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Muhammad

and the

Believers

At the Origins of Islam

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Muhammad and the Believers' Movement

Islamic tradition provides a richly detailed narrative of the life of Muhammad, the man all Muslims recognize as their prophet. This narrative is not contemporary but, rather, based on reports that were circulated and collected within the Muslim community during the several centuries following Muhammad's death. As this chapter explores in more detail, these reports contain material of many kinds. Some of them appear to be sober recountings of events, based ultimately on the testimony of eyewitnesses. Others offer miracle stories or improbable idealizations and seem to belong to the realm of legend or religious apologetic. The following pages present, first, a very condensed summary of the traditional biography of Muhammad, setting aside those reports that are clearly legendary. Thereafter, we will discuss some of the problems of this traditional picture and offer an alternative reading of Muhammad's life that takes these problems into account.

The Traditional Biography of Muhammad the Prophet

According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah was born in the West Arabian town of Mecca in the second half of the sixth

century C.E. (some reports say around 570, but different accounts give different dates). He belonged to the clan of Hashim within the tribe of Quraysh that dominated Mecca. He was orphaned at an early age and subsequently raised to adulthood by his paternal uncle, Abu Talib, who was at this time the chief of the Hashim clan.

As discussed earlier, in Muhammad's day Mecca was a town whose inhabitants were heavily involved in two activities: commerce and religion. The caravans organized by Quraysh, and the participation of Quraysh in various trading fairs, brought them into contact with other tribes and communities throughout Arabia! The Quraysh tribe's role as stewards of Mecca's religious rituals, centered on the Ka'ba and other holy sites around Mecca, also gave them contacts with many groups who came to the Ka'ba to do their devotions there, particularly by performing ritual circumambulations in the open area surrounding it. The security that came with Mecca's status as a *haram* was obviously good for commerce, so Quraysh's dual roles, as merchants and stewards of the shrine, were intimately intertwined.

As a young man, Muhammad entered into the commercial and cultic life of Mecca. He married a well-to-do widow, Khadija, who was some years older than he, and managed her caravan trading ventures. As he entered maturity, he became highly esteemed by his fellow tribesmen of Quraysh for his intelligence, honesty, and tactfulness. He also began to feel a periodic need for meditation and took to secluding himself now and then in order to contemplate his life. According to tradition, it was during such a personal retreat, around 610, that Muhammad first began to receive revelations from God, carried to him by the archangel Gabriel. The revelations came to him as intense sounds and visions that so overcame him that he could only lie on the ground, shaking and perspiring, until they were over, after which the words that had been revealed to him were burned indelibly into his memory. These words were eventually written down by his followers and edited together to form the Qur'an

(Koran), Islam's sacred scripture—which is, thus, literally a transcription of the spoken word of God in the view of believing Muslims.

Muhammad was at first terrified by what he had experienced and reluctant to take up the mantle of prophecy that God had thrust on him; but his religious experiences continued and it became clear to him that he could not evade this responsibility. He was also comforted by his wife Khadija, who accepted the veracity of his experiences and so became the first person to believe in his prophetic calling. Muhammad then began to preach publicly the message that was being revealed to him: the oneness of God, the reality of the Last Judgment, and the need for pious and God-fearing behavior. Gradually he began to win the support of some people, who abjured their pagan beliefs and recognized instead the absolute oneness of God and Muhammad's role as a prophet. Some of his earliest followers were close kinsmen, such as his cousin 'Ali, son of Abu Talib, and Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, possibly a relative of Muhammad's mother. Other early followers seem to have been people from the weaker clans of Quraysh and of marginal social groups. A number of prominent Meccans also became early adherents to his message, and many of these came to play central roles in the later life of the community. Notable among them were two men: Abu Bakr, a merchant of the clan of Taym, who became Muhammad's closest confidant; and Abu Bakr's kinsman Talha ibn 'Ubaydallah. Others included 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, a very wealthy member of the powerful clan of Umayya, whose generosity was often put at the prophet's service and who married the prophet's daughters Ruqayya and (after the former's death) Umm Kulthum; and 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Awf of the clan of Zuhra and Zubayr ibn al-'Awwam of the clan of Asad. All of these people would play pivotal roles in the events following Muhammad's death.

Many tribesmen of Quraysh were shocked or disturbed by Muhammad's attack on their ancestral polytheism, the "faith of their fathers," and subjected him and his followers first to ridicule and then to more serious abuse. For a time he was sheltered from this by

the resolute support of Abu Talib, who, as his uncle and head of the clan of Hashim, stood firm in protecting Muhammad. Even a boycott of Hashim by other clans of Quraysh, organized particularly by "Abu Jahl" (the name may be pejorative—"Father of Folly"), chief of the powerful clan of Makhzum, did not cause Abu Talib to hand Muhammad to them as they wished. However, Muhammad's situation in Mecca was becoming increasingly precarious, and a number of his followers reportedly took refuge at this time with the Christian king of Abyssinia to escape persecution.

Muhammad's position in Mecca deteriorated rapidly after the deaths, in close succession, of both Khadija and Abu Talib, his main sources of emotional and social support. Abu Talib was succeeded as head of the Hashim by another of Muhammad's uncles, "Abū Lahab" (perhaps another pejorative—"Father of Flame"), but the latter was not supportive of his nephew and after a time withdrew his protection. This happened probably around 619 C.E. Realizing that most of Quraysh would not soon be won over, Muhammad began to preach his message at periodic markets outside Mecca in order to find other supporters. Initially he met with little success, and he was rebuffed by the leaders of the town of al-Ta'if, about 100 km (about 60 mi) west of Mecca. Around that time, however, he was contacted by a small group of men from the town of Yathrib, a cluster of date-palm oases situated about 325 km (200 mi) north of Mecca. As discussed earlier, Yathrib had long been torn by political strife between the Aws and the Khazraj, rival clans of its dominant tribe, the Banu Qayla. Yathrib's three major Jewish clans, the Nadir, Qurayza, and Qaynuqa', may also have been involved in this strife. The people of Yathrib who sought out Muhammad were yearning for someone to reunify and heal their town; they were impressed by Muhammad's message and embraced it, promising to return to the fair the following year with more people. The next year, a larger group met with Muhammad and invited him to come to Yathrib with his Meccan supporters so that they could establish themselves there as a new

community dedicated to living and worshipping as God demanded, without interference. Shortly thereafter, in 622 C.E., Muhammad and his followers from Mecca made their *hijra* ("emigration" or "taking refuge") to Yathrib—which I will henceforth refer to by its later name, Medina (from *madinat al-nabi*, "city of the prophet"). Muhammad's *hijra* to Medina, because it came to be considered the inception of a politically independent community of Believers, was adopted within a few years of Muhammad's death as marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar (AH 1). The Meccans who had made *hijra* with Muhammad were called *muhajirun*, "Emigrants," while the Medinese who received them came to be known as *ansar*, "Helpers."

