demonstrate the influence of his past on his thinking. We also read in Sura 93:6, "Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter?" Such was Muhammad's deepest mental image of himself: an orphan. Not only did Muhammad view himself as essentially an orphan, one in need and unable to care for himself, but he also eventually came to see God as actively providing for him the necessities of life.

Muhammad spent all his formative years being shuffled between caretakers. These caretakers were "compassionate" to him in that they took care of him, but they were not able, nor for the most part did they intend, to bring him into deep personal relations with themselves and their families. He was always an outsider, receiving what caretakers were ideally expected in seventh century Hijazi-Arab society to give an orphan. As an orphan and one who sensed deeply his need for a caretaker, Muhammad may have been more reserved and retiring than usual. His first marriage shows this reserve and sense of need of a caretaker.

Muhammad was twenty-five years old before he seriously considered marriage and then married Khadija, a wealthy woman twice widowed and fifteen years his senior. She had given her previous husbands two sons and a daughter. Muhammad may well have been working for Khadija as a caravan leader. His good character and conscientious work are commonly given as reasons for Khadija's interest in him. Some have suggested that this marriage was a calculated and manipulative move on Muhammad's part. However, the reports we have make it very definitely appear as if Khadija took the initiative in this matter. Muhammad appears to be too shy and insecure to ask for her hand in marriage. Again he enters into a relationship based on his receiving caretaking. Khadija has wealth, respect and stability; Muhammad, the insecure orphan, feels a need to connect with these things.

It is a sign of how adequately cared for Muhammad felt in relationship with Khadija that he never took a second wife while she was alive. Perhaps this also goes some way in overcoming the common image of Muhammad as a merely lascivious character. Now with Khadija he had financial, and a measure of emotional, security in connection with his new caretaker/wife. Operating from this sense of new security, he chose to help resuscitate the *Hilfu-al-Fuzul*, an ancient compact between confederates that would strive to curtail acts of aggression and lawlessness within the Holy City. Muhammad was a leading figure in this group. In some ways this was a preparatory stage for Muhammad's later career. We must not neglect the importance of Muhammad's Arab "pedigree" when it comes to trying to understand how Muhammad could have gained such a role.

The Tunisian writer Hisham D'Jait, in his excellent book, *Fitna, Political and Religious Controversy in Earliest Islam*, points out that Muhammad's ancestry uniquely prepared him for a leadership role in Arab society. Muhammad's family history directly ties him to Abd al-Manaf and through Abd al-Manaf to Qosi, the founder of Mecca as a city. Ja'eet says of Qosi,

It was Qosi (or Qusayy) which founded Mecca and raised its lines, over a century before the Prophet's birth.... Qosi became called "The Combiner" and commander of the Quraish, for he combined and held both the political and the religious posts [of leadership].¹⁶

Abd al-Manaf was Qosi's second and more famous son. His family held a special role in supervising the religious rites connected with Bait Allah (the Kaaba). Ja'eet goes on to say:

Despite his personal poverty and that of his uncle, Muhammad did not descend from any old where, rather from Qosi and Abd al-Manaf, and by virtue of that it was possible for Muhammad to appear, in Arab eyes, as a superlative representative of the Quraish. It is undoubted that his role of governance over the city primarily finds its basis in this ancestry.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hicham Djaït, *Al-Fitna Jadaliyat ad-Din was as-Siyasa fi Al-Islam al-Mubakkar/Fitna* [Political and Religious controversy in Earliest Islam] (Beruit: Dar Al-Talee'a, 1995), p. 16.

¹⁷ Djaït, *Al-Fitna Jadaliyat ad-Din was as-Siyasa fi Al-Islam al-Mubakkar/Fitna*, p. 19.

And again, “That is, Muhammad was a man qualified more than any other to speak concerning the matters of religion and politics.”¹⁸

Muhammad’s acceptance into the corridors of power, such as they were, was based upon the fact that he had an esteemed ancestry. It should be noted that only two Caliphs (Abu Bakr and Umar) were not participants in this ancestry until 1208 AD. So, for six centuries, it was the descendants of Qosi and his son Abd al-Manaf that ruled the Islamic nation. Such was the role of ancestry.

However, here we face yet another aspect in Muhammad’s internal makeup. While his heritage is impressive, he is also an orphan. Twenty-three times orphans are mentioned in the Qur’an. He was deeply impacted by his own status as an orphan. Further, we see in Muhammad’s frequent Qur’anic discussions of conception and the human embryonic condition that such facts had puzzled him deeply. One could easily assume that having never seen his father, Muhammad had an intense desire for such a contact. Further, it is not unreasonable to assume that Muhammad must have at times felt keenly how close he had been to having not existed at all. How precarious the universe must have appeared. His whole existence was very nearly vetoed. That it had not been seemed of tremendous, even cosmic, significance. Had his father died just days, just moments before he (Muhammad) had been conceived, then what? So the orphan asks for—longs for—an assured connection to his esteemed heritage.

Connected to this issue of ancestry is a second matter of great concern to Muhammad, that of his own descendants. Muhammad desperately wanted children, particularly a boy who would carry on his name. How deeply this issue affected Muhammad shows up in verses such as Sura 108:3 as well as the frequent repetition in the Qur’an of the process of conception and birth.

