

What do we actually know about Muhammad?

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It is notoriously difficult to know anything for sure about the founder of a world religion. Just as one shrine after the other obliterates the contours of the localities in which he was active, so one doctrine after another reshapes him as a figure for veneration and imitation for a vast number of people in times and places that he never knew.

In the case of Muhammad, Muslim literary sources for his life only begin around 750-800 CE (Common Era), some four to five generations after his death, and few Islamicists (specialists in the history and study of Islam) these days assume them to be straightforward historical accounts. For all that, we probably know more about Muhammad than we do about Jesus (let alone Moses or the Buddha), and we certainly have the potential to know a great deal more.

There is no doubt that Muhammad existed, occasional attempts to deny it notwithstanding. His neighbours in Byzantine Syria got to hear of him within two years of his death at the latest; a Greek text written during the Arab invasion of Syria between 632 and 634 mentions that "a false prophet has appeared among the Saracens" and dismisses him as an impostor on the ground that prophets do not come "with sword and chariot." It thus conveys the impression that he was actually leading the invasions.

Muhammad's death is normally placed in 632, but the possibility that it should be placed two or three years later cannot be completely excluded. The Muslim calendar was instituted after Muhammad's death, with a starting-point of his emigration (*hijra*) to Medina (then Yathrib) ten years earlier. Some Muslims, however, seem to have correlated this point of origin with the year which came to span 624-5 in the Gregorian calendar rather than the canonical year of 622.

If such a revised date is accurate, the evidence of the Greek text would mean that Muhammad is the only founder of a world religion who is attested in a contemporary source. But in any case, this source gives us pretty irrefutable evidence that he was an historical figure. Moreover, an Armenian document probably written shortly after 661 identifies him by name and gives a recognisable account of his monotheist preaching.

On the Islamic side, sources dating from the mid-8th century onwards preserve a document drawn up between Muhammad and the inhabitants of Yathrib, which there are good reasons to accept as broadly authentic; Muhammad is also mentioned by name, and identified as a messenger of God, four times in the Qur'an (on which more below).

True, on Arabic coins and inscriptions, and in papyri and other documentary evidence in the language, Muhammad only appears in the 680s, some fifty years after his death (whatever its exact date). This is the ground on which some, notably Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, have questioned his existence. But few would accept the implied premise that history has to be reconstructed on the sole basis of documentary evidence (i.e. information which has not been handed down from one generation to the next, but rather been inscribed on stone or metal or dug up from the ground and thus preserved in its original form). The evidence that a prophet was active among the Arabs in the early decades of the 7th century, on the eve of the Arab conquest of the Middle East, must be said to be exceptionally good.

Everything else about Muhammad is more uncertain, but we can still say a fair amount with reasonable assurance. Most importantly, we can be reasonably sure that the Qur'an is a collection of utterances that he made in the belief that they had been revealed to him by God. The book may not preserve all the messages he claimed to have received, and he is not responsible for the arrangement in which we have them. They were collected after his death – how long after is controversial. But that he uttered all or most of them is difficult to doubt. Those who deny the existence of an Arabian prophet dispute it, of course, but it causes too many problems with later evidence, and indeed with the Qur'an itself, for the attempt to be persuasive.

The text and the message

For all that, the book is difficult to use as a historical source. The roots of this difficulty include unresolved questions about how it reached its classical form, and the fact that it still is not available in a scholarly edition. But they are also internal to the text. The earliest versions of the Qur'an offer only the consonantal skeleton of the text. No vowels are marked, and worse, there are no diacritical marks, so that many consonants can also be read in a number of ways.

Modern scholars usually assure themselves that since the Qur'an was recited from the start, we can rely on the oral tradition to supply us with the correct reading. But there is often considerable disagreement in the tradition – usually to do with vowelings, but sometimes involving consonants as well – over the correct way in which a word should be read. This rarely affects the overall meaning of the text, but it does affect the details which are so important for historical reconstruction.

In any case, with or without uncertainty over the reading, the Qur'an is often highly obscure. Sometimes it uses expressions that were unknown even to the earliest exegetes, or words that do not seem to fit entirely, though they can be made to fit more or less; sometimes it seems to give us fragments detached from a long-lost context; and the style is highly allusive.