Traditional accounts describe Muhammad's life in Medina in great detail, informing us of some events of a personal nature, such as his numerous marriages and the births (and deaths) of his children. Particularly noteworthy among these personal matters was his marriage to the young 'A'isha, daughter of his stalwart supporter Abu Bakr (whom Islamic tradition remembers as his favorite wife of the fifteen or so he eventually took). Also important was his close relationship with his cousin 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, one of the first to follow his message, who married Muhammad's own daughter Fatima. The traditional sources also emphasize Muhammad's founding in Medina of an independent community, including many notices about how he established ritual practices and laid down social guidelines and legal principles for the new community.

But above all the traditional narratives describe the course of Muhammad's political activities in Medina, which by the end of his life resulted in the creation of an autonomous political community that we can consider an embryonic state. There are two grand themes of this process. One is the story of Muhammad's consolidation of political power over Medina itself, which posed a number of distinct challenges to him. These included occasional tensions between the *muhajirun* and the *ansar*, stubborn opposition by some Medinese (called *munafiqun*, "hypocrites"), lukewarm supporters who seem to have worked

against him behind the scenes, and his troubled relations—at once religious, social, and political—with Medina's Jews. The second grand theme of Muhammad's political life in Medina is the story of his prolonged but ultimately victorious struggle with his former hometown, Mecca, and with those members of Quraysh who had resisted his preaching, led now by Abu Sufyan, the new chief of the clan of Umayya. Clearly related to these two themes is a third, the story of his struggle to win the support of pastoral nomadic groups that resided in the vicinity of Medina and, as time went on, with nomadic and settled communities farther afield. They were to prove a crucial component in his construction of a victorious coalition in western Arabia.

Early in his stay in Yathrib/Medina, Muhammad concluded an agreement (or first in a series of agreements) with various clans of the town. This established mutual obligations between him and the Quraysh Emigants on the one hand and Medinese Helpers on the other, including the Jewish clans affiliated with the latter, binding them all together as belonging to a single community (*umma*). We can, following several recent authors, call this agreement the "*umma* document." It has many remarkable features, some of which we will discuss more fully below, but in general it established guidelines for cooperation of the various groups in Medina, including mutual responsibilities in times of war, the payment of blood money and ransoming of prisoners, and above all, the parties' commitment to support one another in times of conflict. (See Appendix A for the full text of the *umma* document.)

Immediately after his arrival in Medina, according to tradition, Muhammad and his followers are said to have marked out a place for collective prayer—the first mosque. (The English word is derived from Arabic *masjid*, "place for prostrations"—pronounced *mesgid* in some Arabic dialects—via Spanish *mezquita* and French *mosquée*.) At first Muhammad and his Believers faced toward Jerusalem in prayer, as the Jews did, but after some time Muhammad ordered that the Believers should conduct prayers facing Mecca instead. This

change of *qibla* (prayer orientation), which is mentioned in the revelation (Q. 2:142–145), may reflect Muhammad's deteriorating relations with the town's Jews, who according to traditional sources were for the most part not won over to his movement.

One source of Muhammad's difficulties with Medina's Jews, who controlled one of Medina's main markets, may have been his desire to establish a new market in Medina to assist the Meccan Emigrants. In spite of this, some of the Emigrants, uprooted from their livelihoods and cut off from the bulk of the network of close kinsmen that would have sustained them at home in Mecca, soon found themselves on the verge of destitution, and there was only so much that the Medinese Helpers could do for them. In desperation, Muhammad sent a few Emigrants out as a raiding party, which ambushed a Mecca-bound caravan at the town of Nakhla. The booty gained was welcome, but the Nakhla raid opened a long struggle between Muhammad and Quraysh and aroused much criticism even among some of his supporters, because it was undertaken during one of the sacred months, when by local tradition violence was supposed to be forbidden—a controversy resolved (among Muhammad's followers, at least) only by the arrival of a Qur'anic revelation justifying it (Q. 2:217).

TEXT OF QUR'AN 2 (BAQARA/THE COW): 217

They ask you about fighting in the sacred months. Say: fighting in it is a serious [sin], but barring [people] from the way of God, and disbelief in Him and in the sacred mosque, and expelling its people from it are more serious in God's eyes. Spreading discord is more serious than killing. They will continue to fight you until they turn you from your religion, if they can. Whoever of you turns back from his religion and dies an unbeliever—their works in this world and the next are to no avail, and they are the companions of the fire, they shall be in it eternally.

A larger group of Muhammad's followers attacked a sizable Quraysh caravan again at a place called Badr (year 2/624), overcoming the contingent of Meccans guarding it and taking much booty despite being outnumbered. This victory must have strengthened both the morale and the economic position of Muhammad's followers and may mark the beginning of a virtual blockade of Mecca by Muhammad and the Medinese. It also evidently left Muhammad feeling secure enough to make the first open attack on Jews who opposed him. A Jewish leader who had mocked him was murdered by Muhammad's followers; then the important Jewish clan of Qaynuqa', who ran Medina's main market, were besieged in their quarter and ultimately, after negotiations, expelled from the city, leaving behind most of their property, which was taken over by Muhamad's followers. The Qaynuqa' withdrew to Wadi al-Qura, north of Medina, and then to Syria.

After their defeat at Badr, the Meccans were more determined than ever to settle scores with Muhammad and his followers. After trading small raids with him, they organized an alliance that attacked Medina itself. In this clash, called the battle of Uhud (3/625), Muhammad's forces suffered defeat and loss of life. Muhammad himself was slightly wounded, but the Meccan alliance came apart on the brink of victory and had to withdraw, leaving Muhammad and his followers shaken but still standing. Following Uhud, the two sides again traded raids, particularly to thwart each other's attempts to win support among nomadic tribes living nearby. Some of these raids were successful for the Medinese; others, such as that against a place called Bi'r Ma'una, resulted in casualties. In his efforts to win tribal allies, Muhammad sometimes had to allow a pagan tribe to cling to its ancestral religion, but many of his allies also embraced his message of monotheism. Muhammad took advantage of the withdrawal of the Meccan forces to turn against a second major Jewish group of Medina, the clan of Nadir, reportedly because some of them had been plotting to kill Muhammad. His followers besieged the

Nadir, who eventually capitulated and withdrew, most of them going to the largely Jewish oasis town of Khaybar, about 230 km (143 mi) north of Medina.

