

CHAPTER TWO



In search of the historic Muhammad

- ◆ Why the Qur'an cannot be understood independently of the Hadith
- ◆ Sorting fact from fiction in the Hadith—and why this is largely impossible
- ◆ The best early sources for details of Muhammad's life
- ◆ Why historical fact and Muslim belief about Muhammad are *not* synonymous

What can we really know about Muhammad?

MOST WESTERN NON-MUSLIMS KNOW VIRTUALLY NOTHING ABOUT the Prophet of Islam. While even in the post-Christian West the broad outline of the story of Jesus Christ is still generally familiar, and many people would be able to recount the tale of Gautama Buddha attaining enlightenment while sitting under a bo tree, the figure of Muhammad has for most non-Muslims remained peculiarly indistinct and devoid of content.

Muslims would say that non-Muslims are ignorant about Muhammad by their own choice, and not for want of information. Islamic spokesmen generally maintain that we can know a great deal about Muhammad.

Muqtedar Khan of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy enunciated a commonplace assumption when he said: “An extraordinary aspect of Muhammad’s life is that he lived in the full light of history. There are detailed accounts of his life available to us. No comparable religious figure’s life and times have been so well recorded as Muhammad’s.”¹ It was the French scholar Ernest Renan who first wrote in 1851 that Muhammad lived “in the full light of history.”

The Qur’an

The Qur’an contains a good deal of detail about particular incidents in the Prophet’s life, but no continuous narrative—and the incidents it does relate are often told obliquely or incompletely, as if the audience knows the outline of the story already. Allah, according to the traditional Muslim view, dictated every word of the Qur’an to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel. The Qur’an is, according to Islamic tradition, a perfect copy of an eternal book—the *umm al-kitab*, or Mother of the Book—that has existed forever with Allah. It was delivered piecemeal through Gabriel to Muhammad during his twenty-three-year prophetic career.

Allah himself is the only speaker throughout virtually all of the Qur’an. (Occasionally Muhammad seems to have lapsed a bit on this point: sura 48:27, for example, contains the words “if Allah wills”—an odd locution for Allah himself to be using.) Most often he addresses Muhammad directly, frequently telling him what to say about various matters. Allah legislates for the Muslims through Muhammad, giving him instructions on what laws to lay down: “They ask thee concerning women’s courses. Say: They are a hurt and a pollution: so keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, ye may approach them in any manner, time, or place ordained for you by Allah. For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean” (2:222).

But often the matter at hand is not so straightforward: reading the Qur’an is in many places like walking in on a conversation between two

people with whom one is only slightly acquainted. When Islamic apologists say terrorists quote the Qur'an on jihad "out of context," they neglect to mention that the Qur'an itself often offers little context. Frequently it makes reference to people and events without bothering to explain what's going on. For example—and I ask the reader's indulgence as we enter the Qur'an and its exegesis, which can seem a little confusing—the first five verses of the Qur'an's sixty-sixth sura say this:

O Prophet! Why holdest thou to be forbidden that which Allah has made lawful to thee? Thou seekest to please thy consorts. But Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Allah has already ordained for you, (O men), the dissolution of your oaths (in some cases): and Allah is your Protector, and He is Full of Knowledge and Wisdom. When the Prophet disclosed a matter in confidence to one of his consorts, and she then divulged it (to another), and Allah made it known to him, he confirmed part thereof and repudiated a part. Then when he told her thereof, she said, "Who told thee this?" He said, "He told me Who knows and is well-acquainted (with all things)." If ye two turn in repentance to Him, your hearts are indeed so inclined; but if ye back up each other against him, truly Allah is his Protector, and Gabriel, and (every) righteous one among those who believe—and furthermore, the angels—will back (him) up. It may be, if he divorced you (all), that Allah will give him in exchange consorts better than you, who submit (their wills), who believe, who are devout, who turn to Allah in repentance, who worship (in humility), who travel (for Faith) and fast, previously married or virgins.