One explanation for these features would be that the prophet formulated his message in the liturgical language current in the religious community in which he grew up, adapting and/or imitating ancient texts such as hymns, recitations, and prayers, which had been translated or adapted from another Semitic language in their turn. This idea has been explored in two German works, by Günter Lüling and Christoph Luxenberg, and there is much to be said for it. At the same time, however, both books are open to so many scholarly objections (notably amateurism in Luxenberg's case) that they cannot be said to have done the field much good.

The attempt to relate the linguistic and stylistic features of the Qur'an to those of earlier religious texts calls for a mastery of Semitic languages and literature that few today possess, and those who do so tend to work on other things. This is sensible, perhaps, given that the field has become highly charged politically.

Luxenberg's work is a case in point: it was picked up by the press and paraded in a sensationalist vein on the strength of what to a specialist was its worst idea – to instruct Muslims living in the west that they ought to become enlightened. Neither Muslims nor Islamicists were amused.

The inside story

The Qur'an does not give us an account of the prophet's life. On the contrary: it does not show us the prophet from the outside at all, but rather takes us inside his head, where God is speaking to him, telling him what to preach, how to react to people who poke fun at him, what to say to his supporters, and so on. We see the world through his eyes, and the allusive style makes it difficult to follow what is going on.

Events are referred to, but not narrated; disagreements are debated without being explained; people and places are mentioned, but rarely named. Supporters are simply referred to as believers; opponents are condemned as unbelievers, polytheists, wrongdoers, hypocrites and the like, with only the barest information on who they were or what they said or did in concrete terms (rather as modern political ideologues will reduce their enemies to abstractions: revisionists, reactionaries, capitalist-roaders, terrorists). It could be, and sometimes seems to be, that the same people now appear under one label and then another.

One thing seems clear, however: all the parties in the Qur'an are monotheists worshipping the God of the Biblical tradition, and all are familiar – if rarely directly from the Bible itself – with Biblical concepts and stories. This is true even of the so-called polytheists, traditionally identified with Muhammad's tribe in Mecca. The Islamic tradition says that the members of this tribe, known as Quraysh, were believers in the God of Abraham whose monotheism had been corrupted by pagan elements; modern historians would be inclined to reverse the relationship and cast the pagan elements as older than the monotheism; but some kind of combination of Biblical-type monotheism and Arabian paganism is indeed what one encounters in the Qur'an.

The so-called polytheists believed in one creator God who ruled the world and whom one approached through prayer and ritual; in fact, like the anathematised ideological enemies of modern times, they seem to have originated in the same community as the people who denounced them. For a variety of doctrinal reasons, however, the tradition likes to stress the pagan side of the prophet's opponents, and one highly influential source in particular (Ibn al-Kalbi) casts them as naive worshippers of stones and idols of a type that may very well have existed in other parts of Arabia. For this reason, the secondary literature has tended to depict them as straightforward pagans too.

Some exegetes are considerably more sophisticated than Ibn al-Kalbi, and among modern historians G.R. Hawting stands out as the first to have shown that the people denounced as polytheists in the Qur'an are anything but straightforward pagans. The fact that the Qur'an seems to record a split in a monotheist community in Arabia can be expected to transform our understanding of how the new religion arose.

The prophet and the polytheists

What then are the big issues dividing the prophet and his opponents? Two stand out. First, time and again he accuses the polytheists of the same crime as the Christians – deification of lesser beings. The Christians elevated Jesus to divine status (though some of them were believers); the polytheists elevated the angels to the same status and compounded their error by casting them (or some of them) as females; and just as the Christians

identified Jesus as the son of God, so the polytheists called the angels sons and daughters of God, apparently implying some sort of identity of essence.

The polytheists further claimed that the angels (or deities, as they are also called) were intercessors who enabled them to approach God, a well-known argument by late antique monotheists who retained their ancestral gods by identifying them as angels. For Christians also saw the angels as intercessors, and the prophet was of the same view: his polemics arise entirely from the fact that the pagan angels are seen as manifestations of God himself rather than his servants. The prophet responds by endlessly affirming that God is one and alone, without children or anyone else sharing in his divinity.