The traditional sources place at this time a long-distance expedition by the Believers in Medina to the north Arabian oasis and trade center at Dumat al-Jandal—fully 700 km (435 mi) north of Medina—but whatever its goal was, it seems to have been inconclusive. More important, Quraysh had once again organized an alliance, even larger than the previous one, and launched another offensive, including a contingent of cavalry, against Muhammad and Medina. In this case, Muhammad and his followers reportedly dug a moat or trench to neutralize the Meccans' cavalry, forcing them to try to reduce Medina by siege. The so-called battle of the Trench (5/627) involved some skirmishing, but after several weeks the Meccan alliance once again began to unravel and Quraysh were forced to withdraw. In this case, too, Muhammad turned on his Jewish opponents in the aftermath of a major confrontation with Quraysh; this time the victims were the last large Jewish clan of Medina, Qurayza, who are said to have had treasonous contact with the Meccans during the siege of Medina. Their fortifications in the city were surrounded by Muhammad's followers, and when they surrendered, they agreed that a former ally of theirs in Muhammad's following should pass judgment on them. His judgment, however, was harsh: He ordered that the men should be executed and the women and children enslaved.

Muhammad now dispatched envoys to various tribes around Medina and further afield and organized several especially poorly understood campaigns to destinations north of Medina—to Dumat al-Jandal (again) and to the southern fringes of Syria, where his freedman Zayd ibn Haritha had gone on trade. Then, according to traditional sources, in 6/628, Muhammad and a large following marched unarmed toward Mecca with the avowed intention of doing the *'umra* or "lesser pilgrimage," which involved performing various rites at the Ka'ba; the fact that they set out without weapons was.

meant to confirm their peaceful intentions. Quraysh, however, were in no mood to allow Muhammad and his followers to come into their town unopposed, given the long hostilities between them and the fact that Muhammad was still blocking the passage of Meccan caravans. They therefore headed him off with a cordon of troops at a place called Hudaybiya, on the borders of the *haram* around Mecca. There, after lengthy negotiations, they concluded an agreement with Muhammad: He would return to Medina without doing the *'umra* and would end his blockade of Mecca in exchange for permission to perform the *'umra* unmolested in the following year. The two parties also agreed to a ten-year truce, during which neither side was to attack the other but each was free to make whatever contacts it wished.

The Hudaybiya agreement seems to mark a turning point in Muhammad's fortunes. Shortly after concluding it, Muhammad organized a large expeditionary force and marched with it on the Jewish oasis of Khaybar; this town had long been a key ally of Mecca in its struggle with Muhammad, but it was not explicitly protected by the agreement. Khaybar capitulated, but its Jewish residents were allowed to remain in order to cultivate the town's extensive groves of palm trees, from the annual crop of which Muhammad now took a share. Muhammad also launched, around this time, numerous raids on still-unsubdued nomadic tribes and sent several raids to the north. One of these, led (again) by Zayd ibn Haritha, penetrated into southern Syria but was repulsed by local Byzantine forces at Mu'ta, in what is today southern Jordan; Zayd was killed in this battle, but most of the force returned intact. A year after the Hudaybiya agreement, Muhammad and his followers made the *'umra* as planned. Around this time, those Believers who had many years before gone to Abyssinia during Muhammad's darkest days in Mecca finally returned to join Muhammad in Medina. Presumably their decision to return reflected Muhammad's and his community's increasingly secure position in Medina.

The Hudaybiya agreement with Quraysh had been for a term of ten years, but only two years later, in 8/630, Muhammad decided that by various actions Quraysh had violated the terms of the agreement. He therefore organized a large armed force (one report says it numbered ten thousand, including perhaps two thousand nomadic allies) and marched on Mecca. Quraysh capitulated without a fight and agreed to embrace Muhammad's message of monotheism; only a handful of Muhammad's bitterest opponents in Mecca were executed, and indeed many Meccan leaders were given important positions in Muhammad's entourage, a measure that dismayed some of his early supporters, both Emigrants and Helpers. Once inside Mecca, Muhammad set about removing from the confines of the Ka'ba shrine its pagan idols, purifying it for its future role as a focus of monotheist worship. In the view of Muslim tradition, the Ka'ba had originally been built by Abraham as a shrine to the one God, so Muhammad was by these actions merely rededicating it to its original monotheistic purpose.

The conquest (really occupation) of Mecca was perhaps the crowning event of Muhammad's political career. But, although his position was now incomparably stronger, he still faced some opposition. The tribe of Thaqif, which controlled the third major town of western Arabia, Ta'if, had long had close ties to Mecca and Quraysh and continued to reject Muhammad's advances. Moreover, Thaqif had as allies some powerful nomadic tribes in their vicinity, such as Hawazin, who were particularly threatening. Shortly after taking Mecca, therefore, Muhammad marched his forces against Thaqif and their Hawazin allies and defeated them at the battle of Hunayn, after which he surrounded Ta'if itself, which eventually capitulated.

Muhammad was now unquestionably the dominant political figure in western Arabia, and in the year or so after Mecca and Ta'if fell, he received delegations from numerous tribal groups in Arabia, both settled and nomadic, who hastened to tender their allegiance to

him. He also organized at this time another major military expedition to the far north, this time directed against the town of Tabuk; its exact goals remain unclear, but it showed Muhammad's continued interest in the north. Muhammad astutely used these late campaigns as a way to secure the loyalty of those powerful leaders of Quraysh who had formerly been his opponents, such as their former leader Abu Sufyan, and his sons Mu'awiya and Yazid, by giving them important commands or extra shares of booty. Moreover, during these campaigns, he increasingly insisted that his able-bodied followers take active part in military service. At this time, too, Muhammad's growing political and military strength enabled him to dispense with the policy of making alliances with pagan tribes—something that had been necessary earlier in order to secure as many allies as possible in his struggle with Mecca. Now he announced a new policy of noncooperation with polytheists; they were henceforth to be attacked and forced to recognize God's oneness or to fight. (See Q. 9:1–16.)

At the end of 10/March 632, Muhammad is said to have performed the *hajj*, or major pilgrimage, to the environs of Mecca. Shortly after his return to Medina, he fell ill and, after several days, died at home, his head cradled in the lap of his favorite wife, 'A'isha (11/632). Following local custom, his body was interred beneath the floor of his house.

The Problem of Sources

This brief sketch of the events of Muhammad's life, although in many ways plausible (and probably in some respects accurate), is nevertheless vexing to the historian. The problem is that this detailed picture of Muhammad's career is drawn not from documents or even stories dating from Muhammad's time, but from literary sources that were compiled many years—sometimes centuries—

later. The fact that these sources are so much later, and shaped with very specific objectives in mind, means that they often do not tell us many things about which we would like to know more; for example, the position of women in society is often reported only incidentally. There is also reason to suspect that some—perhaps many—of the incidents related in these sources are not reliable accounts of things that actually happened but rather are legends created by later generations of Muslims to affirm Muhammad's status as prophet, to help establish precedents shaping the later Muslim community's ritual, social, or legal practices, or simply to fill out poorly known chapters in the life of their founder, about whom, understandably, later Muslims increasingly wished to know everything.