It is impossible to tell from this passage what the Prophet has held forbidden that Allah has made lawful for him, or how he tried to please his consorts, or under what circumstances Allah permits oaths to be broken, or what secret the consort told that Allah later told Muhammad, or even

which two consorts are being admonished, warned to repent and not to band together against Muhammad, and threatened with divorce. The entire passage—and there are many like it in the Qur’an—is completely opaque to anyone who was not directly involved in the proceedings.

But Islamic tradition fills in the story—and does so in the context of an early Muslim, Abdullah bin ‘Abbas, asking the Caliph Umar, a companion of the Prophet and his second successor as leader of the Muslim community (*umma*), about this Qur’anic passage. During the Hajj—the pilgrimage to Mecca—Abdullah met Umar and posed the question: “O Chief of the believers! Who were the two ladies from among the wives of the Prophet to whom Allah said: ‘If you two return in repentance (66.4)’?”

Umar replied, “I am astonished at your question, O Ibn ‘Abbas. They were Aisha and Hafsa.” According to Umar, Hafsa, one of Muhammad’s wives, had been angering the Prophet by talking back to him. So when Umar learned that Muhammad had divorced all his wives, he was not surprised; he exclaimed: “Hafsa is a ruined loser! I expected that would happen some day.”

Umar goes to Muhammad, who initially declines to receive him and then relents. “I greeted him and while still standing, I said: ‘Have you divorced your wives?’ He raised his eyes to me and replied in the negative.” Umar then complains that his wife has grown disobedient, under the influence of some of recent female Muslim converts. At that, says Umar, “the Prophet smiled.” And he smiled again when Umar related that he had told Hafsa not to talk back to Muhammad; Muhammad’s wife Aisha, he told her, could get away with it only because she was prettier and Muhammad loved her more.

Umar explains to Abdullah that “the Prophet did not go to his wives because of the secret which Hafsa had disclosed to Aisha, and he said that he would not go to his wives for one month as he was angry with them when Allah admonished him (for his oath that he would not approach Maria). When twenty-nine days had passed, the Prophet went to Aisha first of all.”²

But Umar does not reveal Hafsa’s secret. According to some authorities, it was that Hafsa had caught Muhammad in bed with his concubine, Mary

the Copt, on the day he was supposed to spend with Hafsa. Muhammad promised to stay away from Mary and asked Hafsa to keep the matter a secret, but Hafsa told Aisha. Then Allah stepped in with the revelation of the threat of divorce that we now find in sura 66, freeing Muhammad from his oath to stay away from Mary.³ But another tradition explains the matter quite differently. Aisha explains:

The Prophet used to stay for a long while with Zainab bint Jahsh [another one of his wives] and drink honey at her house. So Hafsa and I decided that if the Prophet came to any one of us, she should say to him, "I detect the smell of Maghafir (a nasty smelling gum) in you. Have you eaten Maghafir?" So the Prophet visited one of them and she said to him similarly. The Prophet said, "Never mind, I have taken some honey at the house of Zainab bint Jahsh, but I shall never drink of it any-more." So there was revealed: "O Prophet ! Why do you ban (for you) that which Allah has made lawful for you. . . . If your two (wives of Prophet) turn in repentance to Allah," (66.1-4) addressing Aisha and Hafsa. "When the Prophet disclosed a matter in confidence to some of his wives," (66.3) namely his saying: but I have taken some honey.⁴

In this scenario the revelation of sura 66 concerns only his wives' jealousy (or perhaps Muhammad's bad breath) and his oath to stop drinking honey. In this case what the Prophet has held forbidden that Allah has made lawful for him would be honey. That is, Muhammad tried to please his consorts by promising to give up honey, and Allah is allowing him to break this oath and threatening the errant wives with divorce.

In another hadith, Umar takes oblique credit for inspiring part of this particular revelation: "Once the wives of the Prophet made a united front against the Prophet and I said to them, 'It may be if he (the Prophet) divorced you, (all) that his Lord (Allah) will give him instead of you wives better than you.' So this Verse [(V. 66.5) the same as I had said] was revealed."⁵

Leaving aside the question of the nature of a divine revelation concerning either the Prophet's oral hygiene or the squabbles and jealousy of his wives, it clear that neither of the traditional Islamic explanations for the cryptic, allusive statements in sura 66 could possibly be reconstructed from the Qur'an alone.