The second bone of contention between the prophet and his opponents was the resurrection. Some doubted its reality, others denied it outright, still others rejected the idea of afterlife altogether. The hardliners appear to have come from the ranks of the Jews and/or Christians rather than – or in addition to – the polytheists; or perhaps the so-called polytheists were actually Jews or Christians of some local kind. In any case, the hardliners convey the impression of having made their appearance quite recently, and again people of the same type are attested on the Greek (and Syriac) side of the fence.

The prophet responds by repeatedly rehearsing arguments in favour of the resurrection of the type familiar from the Christian tradition, insisting that people will be raised up for judgment. He adds that the judgment is coming soon, in the form of some local disaster such as those which overtook earlier communities (e.g. Lot's) and/or a universal conflagration. His opponents tease him, asking him why it does not seem to be happening; he persists. At some point the confrontation turns violent and the book is filled with calls to arms, with much fighting over a sanctuary.

By then it is clear that there has been an emigration (*hijra*), though the event itself is not described, and there is some legislation for the new community. Throughout the book there is also much acrimonious debate about the credentials of the prophet himself. But God's unity, the reality of the resurrection and judgment, and the imminence of violent punishment are by far the most important themes, reiterated in most of the *sura* (chapters of the Qur'an).

In sum, not only do we know that a prophet was active among the Arabs in the early decades of the 7th century, we also have a fair idea of what he preached. Non-Islamicists may therefore conclude that the historians' complaint that they know so little about him is mere professional grumpiness. But on one issue it is unquestionably more. This is a big problem to do with Arabia.

A question of geography

The inhabitants of the Byzantine and Persian empires wrote about the northern and the southern ends of the peninsula, from where we also have numerous inscriptions; but the middle was *terra incognita*. This is precisely where the Islamic tradition places Muhammad's career. We do not know what was going on there, except insofar as the Islamic tradition tells us.

It yields no literature to which we can relate the Qur'an – excepting poetry, for which we are again dependent on the Islamic tradition and which is in any case so different in character that it does not throw much light on the book. Not a single source outside Arabia mentions Mecca before the conquests, and not one displays any sign of recognition or tells us what was known about it when it appears in the sources thereafter. That there was a place called Mecca where Mecca is today may well be true; that it had a pagan sanctuary is perfectly plausible

(Arabia was full of sanctuaries), and it could well have belonged to a tribe called the Quraysh. But we know nothing about the place with anything approaching reasonable certainty. In sum, we have no context for the prophet and his message.

It is difficult not to suspect that the tradition places the prophet's career in Mecca for the same reason that it insists that he was illiterate: the only way he could have acquired his knowledge of all the things that God had previously told the Jews and the Christians was by revelation from God himself. Mecca was virgin territory; it had neither Jewish nor Christian communities.

The suspicion that the location is doctrinally inspired is reinforced by the fact that the Qur'an describes the polytheist opponents as agriculturalists who cultivated wheat, grapes, olives, and date palms. Wheat, grapes and olives are the three staples of the Mediterranean; date palms take us southwards, but Mecca was not suitable for any kind of agriculture, and one could not possibly have produced olives there.

In addition, the Qur'an twice describes its opponents as living in the site of a vanished nation, that is to say a town destroyed by God for its sins. There were many such ruined sites in northwest Arabia. The prophet frequently tells his opponents to consider their significance and on one occasion remarks, with reference to the remains of Lot's people, that "you pass by them in the morning and in the evening." This takes us to somewhere in the Dead Sea region. Respect for the traditional account has prevailed to such an extent among modern historians that the first two points have passed unnoticed until quite recently, while the third has been ignored. The exegetes said that the Quraysh passed by Lot's remains on their annual journeys to Syria, but the only way in which one can pass by a place in the morning and the evening is evidently by living somewhere in the vicinity.

The annual journeys invoked by the exegetes were trading journeys. All the sources say that the Quraysh traded in southern Syria, many say that they traded in Yemen too, and some add Iraq and Ethiopia to their destinations. They are described as trading primarily in leather goods, woolen clothing, and other items of mostly pastoralist origin, as well as perfume (not south Arabian frankincense or Indian luxury goods, as used to be thought). Their caravan trade has been invoked to explain the familiarity with Biblical and para-Biblical material which is so marked a feature of the Qur'an, but this goes well beyond what traders would be likely to pick up on annual journeys. There is no doubt, however, that one way or the other a trading community is involved in the rise of Islam, though it is not clear how it relates to that of the agriculturalists of the Qur'an. On all this there is much to be said, if not yet with any certainty.