The vast ocean of traditional accounts from which the preceding brief sketch of Muhammad's life is distilled contains so many contradictions and so much dubious storytelling that many historians have become reluctant to accept any of it at face value. There are, for example, an abundance of miracle stories and other reports that seem obviously to belong to the realm of legend, such as an episode similar to the "feeding the multitudes" story in Christian legends about Jesus. The chronology of this traditional material about Muhammad, moreover, is not only vague and confused, but also bears telltale signs of having been shaped by a concern for numerological symbolism. For example, all the major events of Muhammad's life are said to have occurred on the same date and day of the week (Monday, 12 Rabi' al-awwal) in different years. Further, some episodes that are crucial to the traditional biography of Muhammad look suspiciously like efforts to create a historicizing gloss to particular verses of the Qur'an; some have suggested, for example, that the reports of the raid on Nakhla were generated as exegesis of Q. 2:217 (see "Text of Qur'an 2" Sidebar, p. 45). Other elements of his life story may have been generated to make his biography conform to contemporary expectations of what a true

prophet would do (for instance, his orphanhood, paralleling that of Moses, or his rejection by and struggle against his own people, the tribe of Quraysh).

Even if we accept the basic outlines of Muhammad's life as portrayed in traditional accounts, the historian is faced with many stubborn questions that the sources leave unaddressed. (For example, why were the pagans of Medina so readily won over to Muhammad's message, while the Quraysh of Mecca resisted it so bitterly? What exactly was Muhammad's original status in Medina? What exactly was his relationship to the Jews of Medina?) Unfortunately, we have no original documents that might confirm unequivocally any of the traditional biography—no original copies of letters to or from or about Muhammad by his contemporaries, no inscriptions from his day written by members of his community, and so on.

These well-founded concerns about the limitations of the traditional Muslim accounts of Muhammad's life have caused some scholars to conclude that everything in these accounts is to be rejected. This, however, is surely going too far and in its way is just as uncritical an approach as unquestioning acceptance of everything in the traditional accounts. The truth must lie somewhere in between; and some recent work has begun to show that despite the vexing problems they pose, the traditional narratives do seem to contain some very early material about the life of Muhammad. A tolerably accurate and plausible account of the main events of Muhammad's life may someday be possible, when scholars learn more about how to sift the mass of traditional materials more effectively. However, such critical studies are just getting underway today, and for the present it remains prudent to utilize the traditional narratives sparingly and with caution.

Our situation as historians interested in Muhammad's life and the nature of his message is far from hopeless, however. A few seventh-century non-Muslim sources, from a slightly later time than that of

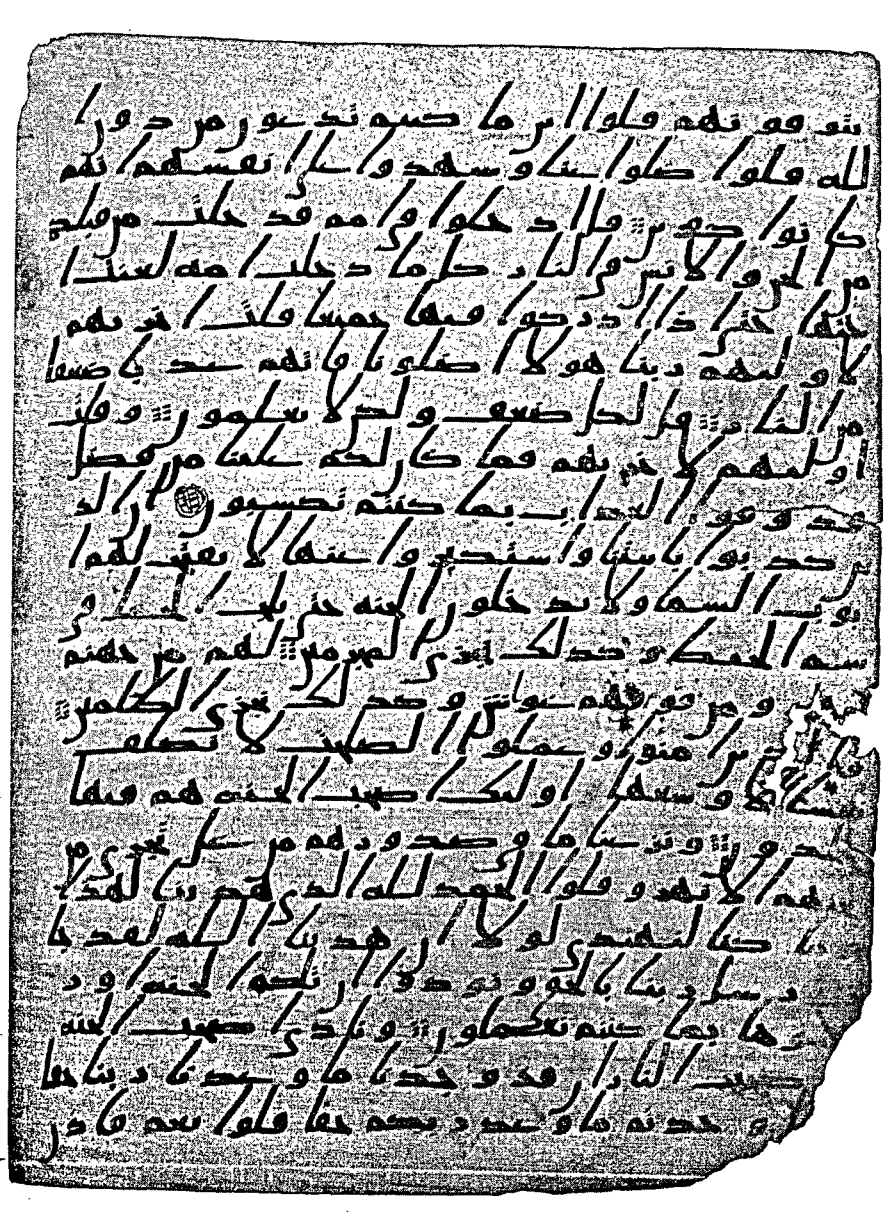
Muhammad himself but much earlier than any of the traditional Muslim compilations, provide testimony that—although not strictly documentary in character—appears to be essentially reliable. Although these sources are few and provide very limited information, they are nonetheless invaluable. For example, an early Syriac source by the Christian writer Thomas the Presbyter, dated to around 640—that is, just a few years after Muhammad's death—provides the earliest mention of Muhammad and informs us that his followers made a raid around Gaza. This, at least, enables the historian to feel more confident that Muhammad is not completely a fiction of later pious imagination, as some have implied; we know that someone named Muhammad did exist, and that he led some kind of movement. And this fact, in turn, gives us greater confidence that further information in the massive body of traditional Muslim materials may also be rooted in historical fact. The difficulty is in deciding what is, and what is not, factual. (See the "Text of Thomas the Presbyter" sidebar in Chapter 3.)