The Hadith

Perhaps reacting to the fragmentary quality of the Qur'anic narrative, early Muslims elaborated two principal sources to provide context for the Qur'an: *tafsir* (commentary on the Qur'an) and *hadith*, traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. And a significant amount (although by no means all) of the hadith is itself tafsir. It gives the *asbab an-nazool*, or circumstances of revelation (as we have just seen for sura 66:1-5), for various Qur'anic verses—which can have important implications for how the verse is to be applied in the modern age. One hadith, for example, recounts the occasion on which Muhammad was reciting a Qur'anic verse which scolds Muslims who take no part in jihad: “Those of the believers who sit still . . . are not on an equality with those who strive in the way of Allah with their wealth and lives. Allah hath conferred on those who strive with their wealth and lives a rank above the sedentary. Unto each Allah hath promised good, but He hath bestowed on those who strive a great reward above the sedentary” (4:95).

At that point in Muhammad's recitation, a blind man spoke up: “O Allah's Messenger! If I had power, I would surely take part in Jihad.” Whereupon “Allah sent down the revelation to His Messenger” of another segment of the verse, removing the Prophet's blind friend from this condemnation: “other than those who have a (disabling) hurt.”⁶

The *sunnah*, or model, of the Prophet, which is largely comprised of the Hadith, is second only to the Qur'an in authority for most Muslims and contains a huge amount of information about Muhammad. It is from the Sunnah that most of the laws that distinguish Islamic society from other societies have been elaborated. The Sunnah is so important in Islamic

thought that according to Islamic scholar Ahmad Von Denffer, “there is agreement among Muslim scholars that the contents of the *sunna* are [in addition to the Qur’an] also from Allah. Hence they have described it as also being the result of some form of inspiration.”⁷

From the vantage point of fourteen hundred years later it is virtually impossible to tell with any certainty what is authentic in this mass of information and what isn’t. Muslims themselves acknowledge that there are a great many forged *ahadith* (the plural form of hadith), which were written to give the Prophet’s sanction to the views or practices of a particular party in the early Muslim community. This makes the question of what the historical Muhammad actually said and did well-nigh insoluble. But it does not mean that the Hadith has no relevance for Muslims. Reacting to the confusion caused by the proliferation of forged *ahadith*, relatively early in the history of Islam several Muslims assembled collections of accounts of the Prophet’s words and deeds that they considered more or less definitive and authentic.⁸ In the ninth century several Islamic scholars ranged through the Muslim world collecting traditions about Muhammad and then attempting to winnow the true ones from the false. The imam Muhammad Ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (810–870), who compiled the most respected and authoritative hadith collection (known as *Sahih Bukhari*), is said to have gathered 300,000 *ahadith*. These he examined carefully, trying to trace each back through a discernable chain of transmission (*isnad*) to the Prophet himself. Ultimately he chose and published around two thousand separate *ahadith* as authentic; repetitions bring the number of *ahadith* in his collection to over seven thousand.

Sahih Bukhari alone fills nine volumes in a deluxe English-Arabic edition published in Saudi Arabia. Besides providing the context of an enormous number of verses of the Qur’an, it gives the reader insights into Muhammad’s private life, and his wisdom and example on a huge range of topics, including ablutions, characteristics of prayer and actions while praying, funerals, the obligatory charity tax (*zakat*), the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), fasting, good manners, sales and trade, loans, mortgaging, wills and testaments, marriage, divorce, laws of inheritance, jihad and the

subjugation and punishment of unbelievers, blood money, and much more—even the interpretation of dreams.

Sahih Bukhari is just one of six collections, all lengthy, that Muslims generally regard as trustworthy. Among these *Sahih Sittah*, or reliable collections, is another that bears the designation *sahih*—meaning reliable. This is *Sahih Muslim*, which was compiled by Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri (821–875). The others are considered lesser authorities after Bukhari and Muslim, but still enjoy great respect: *Sunan Abu-Dawud* by Abu Dawud as-Sijistani (d. 888); *Sunan Ibn Majah* by Muhammad ibn Majah (d. 896), *Sunan At-Tirmidhi* by Abi ‘Eesaa Muhammad At-Tirmidhi (824–893), and *Sunan An-Nasai* by Ahmad ibn Shu‘ayb an-Nasai (d. 915).