Muhammad and his wife Khadija had two sons, al-Qasim and Abdullah. Al-Qasim died when he was two years old, and Abdullah died in infancy. They also had four daughters, all of whom, with the exception of Fatima, died before Muhammad. The strong feeling of Arab society at that time was that boys were more valuable than girls, and the father of boys was more honored. This, in part, was because of economics. Boys would grow up to be men who would participate in the profitable raiding parties of their tribes, girls would not. I believe it is this desire for a male son—and not sexual lust—that explains most of Muhammad’s marriages after Khadija’s death. (Unfortunately they cannot all be thus explained.)

¹⁸ Djaït, *Al-Fitna Jadaliyat ad-Din was as-Siyasa fi Al-Islam al-Mubakkar/Fitna*, p. 20.

We see this Arab thinking in Muhammad's comment in Sura 16:57-59:

And they assign daughters for God!—Glory be to Him—And for themselves sons (the issue) they desire! When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female child his face darkens, and he is filled with grief (anger). With shame he hides himself from the people from shame (offense), because of the bad news he has had! Shall he hold it (the infant girl) albeit in disgrace, or bury her in the dirt? Ah what an evil judgment they make.

Muhammad rebukes his people for the practice of female infanticide (see Sura Takwir 81:8-9). However, he is still very much affected by this view of girls as less valuable than boys, and fathers of girls as having less prestige than fathers of boys. We see this in his comment in S. 53:21-22: "Are you to have males and He to have females? This then is an injurious (unfair, offensive) division" (see also S. 17:40; 37:149-153; 52:39; 43:16-19). The idea of male superiority over females was so deeply implanted in Muhammad's mind that it was a particularly grotesque blasphemy to ascribe female progeny to God.

When Muhammad's sons died, Abu Jahl and other enemies of the Prophet, including his uncle Abu al-Lahab and his wife, ridiculed Muhammad. This was one of the most painful things Muhammad had to endure. It infuriated him as we see in his response toward his uncle (in whose home Muhammad had lived as an infant), as is recorded in Sura 111:

May the hands of Abu-Lahab perish. His wealth and gains will benefit him nothing. He will fry in a flaming Fire, his wife laden with the wood (as fuel), around her neck a twisted fiber rope.

Muhammad's fury is easily understandable. He had lost his two sons, and his wife was certainly approaching the point in life where having other children was very unlikely. Muhammad the orphan, cut off from his past by not knowing his own father, now feels his connection with the future is tearing.

A related passage is Sura al-Kauthar 108:3: "He that hates you is the one without offspring." The word here in Arabic is *'abtar*. It means basically "defective, imperfect" and secondly "cut off, clipped." This word had been used insultingly to imply that Muhammad would have no one to carry on his name because he is defective, very possibly sexually defective. This may very well have been Muhammad's own fear. We know that he

does adopt two sons, Ali and Zaid, quite obviously as an attempt to build the connection to the future he feels so keenly a need for. His response in Sura 108:3 is that the unbeliever in the message of Islam is the one who is actually cut off and defective. But this rejoinder does little to solve the questions in Muhammad's own mind: Why does God refuse to give me my heart's desire, a son? Why must I be cut off ('*abtar*') from both my past and my future? Am I essentially defective? Am I sexually defective? How am I to have a progeny that outlives me?

He derives some comfort by assuring himself that such matters are entirely in God's hands, saying to his detractors (and undoubtedly to himself),

To God is the possession of the heavens and the earth. He creates whatever He wishes and bestows to whomever He wills female children or to whomever He wills he bestows male children. Or He bestows to another male and female children. Or He makes whomever He wishes to be barren/sterile. He is all-knowing and all-powerful (S. 42:49).

This verse has something of the spirit of Job's: "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Muhammad grasps that God knows things that he, Muhammad, is not privy to.

So who is Muhammad? He is a man who feels deeply that he is cut off from his past and has a fear that he will be cut off from his future. He is an orphan who has never known life without a caretaker, and thereby has become psychologically dependent upon a caretaker figure being in his life. He is a man who has twice lost his mother, initially to cultural norms and then to death (which is in God's hands). His marriage to Khadija, who is fifteen years his senior, allows him a significant measure of recovery of a mother figure. This marriage also very definitely provides him with his needed caretaker figure. So much so, in fact, that Muhammad gains the inner stability to launch out in a program that re-connects him to his past. We see this in Muhammad's leadership role in the re-forming of the Hiflu al-Fuzul group. The reforming of this ancient group is very definitely a step in Muhammad's recovery of his connection to his past.

But such attempts at finding a place of permanence are all temporary success at best. Muhammad's sons die, his wife dies, the al-Fuzul group comes apart. Muhammad's search for means to meet his inner needs (the needs of the orphan and the '*abtar*') must go deeper. To one degree or another, he had understood this before he was to become a "prophet," and responded by entering a life of searching.