Moreover, the most important source of information about the early community of Believers is still to be discussed: the text of the Qur'an itself, Islam's holy book. For Believing Muslims, the Qur'an is, of course, a transcript of God's word as revealed to Muhammad. Each of its 114 separate, named *suras* (chapters), containing altogether thousands of *ayas* (verses—literally, "signs" of God's presence) is, for the Believer, an utterance of eternal value that exists outside the framework of normal, mundane, historical time. Traditional Muslim exegesis developed an elaborate chronology for the Qur'an, connecting the revelation of each verse to a particular episode in the life of Muhammad—the so-called "occasions of revelation" literature *(asbab al-nuzul)*. This literature, which was closely followed by traditional Western scholarship on the Qur'an, generally divided the text into verses considered, on grounds of both style and content, to hail from either the early Meccan, intermediate Meccan, late Meccan, or Medinese phases of Muhammad's career. Similarly, Muslim tradition

preserves accounts of how the revelation came to take the form of a written book. According to this view, the various revelations that were first burned into the memory of their prophet were memorized by his followers; some passages were then written out by different people in the early community; finally, about twenty years after Muhammad's death, the scattered written and unwritten parts of the revelation were collected by an editorial committee and compiled in definitive written form.

The historian who questions the traditional narratives of Muhammad's life, however, is also likely to have difficulty accepting at face value this account of how the Qur'an text coalesced; but if we reject this account, we are left unsure of just what kind of text the Qur'an is and where it came from. Starting from this point, revisionist scholars using literary-critical approaches to the text have in recent years offered alternative theories on the origins and nature of the Qur'an as we now have it. One has suggested that the Qur'an originated as pre-Islamic strophic hymns of Arabian Christian communities, which Muhammad adapted to form the Qur'an. Equally radical is the "late origins" hypothesis first circulated the late 1970s. According to this view, the Qur'an, far from being a product of western Arabia in the early seventh century C.E., actually crystallized slowly within the Muslim community over a period of two hundred years or more and mostly outside of Arabia, perhaps mainly in Iraq. In the opinion of this theory's advocates, the traditional story of the Qur'an's origins as revelations to Muhammad is merely a pious back-projection made by Muslims of later times who wished to root their beliefs and the existence of their community in the religious experience of an earlier prophetic figure.

If true, the "late origins" hypothesis of the Qur'an, in particular, would have devastating implications for the historian interested in reconstructing Muhammad's life or the beliefs of the early community. But the "late origins" hypothesis fails to explain many features of the Qur'an text, analysis of which suggests that in fact the Qur'an



An Early Qur'an leaf, dated to the first century AH, from San'a', Yemen, covering Q. 7:37–44. Characteristic of its early date are the vertical strokes leaning to the right, the diacritical dots in a row, and many letterforms, which have more in common with monumental inscriptions than later cursive Arabic.

did coalesce very early in the history of Muhammad's community—within no more than three decades of Muhammad's death. For example, meticulous study of the text by generations of scholars has failed to turn up any plausible hint of anachronistic references to important events in the life of the later community, which would almost certainly be there had the text crystallized later than the early seventh century C.E. Moreover, some of the Qur'an's vocabulary suggests that the text, or significant parts of it, hailed from western Arabia. So we seem, after all, to be dealing with a Qur'an that is the product of the earliest stages in the life of the community in western Arabia.

This is not to say that we are all the way back to accepting the traditional view of the Qur'an's origins. Although the Qur'an itself claims to be in a "clear Arabic tongue," many passages in it remain far from clear, even in the most basic sense of knowing what the words might have meant in their original context, whatever it was. It may be that the Qur'an includes passages of older texts that have been revised and reused. The markedly different style and content of diverse parts of the Qur'an may be evidence that the text as we now have it is a composite of originally separate texts hailing from different communities of Believers in Arabia. Some recent studies suggest that the Qur'an text is not only aware of, but even in some ways reacting to, the theological debates of Syriac-speaking Christian communities of the Near East. Whether further work on the text will vindicate the close connection of particular passages in the Qur'an with specific episodes in Muhammad's life, as elaborated by both traditional Muslim and traditional Western scholarship, still remains to be seen. What we can say is that the Qur'an text is demonstrably early.

The Character of the Early Believers' Movement

The fact that the Qur'an text dates to the earliest phase of the movement inaugurated by Muhammad means that the historian can use it

to gain some insight into the beliefs and values of this early community. Later literary sources may then be used, with caution, to elaborate on what these earliest beliefs may have been, but the problem of interpolation and idealization in those later sources makes even their "supporting" role often quite uncertain. It is best, therefore, to stick very closely to what the Qur'an itself says for information.

Basic Beliefs

What, then, does the Qur'an tell us about Muhammad and his early followers? To start, we notice that the Qur'an addresses overwhelmingly people whom it calls "Believers" *(mu'minun)*. In this, it differs from the traditional Muslim narratives and from modern scholarly practice, both of which routinely refer to Muhammad and his followers mainly as "Muslims" (*muslimun*, literally, "those who submit") and refer to his movement as "Islam." This later usage is, however, misleading when applied to the beginnings of the community as reflected in the Qur'an. It is of course true that the words *islam* and *muslim* are found in the Qur'an, and it is also true that these words are sometimes applied in the text to Muhammad and his followers. But those instances are dwarfed in number by cases in which Muhammad and his followers are referred to as *mu'minun*, "Believers"—which occurs almost a thousand times, compared with fewer than seventy-five instances of *muslim*, and so on. Later Muslim tradition, beginning about a century after Muhammad's time, came to emphasize the identity of Muhammad's followers as Muslims and attempted to neutralize the importance of the many passages in which they are called Believers by portraying the two terms as synonymous and interchangeable. But a number of Qur'anic passages make it clear that the words *mu'min* and *muslim*, although evidently related and sometimes applied to one and the same person, cannot be synonyms. For example, Q. 49:14 states, "The bedouins say: 'We Believe' *(aman-na)*. Say [to them]: 'You do not Believe; but rather say,

"we submit" *(aslam-na)*, for Belief has not yet entered your hearts.'" In this passage, Belief obviously means something different (and better) than "submission" *(islam)*; and so we cannot simply equate the Believer with the Muslim, though some Muslims may qualify as Believers. The Qur'an's frequent appeal to the Believers, then—usually in phrases such as "O you who Believe . . ."—forces us to conclude that Muhammad and his early followers thought of themselves above all as being a *community of Believers*, rather than one of Muslims, and referred to themselves as Believers. Moreover, the notion that they thought of themselves as Believers is corroborated by some very early documentary evidence dating from several decades after Muhammad's death. For this reason, I will break with standard scholarly practice and also refer, in these pages, to Muhammad and his early followers as "the community of Believers," or "the Believers' movement." (See "Ecumenism," later in this chapter, for a discussion of the exact early meaning of *muslim*.) For a short while, Muhammad may have called his movement "Hanifism" *(hanifiyya)*, presumably in reference to a vague pre-Islamic monotheism, but this usage does not seem to have become widespread.