Also highly regarded, although not numbered among the *Sahih Sittah*, are several other collections, notably one known as *Muwatta Imam Malik* (or simply *Muwatta Malik*). Malik bin Anas bin Malik bin Abu Amir Al-Asbahi (715–801), or Imam Malik, lived closest in time to the life of Muhammad of all the collectors of ahadith—and he was born more than eighty years after the death of the Prophet.

In Islam the study of hadith is a complex and absorbing science. Scholars grade individual traditions according to such designations as “sound,” “good,” “weak,” “forged,” and many others. If a tradition appears in Bukhari or Muslim, Muslim scholars accord it a great presumption of reliability, and if it’s in both, its authenticity is virtually assured—at least from a traditional Muslim perspective. And this is not just the view of Muslim scholars but of everyday Muslims: Bukhari and Muslim are regarded as preeminent sources. One Islamic Internet resource, while assuring readers that “nothing on this site violates the fixed principles of Islamic law,” sums up the prevailing opinion of Muslims succinctly: “*Sahih Bukhari* is distinguished with its [sic] strong reliability”; regarding *Sahih Muslim*, it adds: “Out of 300,000 Hadiths which were evaluated by Muslim, only 4,000 approximately—divided into forty-two books—were extracted for inclusion into his collection based on stringent acceptance criteria.”⁹

Bukhari and Muslim, and to a lesser degree the other collections of *Sahih Sittah*, remain the gold standard for ahadith. The English translator

of *Sahih Muslim*, Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, explains that the hadiths “which are recognized as absolutely authentic are included in these two excellent compilations,” and that “even of these two, Bukhari’s occupies a higher position in comparison to Muslim’s.”¹⁰

The Sira

Then there is the *sira*, or biography of Muhammad. With the Hadith and Qur’an, it makes up the Sunnah. The first full-length biography of the Prophet of Islam did not appear until 150 years after his death. The Prophet’s first biographer was Muhammad Ibn Ishaq Ibn Yasar, generally known as Ibn Ishaq (704–773). While many biographical nuggets are contained in other sources, not least the Qur’an, Ibn Ishaq’s *Sirat Rasul Allah* (*Biography of the Prophet of Allah*) was the first attempt to provide a continuous narrative of Muhammad’s life.

Unfortunately, the original form of this book is lost to history. It exists only in a later revised and shortened (although still quite lengthy) version by Ibn Hisham, who died in 834, sixty years after Ibn Ishaq, and in fragments quoted by other early Muslim writers, including another historian, Muhammad Ibn Jarir at-Tabari (839–923). Ibn Hisham explains that in his version he omits, among other material from Ibn Ishaq’s biography, “things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people; and such reports as al-Bakka’i told me he could not accept as trustworthy.”¹¹ Some of these “disgraceful” matters may have induced Malik ibn Anas (715–801), himself the compiler of a respected hadith collection, *Muwatta*, to call Ibn Ishaq “an antichrist” and to complain that the biographer “reports traditions on the authority of the Jews.” Malik and Ibn Ishaq later reconciled, and numerous other early Muslim authorities attest to the biographer’s reliability. One Muslim who knew him for many years stated that “none of the Medinans suspected him or spoke disparagingly of him”; another contemporary called him “truthful in tradition.”¹²

Muslims have generally accepted Ibn Ishaq’s work as trustworthy based on the fact that the distaste that some early Muslims like Malik felt for him

stemmed not from a belief that his historical material was unreliable, but from his writings on Islamic law. He was suspected of quoting legal traditions with incomplete or inadequate chains of transmitters establishing their authority (although he scrupulously includes such chains for most of his historical accounts). He was further accused of Shi'ite tendencies and other deviations from orthodoxy. But the great Islamic jurist Ahmed ibn Hanbal (780–855) summed up the prevailing view: “in *maghazi* [Muhammad’s military campaigns] and such matters what Ibn Ishaq said could be written down; but in legal matters further confirmation was necessary.”¹³ In other words, he is a good source for history, not for legislation.