Muhammad may have always been a meditative person but now, in the relative financial and emotional security of his marriage to Khadija, his

mother/caretaker figure as well as the mother of his children, he takes opportunity to involve himself in an overt program of religious meditation. The cultural influences that led Muhammad to believe that meditation and late night vigils were an effective means for discovering truth—as opposed to using academic research and philosophical investigation—are unfortunately mostly hidden from us. Was it the fact that the Hanifite movement had influenced him with their inclination toward late-night prayer vigils? Or perhaps Christian monks in the monasteries that dotted the desert landscape in which Muhammad had occasionally lodged? Or was it the influence of a particular monk, maybe ben Naufal? Or was it possibly just the desert sky? Whatever the influences were, ultimately what is more important is that Muhammad firmly believed that he could find truth and the answers that he needed via a personal religious meditation.

He did not apparently feel the need for a systematic evaluation of the various religions and religious philosophies that were around him. Further, he did not feel that an academic approach was relevant to his goals. Was this because he was basically illiterate and therefore felt that an academic approach was beyond his capacities? Or was it that he essentially felt that a mystic/Gnostic approach to truth was more reliable? We see throughout Muhammad's life this strong inclination to avoid investigation and to accept what he was, to hear "inwardly" as ultimate (by virtue of it being divinely given) truth.

Whether it be in religious, familial, political, or other arenas, Muhammad accepted as final truth what came to him by inward impression. A golden calf speaks, Dhu-Al-Qarnain finds the sun in a muddy pool of water, Jesus is raised to heaven (but not crucified), a group of youths and their dog sleep for around three centuries, then wake up, etc.—all because Muhammad had an inward impression that told him these things were so. He never thought it necessary to do anything but to go and meditate when he needed guidance. His mystical connection to Allah made any other avenue of research unimportant.

Undoubtedly many of the stories Muhammad relates to us in the Qur'an are his revisions of popularly told stories that he heard from Arab pagans, Jews, and Christians. However, Muhammad accepts or rejects what is related in these stories based entirely upon what his mystical connection to Allah confirms or rejects of them. He needs no external evidence of the correctness of his opinions, for, as he sees them, they come not from within himself but from the world of the unknown (*'alam al-ghaib*), from God himself. The story of Joseph is a good example of this. We read: "That is news of the unseen which we reveal to you though you were not present among them (i.e., when the events took place)"

(S.12:102). And, “We recount to you (Muhammad) the most beautiful of stories, in what we reveal to you” (S.12:3). Muhammad himself describes the beginning of this encounter between himself and God in these words:

Your companion (Muhammad) is neither astray nor is he deceived. He does not speak from his own desire. This (the Qur’an) is no less than divine inspiration given to him. One mightily powerful taught him (Gabriel), a possessor of strength who did stand erect. He was at the highest horizon, then drew near and descended until he was with two bow lengths away or closer. So He (God) inspired his servant with what He sent down. The (Prophet’s) heart did not disbelieve what he saw. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw? He has seen him (Gabriel) another time descending to the sidra tree which no one may pass, where there is the garden of repose. The sidra was covered with what covered it. His (Muhammad’s) sight never wandered nor turned aside. For truly he did see one of the greatest of his Lord’s signs (Sura 53:2-18).

So Muhammad perceives his visions and inwardly received messages as revelations coming directly from God. Like his Persian predecessor, Zarathustra, Muhammad could have said, “When he came to me as Good Mind, the Silent Thought taught me the greatest good so that I may proclaim it.”¹⁹ Temple Gairdner wrote, “If Muhammad’s awful Visitant was not other than the Spirit, then It was a being altogether higher than the angels...the Spirit is a unique Being, above all creatures, related uniquely, intimately and actively to the Lord of the Throne.”²⁰ When Silent Thought, the Awful Visitant, or The Spirit teaches, there is immediacy that supersedes the need for external or rational confirmation.

So Muhammad the orphan is searching for the ultimate answer to connection to the past, and a means for connection to the future, as can only be provided for him by an Ultimate Caretaker. These are the inward, subconscious motives that drive Muhammad in his meditations. His mystical view of how truth is encountered takes on the form of religious meditation. In these meditations he encounters the mystical Silent Thought, which he perceives as being Gabriel, the spirit of Allah and His messenger. Gabriel delivers to Muhammad a divine revelation.

In this there is nothing of vain fancy in Muhammad. His is not a mere academic interest in religious matters, he is searching for the answers to

¹⁹ Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *The hymns of Zarathustra: Being a Translation of the Gathas together with Introduction and Commentary*, trans. M. Henning (Boston: Tuttle, 1992), p. 139.

²⁰ Samuel Zwemer, *The Cross above the Crescent* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, c 1941), p. 272.

this matter of connection to a stolen past and a dead future. And in these "revelations" he finds the answers he needs. Eventually, God becomes his permanent Caretaker, one who will never die and leave him orphaned. His past is tied intimately to the prophets of old (Jewish, Christian, and Arab) delivering him from the rootlessness of not knowing his "merely" earthly father. His status as an orphan loses its sting, for he becomes a member in a mystical family. He finds a progeny—that is not so completely subject to the arbitrariness of death—in a believing group that he births spiritually. In short, his revelations from Allah via Gabriel (his symbol for Silent Thought) answer his own deepest needs.