If Muhammad and his followers thought of themselves first and foremost as Believers, in what did they believe? Above all, Believers were enjoined to recognize the oneness of God. (*Allah* is simply the Arabic word for "God.") The Qur'an tirelessly preaches the message of strict monotheism, exhorting its hearers to be ever mindful of God and obedient to His will. It rails against the sin of polytheism (*shirk*, literally "associating" something with God)—which, Muslim tradition tells us, was the dominant religious outlook in Mecca when Muhammad grew up there. From the Qur'an's or the Believers' perspective, failing to acknowledge the oneness of God, who created all things and gave us life, is the ultimate ingratitude and the essence of unbelief *(kufr)*. But the Qur'an's strict monotheism also condemns the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as being incompatible with the idea of God's absolute unity: "Those who say

that God is the third of three, disbelieve; there is no god but the one God . . ." (Q. 5:73).

As we have seen, the idea of monotheism was already well established throughout the Near East, including in Arabia, in Muhammad's day, and it has been plausibly suggested that the Qur'an's frequent invective against "polytheists" may actually be directed at trinitarian Christians and anyone else whom Muhammad considered only lukewarm monotheists. Be that as it may, the Qur'an makes it clear that the most basic requirement for the Believers was uncompromising acknowledgement of God's oneness. And, as we shall see, it was from this most fundamental concept, the idea of God's essential unity, that most other elements of true Belief flowed.

Also important to the Believers was belief in the Last Day or Day of Judgment *(yawm al-din)*. Just as God was the creator of the world and of everything in it, and the giver of life, so too will He decree when it will all end—the physical world as we know it, time, everything. The Qur'an provides considerable detail on the Last Day: how it will come on us suddenly and without warning; how just before it the natural world will be in upheaval—mountains flowing like water, the heavens torn open, stars falling; how the dead from all past ages will be brought to life and raised from their graves; how all mankind will be brought before God to face final Judgment; and how we will then all be taken either to a paradise full of delights and ease, or to a hell full of torment and suffering, for eternity. But the Qur'an does not merely describe the coming Judgment for us—above all, it warns us of its approach, enjoining us to prepare ourselves for it by believing truly in God and by living righteously.

From the Qur'an we can also deduce that the Believers accepted the ideas of revelation and prophecy. The Qur'an makes clear that God has revealed His eternal Word to mankind many times, through the intermediacy of a series of messengers (singular, *rasul*) or prophets (singular, *nabi*). (The technical distinction between *rasul* and *nabi* will be discussed more fully later in this chapter.) The Qur'an

offers many stories about, and lessons drawn from, the lives of these messengers and prophets. These include many figures familiar from the Old and New Testament—Adam, Noah, Job, Moses, Abraham, Lot, Zachariah, Jesus, and others—as well as a few otherwise unknown Arabian prophets (Hud, Salih) and, of course, Muhammad himself, to whom the Qur'an was revealed. Indeed, the Qur'an, as the most recent revelation of God's word, obviously supercedes earlier revelations, which were said to have become garbled over time. And the Believers are repeatedly enjoined to refer matters "to God and His messenger" Muhammad. Part of this complex of ideas, too, is the notion of "the book," referring in some cases to the heavenly archetype of God's word, of which the Qur'an is merely an exact transcript, and in other cases apparently to the Qur'an itself or to other, earlier scriptures.

TEXT OF QUR'AN 7 (A'RAF/THE HEIGHTS), 11–18

We created you and gave you form, then we said to the angels: "Prostrate yourselves to Adam!" So they prostrated themselves, except for Iblis—he was not among those who prostrated./He [God] said, "What prevented you from prostrating yourself when I ordered you [to do so]?" He replied, "I am better than he; you created me of fire, but you created him of clay."/[God] said, "Then descend from it [the garden]; you are not entitled to be arrogant in it. Get out; you are surely among the humiliated."/He [Iblis] said, "Grant me a reprieve until the day they are resurrected."/[God] said, "You are reprieved."/[Iblis] said, "Indeed, I shall lie in wait for them on your straight path because you tempted me./Then I will come at them from before them and from behind them and from their right and their left; you will not find most of them grateful [to you]."/[God] said, "Get out of it, despised and banished! Verily, I will fill hell with all of those who follow you."

Believers are also enjoined to believe in God's angels—creatures that assist God in various ways, most importantly by carrying God's word to His prophets at the moment of revelation, by serving as "orderlies" during the Last Judgment, and in various ways intervening in mundane affairs when it is God's will that they do so. Satan (also called Iblis) is, in Qur'anic doctrine, merely a fallen angel who always accompanies man and tries to seduce him into sin (Q. 7: 11–22).

Piety and Ritual

Such, then, were the basic concepts that shaped the Believers' movement: one God, the Last Judgment, God's messengers, the book, and the angels. But the Qur'an makes it clear that to be a true Believer mere intellectual acceptance of these ideas was not sufficient; one also had to live piously. According to the Qur'an, our status as creatures of God demands pious obedience to His word; we should constantly remember God and humble ourselves before Him in prayer. But we should also behave humbly toward other people, who are equally God's creatures; the Qur'an's warnings against self-importance *(takabur)* and its injunctions to help the less fortunate are an important part of its vision of piety, one that projects a strongly egalitarian message that we see reflected in various rituals. Moreover, the Believers seem to have felt that they lived in a sinful age and feared that their salvation would be at stake unless they lived a more righteous life.

What, then, was the piety of the Believers' movement like? First and foremost, the Qur'an makes clear that Believers must engage in regular prayer. This includes both informal prayers requesting God's assistance or invoking His favor (called *du'a'*), and the more formalized ritual prayer *(salat)*, performed at particular times of the day and in a particular way, and preferably in the company of other Believers who, whatever their social station, stood shoulder to shoulder

TEXT OF QUR'AN 11 (HUD/THE PROPHET HUD): 114

And perform ritual prayer at the two ends of the day, and part of the night; indeed, good deeds cancel evil deeds. That is a reminder for those who remember.

to submit themselves as equals before God. References to prayer, injunctions to perform it faithfully, and instructions on when and how to do it are so frequent in the Qur'an, that, as one observer has put it, "prayer is . . . in the Qur'anic vision of the world, the fundamental fabric of religious behaviour."