However, Ibn Ishaq’s life of Muhammad is so unashamedly hagiographical that its accuracy is questionable. The Prophet’s biographer was a believing Muslim, anxious to portray Muhammad as a larger-than-life figure. He recounts one incident in which the captive wife of a man Muhammad had ordered killed poisons the Prophet’s dinner. According to Ibn Ishaq, the Prophet had some preternatural awareness of the woman’s deed; he spat out the poisoned meat, exclaiming, “This bone tells me that it is poisoned.”¹⁴ On another occasion his men were digging a large trench for a battle and came upon a huge rock that no one could move. The Prophet spat in some water and sprinkled it on the rock, whereupon the obstacle became “pulverized as though it were soft sand so that it could not resist axe or shovel.”¹⁵

Whatever his overall reliability as a historian, much of Ibn Ishaq’s portrait of Muhammad has over the centuries passed into the general consciousness of Muslims. Many incidents in the Prophet’s life, including ones that became influential in Islamic history, have no other source; later Muslim historians’ accounts often depend solely on Ibn Ishaq. He is read and respected by Muslims today; Muslim bookstores still stock copies of his biography among more modern accounts of the Prophet.¹⁶ Modern Muslim historians praise his accuracy: Lieutenant-General A.I. Akram of the Pakistani Army, in his biography of Khalid bin Waleed—one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, known as the “Sword of Allah”—explains that Ibn Hisham’s:

abridgement of the last pioneering work, *Seerah Rasoolullah*, by Muhammad bin Ishaq, is invaluable. . . . Muhammad bin Ishaq (who died in 150 or 151AH¹⁷), is unquestionably the principal authority on the Seerah (Prophetic biography) and Maghazi (battles) literature. Every writing after him has depended on his work, which though lost in its entirety, has been immortalised in the wonderful, extant abridgement of it, by Ibn Hisham. . . . Ibn Ishaq's work is notable for its excellent, rigorous methodology and its literary style is of the highest standard of elegance and beauty. This is hardly surprising when we recall that Ibn Ishaq was an accomplished scholar not only in Arabic language but also in the science of hadith.¹⁸

Javeed Akhter, author of *The Seven Phases of Prophet Muhammad's Life*, agrees: "Was Ibn Ishaq trustworthy? He appears to be very careful in his writings. When in doubt, he frequently precedes a statement by the word 'Za'ama' (he alleged)."¹⁹ In a survey of Muslim historians, Salah Zaimeche of a Muslim organization known as the Foundation for Science Technology and Civilisation writes this of Ibn Ishaq: "He corrects hadiths, and also rids his accounts of legends and poetry that are not on the reliable side. The actions and deeds of the Prophet (PBUH²⁰) are scrupulously noted, and his battles described in great detail."²¹

And in his modern biography of the Prophet (which is distributed by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a group that bills itself as a civil rights organization defending Muslims in America), Islamic apologist Yahiya Emerick praises Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah* as "one of the earliest attempts at presenting a complete biography of Muhammad using a wide variety of sources."²²

The contemporary Islamic scholar (and, as Abu Bakr Siraj Ad-Din, convert to Islam) Martin Lings (1909–2005), whose biography *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, is respected by non-Muslims and Muslims alike (and won Lings awards in Egypt and Pakistan), relies chiefly on three sources: Ibn Ishaq's biography; a chronicle of the battles of

Muhammad by Muhammad ibn Umar al-Waqidi (d. 823); and the traditions collected by Muhammad by al-Waqidi's secretary, Muhammad Ibn Sa'd (d. 845): *Kitab Al-Tabaqat Al-Kabir* (*The Book of The Major Classes*). Since the latter two are several generations younger than Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah* still has pride of place as the principal source for information about Muhammad. Lings also uses the "The History of the Messengers and the Kings" (*Ta'rikh ar-Rasul wa 'l-Muluk*) by Tabari, as well as Bukhari, Muslim, and other sources of hadith.