Three sources of evidence

The biggest problem facing scholars of the rise of Islam is identifying the context in which the prophet worked. What was he reacting to, and why was the rest of Arabia so responsive to his message? We stand a good chance of making headway, for we are nowhere near having exploited to the full our three main types of evidence – the traditions associated with the prophet (primarily the *hadith*), the Qur'an itself, and (a new source of enormous promise) archaeology.

The first is the most difficult to handle; this overwhelmingly takes the form of *hadith* – short reports (sometimes just a line or two) recording what an early figure, such as a companion of the prophet or Muhammad himself, said or did on a particular occasion, prefixed by a chain of transmitters. (Nowadays, *hadith* almost always means *hadith* from Muhammad himself.) Most of the early sources for the prophet's life, as also for the period of his immediate successors, consist of *hadith* in some arrangement or other.

The purpose of such reports was to validate Islamic law and doctrine, not to record history in the modern sense, and since they were transmitted orally, as very short statements, they easily drifted away from their original meaning as conditions changed. (They were also easily fabricated, but this is actually less of a problem.) They testify to intense conflicts over what was or was not true Islam in the period up to the 9th century, when the material was collected and stabilised; these debates obscured the historical nature of the figures invoked as authorities, while telling us much about later perceptions.

The material is amorphous and difficult to handle. Simply to collect the huge mass of variant versions and conflicting reports on a particular subject used to be a laborious task; now it has been rendered practically effortless by searchable databases. However, we still do not have generally accepted methods for ordering the material, whether as evidence for the prophet or for the later doctrinal disputes (for which it will probably prove more fruitful). But much interesting work is going on in the field.

As regards the second source, the Qur'an, its study has so far been dominated by the method of the early Muslim exegetes, who were in the habit of considering its verses in isolation, explaining them with reference to events in the prophet's life without regard for the context in which it appeared in the Qur'an itself. In effect, they were replacing the Qur'anic context with a new one.

Some fifty years ago an Egyptian scholar by the name of Muhammad Shaltut, later rector of al-Azhar, rejected this method in favour of understanding the Qur'an in the light of the Qur'an itself. He was a religious scholar interested in the religious and moral message of the Qur'an, not a western-style historian, but his method should be adopted by historians too. The procedure of the early exegetes served to locate the meaning of the book in Arabia alone, insulating it from religious and cultural developments in the world outside it, so that the Biblical stories and other ideas originating outside Arabia came across to modern scholars as "foreign borrowings," picked up in an accidental fashion by a trader who did not really understand what they meant.

The realisation is slowly dawning that this is fundamentally wrong. The prophet was not an outsider haphazardly collecting fallout from debates in the monotheist world around him, but rather a full participant in these debates. Differently put, the rise of Islam has to be related to developments in the world of late antiquity, and it is with that context in mind that we need to reread the Qur'an. It is a big task, and there will be, indeed already have been, false turns on the way. But it will revolutionise the field.

The third, and immeasurably exciting, type of source is looming increasingly large on the horizon: archaeology. Arabia, the big unknown, has begun to be excavated, and though it is unlikely that there will be archaeological explorations of Mecca and Medina anytime soon, the results from this discipline are already mind-opening.

Arabia seems to have been a much more developed place than most Islamicists (myself included) had ever suspected – not just in the north and south, but also in the middle. We are beginning to get a much more nuanced sense of the place, and again it is clear that we should think of it as more closely tied in with the rest of the Near East than we used to do. The inscriptional record is expanding, too. With every bit of certainty we gain on one problem, the range of possible interpretations in connection with others contracts, making for a better sense of where to look for solutions and better conjectures where no evidence exists.

We shall never be able to do without the literary sources, of course, and the chances are that most of what the tradition tells us about the prophet's life is more or less correct in some sense or other. But no historical interpretation succeeds unless the details, the context, and the perspectives are right. We shall never know as much as we would like to (when do we?), but Islamicists have every reason to feel optimistic that many of the gaps in our current knowledge will be filled in the years ahead.