The Qur'an specifically enjoins prayer before dawn, before sunset, during the night, and during the day (see, for example, Q. 11:114, 17:78–79, 20:130, and 76:25–26). One reference to the "middle prayer" (Q. 2:238) suggests that three daily prayers may have been the standard pattern among the Believers at some point in Muhammad's life, but the Qur'an's references to times when prayer should be performed use varied vocabulary and are not clear in their temporal implications and may reflect different moments in an evolving situation. The systematization of ritual prayers into five clearly defined times—a systematization that occurred in the century after Muhammad's death—does not seem yet to have taken place (at least the Qur'an provides no compelling evidence for such systematization), but the early Believers were in general expected to remain mindful of God throughout the day. Regardless of how many prayers the early Believers performed daily, however, we can glean what it was like from the vocabulary the Qur'an uses in association with ritual prayer. It clearly involved standing, bowing, prostrating oneself, sitting, and the mention of God's name, although the exact mechanics and sequence of the ritual cannot be recovered from the Qur'an alone. Furthermore, the Qur'an refers to the Believers being called to ritual prayer before-

hand and to the need for them to perform ablutions with water before praying. It is, then, absolutely clear that the Believers of Muhammad's day took part in regular ritual prayers that bore strong similarities to later "classical Islamic" prayer, even if the full details of earliest ritual practice remain unclear today.

Another practice that the Qur'an describes as vital for Believers is charity toward the less fortunate in life—another way of bringing home the idea that all humans are fundamentally equal and that whatever differences of fortune we may enjoy are only contingent. This is expressed unequivocally in many Qur'anic passages: ". . . but the righteous person is whoever Believes in God and the Last Day, in the angels and the book and the prophets; who gives [his] wealth, despite [his] love for it, to relatives, orphans, the destitute, the traveler, the beggar, and for [the manumission of ?] slaves; and who performs the ritual prayer and pays the *zakat* . . ." (Q. 2:177).

Later Muslim tradition refers to such charity under the terms *zakat* or *sadaqa*, usually rendered "almsgiving"; these two terms are closely associated with prayer in numerous Qur'anic passages, and later Muslim tradition considers them, like prayer, to be one of the "pillars of the faith" that define a Believer. Recent research suggests, however, that the original Qur'anic meaning of *zakat* and *sadaqa* was not almsgiving, but rather a fine or payment made by someone who was guilty of some kind of sin, in exchange for which Muhammad would pray in order that they might be purified of their sin and that their other affairs might prosper. Indeed, even in the verse just cited, one notes that payment of *zakat* is mentioned *after* prayer, suggesting that it was something different than the giving of wealth to the poor (what we usually mean by almsgiving), which is treated in the verse *before* mention of prayer. This understanding of *zakat* or *sadaqa* as a payment for atonement or purification of sins is clearest in the following verses: "Others have confessed their sins . . . /Take from their property *sadaqa* to cleanse them, and purify [*tuzakki*] them thereby, and pray for them, indeed your prayer is a consolation to them. God is

all-hearing, all-knowing" (Q. 9:102–103; the verb "to purify" is from the same Arabic root as *zakat*. The fact that Believers were sometimes required to make such purification payments, however, underscores how the community was, in principle, focused on maintaining its inner purity, on being as much as possible a community that lived strictly in righteousness, so as to set themselves apart from the sinful world around them and thus to attain salvation in the afterlife. As time went on, it seems that membership criteria became more relaxed, so that anyone who uttered the basic statement of faith would be included, but in doing so they at least theoretically made themselves subject to high standards of conduct.

The Believers were also required, if they were physically able, to fast during daytime hours in the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, Ramadan, and at other times as expiation for sins (Q. 2:183–185). Fasting, particularly at *'ashura'* (the tenth day of the first month), had of course long been practiced by Jews and Christians in the Near East; it may also have been current among adherents of pagan cults in Arabia and was a practice that continued well into Islamic times. It is not clear, however, in what measure this earlier fasting tradition contributed to the Believers' practices. However, in this season the Ramadan fast kept all Believers especially mindful of God, at least in theory, and was a way of binding the Believers together as a community through collective ritual activity. Eventually, the Ramadan fast came to be emphasized and the *'ashura'* fast was relegated to voluntary status.

The Qur'an also makes reference to pilgrimage rituals that the Believers are enjoined to perform. These include both the *'umra* or "lesser pilgrimage," performed about the Ka'ba in Mecca, and the *hajj* or "greater pilgrimage," performed on specified days in the month of Dhu l-hijja in 'Arafat and adjacent places a few miles from Mecca (Q. 2:196–200, 5:94–97.) Pilgrimage to the Ka'ba, including circumambulation and other rituals, had been practiced at the Ka'ba

TEXT OF QUR'AN 2 (BAQARA/THE COW): 183–185

O you who Believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was for those who came before you, that you should be God-fearing [184]. For a specified number of days. But whoever of you is sick, or traveling, [prescribed are] a number of other days. And upon those who are able to do it [but do not], redemption is feeding a poor person; but whoever does a good deed of his own accord, that is better for him, and that you fast is better for you, if you could know. [185] The month of Ramadan, in which the Qur'an was sent down as guidance to the people, and clear evidence of the guidance and the commandments: Whoever of you is present in the month shall fast for it, but whoever is sick or traveling [shall fast] a number of other days. God wishes to make it easy for you, he does not wish to make it difficult. So complete the number [of days] and magnify God because He guided you; perhaps you may be thankful.

in pre-Islamic times, but forms of pilgrimage were also a well-established practice in late antique Judaism and Christianity, and these may also have formed part of the background against which we should view the pilgrimage practices of the early Believers. Yet it seems likely that the pilgrimage was enjoined as a duty on the Believers only in the later years of Muhammad's career in Medina, for the simple reason that Muhammad and his followers in Medina did not have access to Mecca as long as the two towns were locked in open hostilities. It is noteworthy that the *suras* of the Qur'an that are generally dated to the Meccan phase of Muhammad's career make no mention of pilgrimage. We see Muhmmad forcing the issue of pilgrimage, however, in the Hudaybiya expedition of 6/628, when he and a large group of followers marched, en masse but unarmed, toward Mecca intending to perform the pilgrimage. The Believers

were turned back by Quraysh but not before concluding an agreement that gave them permission to make a pilgrimage to Mecca in the following year. Of course, the pre-Islamic pilgrimage rites at the Ka'ba, which were pagan rituals, had to be reinterpreted in light of the Believers' monotheistic views. Muslim tradition claims that the Ka'ba rites were originally established by Abraham, the first monotheist, but subsequently became corrupted by pagan practices. The Believers' pilgrimage was thus portrayed as the restoration of an originally monotheistic practice. The story of Muhammad's occupation of Mecca in 8/630, as we have seen, relates how Muhammad purified the Ka'ba enclosure of the pagan idols that had been introduced into it.

The likelihood that the Believers saw themselves as living in a world beset with sin, from which they wished to differentiate themselves, also finds expression in other, more routine practices that are singled out in the Qur'an for emulation or prohibition. Believers are urged to dress modestly (Q. 24:30–31)—the implication that this was in contrast to those around them is obvious—and are forbidden from eating pork, carrion, and blood (Q. 2:173). They are instructed not to come to prayers while intoxicated (Q. 4:43). General moral guidelines are also frequently encountered. For example, Q. 60:12 prohibits, in a few lines, a whole series of gravely sinful practices that were apparently all too common: associating something with God *(shirk)*, theft, adultery, infanticide, bearing false witness, and disobeying the prophet. Passages such as these suggest, again, that the Believers were concerned with what they saw as the rampant sinfulness of the world around them and wished to live by a higher standard in their own behavior.