I will, therefore, rely primarily on those sources as well—chiefly Ibn Ishaq, since his work is the oldest chronologically, and also on Ibn Sa'd, who is considered by many Muslim scholars to be more reliable in his transmission of hadith than al-Waqidi.²³ I will also make extensive use of Bukhari and Muslim, as well as other hadith collections considered reliable by Muslims—all so as to construct a picture of Muhammad from Islamic sources, the kind of picture that a pious Muslim might get if he set out to learn more about the life and sayings of his prophet.

Historical fact and Muslim belief

Using the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sira, what can we ultimately know about Muhammad? Historical certainty is not easy to ascertain with a text as sketchy as the Qur'an, as overwhelmed with false information as the Hadith, and as late as the Sira. And even the Qur'an, in the opinion of some modern historians, "as we have it is not the work of Muhammad or the 'Uthmanic redactors . . . but a precipitate of the social and cultural pressures of the first two Islamic centuries."²⁴ While Islamic apologists generally assert with pride that the Qur'anic text has never been altered and there are no variants, there are some indications even in Islamic tradition that this is not actually the case. One early Muslim, Anas ibn Malik, recounts that after a battle in which many Muslims were killed, that the Qur'an originally contained a message from the slain Muslims to the living ones: "Then we read a verse in al-Qur'an for a long time which was

either removed or forgotten. (It was): convey to our people from us that we met our Lord Who was pleased with us and we were pleased with Him.”²⁵

Some Western scholars, meanwhile, such as the pioneering Hadith expert Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), as well as John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Christoph Luxenberg, and others, have done ground-breaking work in researching which ahadith reflect what Muhammad really said and did, and which are pious legend—research which often deviates sharply from the received wisdom of Muslim scholars of the Hadith.²⁶

From a strictly historical standpoint, it is impossible to state with certainty even that a man named Muhammad actually existed, or if he did, that he did much or any of what is ascribed to him. In all likelihood he did exist—particularly in light of recorded aspects of his life that are acutely embarrassing for Muslims today (and, to varying degrees, throughout history) who are confronted with the difficulty of squaring them with modern sensibilities. It is hard to imagine that a pious hagiographer would have invented Muhammad’s marriage to a nine-year-old girl, or his marriage to his ex-daughter-in-law. Muslims have struggled to explain these and other aspects of Muhammad’s life for centuries; if an editor or compiler could have simply consigned them to oblivion, he most likely would have. Still, some historians believe that the Muhammad who comes to us in the Qur’an, Hadith, and Sira is a composite figure, constructed later to give Arab imperialism a foundational mythos. Others have questioned also whether the Muhammad of history was really connected with Mecca and Medina, or if the story was given this setting in order to situate it in Arabia’s most important centers.

These historical speculations have had virtually no effect on Islamic doctrine or practice. For our purposes it is less important to know what really happened in Muhammad’s life than what Muslims have generally accepted as having happened, for the latter still forms the foundation of Muslim belief, practice, and law. It is important to know the Muhammad of history, but perhaps even more important to know the Muhammad who

has shaped and continues to shape the lives of so many Muslims worldwide. The popular picture of Muhammad, and the mass of Islamic legislation that is accepted by millions of Muslims today as the veritable law of Allah, has been elaborated from his words and deeds in the Hadith that orthodox Islamic schools of jurisprudence and clerics consider authentic.

It is this picture of Muhammad that inspires Muslims worldwide, whether for good or for ill, and that remains true whatever the actual historical accuracy of this material. Millions of Muslims look to the Muhammad of the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sira for guidance on how to imitate the man that Islamic tradition has dubbed *al-insan al-kamil*, or the Perfect Man. This concept has played a significant role in Islamic mysticism. Scholar Itzhak Weismann, in discussing the mystical thought of Amir 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri (1808–1883), who waged jihad against the French in what would become modern Algeria, explains that in some Islamic mystical traditions, “the Perfect Man is the ideal of humanity. In the strictest sense only Muhammad has perfectly realized this state, since it is only in him that the Divine names were revealed in complete harmony and perfection.”²⁷ While some less mystically minded Muslims may find this an excess of reverence, popular devotion to Muhammad among Muslims around the world is scarcely less ardent.

That is why it is all the more imperative today that Westerners become familiar with this singular and fascinating figure.

To get your copy of *The Truth About Muhammad*, [click here](#).