

Exploring Islam in the light of Scripture (4)

Muslims believe Muhammad, the founder of Islam (570-632 A.D.), is the last and final prophet of God. He was not like Moses who was not allowed to enter the promised land. He was not like Jesus who had been crucified as a criminal. Instead, Muhammad had prevailed and had governed. The faith he bequeathed his followers would forever insist on the oneness of religion and politics. He taught that his authority came directly from Allah and acted at the same time as the head of state and of his faith community.

Muhammad's exalted position in Islam and his spiritual significance is acknowledged by all Muslims. In his 1981 Gilford Lectures, "Knowledge and the Sacred", Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the leading proponents of Sufism, said of Muhammad, that it was the function of the Prophet to be not only a spiritual guide, but also the organizer of a new social order with all that such a function implies. He describes Muhammad as a man with "superhuman power." He says, "The very sound of the name Muhammad implies force, a sudden breaking forth of a power which is from God and not just human." Nasr also notes that the prophet did participate in social life in its fullest sense. He married, had a household, was a father and moreover he was ruler and judge and had to also fight many wars in which he had to undergo painful ordeals. Yet the life of Muhammad remains the model for all Muslims. Even in modern times they still seek to base their lives upon that of the prophet. Nasr states, "This end is achieved through the fresh interpretation that each generation makes of his life, through the litanies and chants repeated in his praise and through the celebrations marking his birth or other joyous occasions."

Muhammad: A true Prophet?

Can Christians acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet? At the 1984 Conference of European Churches, meeting to reflect on Christian-Muslim dialogue in Europe, the final statement made the following suggestion: "Christians respect the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. It calls people to repentance in the service of the one God. It is unjust to dismiss Muhammad out of hand as a false prophet. Christians may recognize Muhammad as part of the same prophetic tradition, and in the past some have done so. We must nevertheless ensure that our Muslim friends understand the subtle differences between the two perspectives, for Christians confess that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us."

Who is Muhammad? In AD 610 God sent the archangel Gabriel from above to encounter Muhammad, a businessman who meditated on top of a rocky arid mountain three miles northeast of Mecca. Gabriel's mission was to impart to this 40-year-old a message that God wants all mankind to hear and receive. In other words, Muhammad claimed that he had a revelation from God himself, utterly and universally applicable for

all mankind. Islam, therefore, claims to be the truth, the ultimate word from the God who made the world as to what is true and how we should live. It does not tolerate disbelief in areas it controls.

But why another revelation? Is the Bible not sufficient? According to Islam, the Jews and Christians corrupted their Scriptures and were no longer worshipping Allah properly, so Allah had to send a fresh revelation. In the beginning Muhammad had only a few followers. Very little impact was made upon the people of Mecca over the thirteen years that the new prophet prophesied there. Afterwards, he went to Medina, a town in the region, which rivaled Mecca in social and economic importance. In Medina he proved to be very different from the Muhammad in Mecca. During those earlier years of preaching in Mecca no laws had been enacted. In Medina the prophet became a ruler and established, in effect, a religion-based state, a theocracy. As the "final prophet" Muhammad demanded total obedience of his followers. A Muslim, therefore, must submit to the judgments, teachings and ways of Muhammad. The Koran says, "They can have no faith, until they make you (O Muhammad) judge in all disputes between them, and find in themselves no resistance against your decisions, and accept (them) with full submission" (Sura 4:65). And "He who obeys the Messenger (Muhammad), has indeed obeyed Allah" (Sura 4:80).

The Koran

The text of the Koran is said to be conveyed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel over a twenty-three- year period. Muslims believe it is uncreated, dictated, unchangeable, untouchable, preserved on an eternal tablet in heaven. It is the incarnation of a book. But in Christianity the Word is not a text but a divine person - Jesus Christ Himself. According to the Gospel of John, the Word (as a Person) came down; in the Muslim case, the Word (the Koran) is sent down. There is no question of the Koran being interrogated, evaluated or criticised. Since it conveys words of the original in heaven, there can be no room for error. Those few Muslim scholars who have published thoughtful speculation about the (human) sources of the Koran have found themselves condemned in decrees declaring them to be apostates and beyond the pale of Islam.

The Koran is in its essence a "recitation". Many of "the revelations" were committed to memory upon their "descent". Numerous suras [chapters], on the other hand, were recorded on various bits of parchment, palm leaves, smooth stones, and similar objects. Being principally illiterate, the prophet himself did no writing, he had entrusted most of what had been recorded to his aid. Those reading the Koran for the first time are struck by the apparent disjointed fashion in which the suras are arranged and by the rather odd headings selected for each. It is not an easy book to read. All of its suras are assigned, in their heading, to Mecca or Medina according to where Muhammad was living when they were revealed. Otherwise, chronology is ignored and the Koran is arranged, more or less, from the longest to the shortest sura. Even with specific Meccan or Medinan suras, subject-matters sometimes derive from different times and circumstances. The total number of suras is 114. They vary in length from 287 verses to 3. The verses themselves are of very unequal length; some consist of two words, while others run for nearly half a page. The longer chapters come first and the shortest suras

at the end. The first sura, the longest, relates to the period of Muhammad's role as head of the community Medina. It is a prayer repeated no less than twenty times a day by every Muslim who performs his daily ritual prayers.

What is the relationship of the Koran to the Old and New Testament? Muhammad saw no reason or need to scrutinize the obvious discrepancies between the Koran and the Bible. And even today orthodox Islamic theologians insist that the duty of the faithful is to accept the Koran literally and not to question the tenor or the meaning of the revelations. But Biblical narratives do survive in the Koran, often in a vague and sometimes confusing way, for example, where Muhammad mistakes Miriam, Moses' sister for Mary, Jesus' mother. This error suggests that he derived his knowledge of these accounts and personalities either from uninformed sources or from informants whose views of Christianity were not orthodox. Consequently, it is difficult to understand the presence of material that can be identified as deriving from non-Biblical sources. This leads to the question how Muslims can call the Koran the eternal speech of God when its sources on earth are outside the canonical Old or New Testament.

Arabic was the language in which the archangel Gabriel revealed the Koran to Muhammad. For centuries the faithful, regardless of their native tongue, were to recite their Koran in Arabic. Officially the Koran was not to be translated into other languages because Allah declared to Muhammad: "We have revealed unto thee an Arabic Koran." How then can non-Arabic-reading Westerners read the Koran? Unauthorized translations have come into being in some forty-three different languages. One of the tolerated translations is that of Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, but under the title "*The Meaning of the Glorious Koran.*" This is the translation I use for my references.

(To be continued)

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