The piety that is enjoined on Believers by the Qur'an, then, required them constantly to demonstrate their mindfulness of God: through regular prayer, the doing of good works, proper deportment, and so on. The Qur'an's emphasis on the importance of righteous

TEXT OF QUR'AN 60 (MUMTAHANA/THE WOMAN EXAMINED): 12

O prophet, when Believing women come to you, pledging that they will not associate anything with God, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor bring slanders they have fabricated out of thin air [lit. "between their hands and feet"], nor disobey you in any customary thing, then accept what they pledge and ask God to forgive them, for God is forgiving, merciful.

behavior is so great that we are fully justified in characterizing the Believers' movement as being not only a strictly monotheistic movement, but also a strictly pietistic one. In this respect, the Believers' movement can be seen as a continuation of the pietistic tendency found in Near Eastern religions in the late antique period. Although it makes sense to view the Believers' movement in this general context, it is of course true that the pietism of the Believers' movement, as we reconstruct it from the Qur'an, represents a unique manifestation of this broad trend toward piety, tailored to the Arabian cultural environment. Even though the Believers perceived the world around them to be full of iniquity, the pietism of their movement lacks, at least as a central element, the kind of ascetic orientation that was so prominent in the late antique Christian tradition, especially in Syria and Egypt. True, modesty and humility are enjoined as part of the Qur'an's egalitarian ethos, and wealth is occasionally deemed a snare for the unwary. One passage even hints that children and family may be distractions from the duty of devoting one's thoughts to God: "wealth and sons are the ornaments of the nearer life; but enduring works of righteousness are better before your Lord . . ." (Q. 18:46). But these sentiments are more than counterbalanced by many verses noting that the good things of this life are the result of God's grace

TEXT OF QUR'AN 16 (NAHL/THE BEE): 114–115

So eat of that which God has provided you with as lawful and good, and be thankful for God's bounty, if you serve Him [115]. He has forbidden to you only carrion, and blood, and flesh of the pig, and that which has been consecrated to other than God; but whoever is forced [to eat of these] unwillingly and without going to excess, indeed God is forgiving and merciful.

and are to be accepted as favors he bestows on the Believers: "O you who Believe, do not forbid the good things that God has allowed you, nor go to extremes, for God does not love those who go to extremes" (Q. 5:87). It seems, then, that the iniquity the Believers perceived around them was a purely human or social phenomenon, which in no way implied that the blessings of the natural world were anything other than that—God's blessings. Enjoyment of them, and of many of the joys of society as well, are permissible to Believers, as long as they are enjoyed in moderation—at least, they are not prohibited. Marriage and the raising of children are assumed to be the norm and are not generally presented as incompatible with a righteous life. In short, the Believers' piety is a piety that is meant to function in, and to be part of, the world and of everyday life—not divorced from it in ascetic denial, as in the late antique Christian tradition. In this respect, the Believers' piety resembled more closely the commonsense notions of righteousness that were found in late antique Judaism.

Ecumenism

The Qur'anic evidence suggests that the early Believers' movement was centered on the ideas of monotheism, preparing for the Last Day, belief in prophecy and revealed scripture, and observance of

righteous behavior, including frequent prayer, expiation for sins committed, periodic fasting, and a charitable and humble demeanor toward others. All of these ideas and practices were quite well known in the Near East by the seventh century, although of course in the Qur'an they found a unique formulation (and one in a new literary idiom, Arabic). The earliest Believers thought of themselves as constituting a separate group or community of righteous, God-fearing monotheists, separate in their strict observance of righteousness from those around them—whether polytheists or imperfectly rigorous, or sinful, monotheists—who did not conform to their strict code.

On the other hand, there is no reason to think that the Believers viewed themselves as constituting a new or separate religious confession (for which the Qur'anic term seems to be *milla*, Q. 2:120). Indeed, some passages make it clear that Muhammad's message was the same as that brought by earlier apostles: "Say: I am no innovator among the apostles; and I do not know what will become of me or of you. I merely follow what is revealed to me; I am only a clear warner" (Q. 46:9). At this early stage in the history of the Believers' movement, then, it seems that Jews or Christians who were sufficiently pious could, if they wished, have participated in it because they recognized God's oneness already. Or, to put it the other way around, some of the early Believers were Christians or Jews—although surely not all were. The reason for this "confessionally open" or ecumenical quality was simply that the basic ideas of the Believers and their insistence on observance of strict piety were in no way antithetical to the beliefs and practices of some Christians and Jews. Indeed, the Qur'an itself sometimes notes a certain parallelism between the Believers and the established monotheistic faiths (often lumped together by the Qur'an in the term "people of the book," *ahl al-kitab*; Q. 48:29).

Closer examination of the Qur'an reveals a number of passages indicating that some Christians and Jews could belong to the Believers'

movement—not simply by virtue of their being Christians or Jews, but because they were inclined to righteousness. For example, Q. 3:199 states, "There are among the people of the book those who Believe in God and what was sent down to you and was sent down to them . . ." Other verses, such as Q. 3:113–116, lay this out in greater detail. These passages and other like them suggest that some peoples of the book—Christians and Jews—were considered Believers. The line separating Believers from unbelievers did not, then, coincide simply with the boundaries of the peoples of the book. Rather, it cut across those communities, depending on their commitment to God and to observance of His law, so that some of them were to be considered Believers, while others were not.

Believers, then, whatever religious confession they may have belonged to—whether (non-trinitarian) Christians, Jews, or what we might call "Qur'anic monotheists," recent converts from paganism—were expected to live strictly by the law that God had revealed to their communities. Jews should obey the laws of the Torah; Christians those of the Gospels; and those who were not already members

TEXT: QUR'AN 3 (AL 'IMRAN/THE FAMILY OF 'IMRAN): 113–116

Among the people of the book are an upright company; they recite God's verses through the night while prostrating themselves. They Believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin kindliness and forbid abominations, and hasten to do good things. These are among the righteous ones. For no good thing that they do will be passed over without thanks; for God knows the pious. But those who disbelieve, neither their wealth nor their children will be of any help to them against God. Those are the companions of hellfire; they shall be in it forever.

of one of the preexisting monotheist communities should obey the injunctions of the Qur'an. The general term for these new Qur'anic monotheists was *muslim*, but here we must pause for a moment to discuss in more detail the exact meaning of the words *muslim* and *islam* in the Qur'an.

The notion that the early community of Believers of Muhammad's day included pious Christians and Jews is, of course, very different from what the traditional Muslim sources of later times tell us. In later Islamic tradition, right down to the present, "Islam" refers to a particular religion, distinct from Christianity, Judaism, and others, and "Muslim" refers to an adherent of this religion. These terms are indeed derived from the Qur'an, but their meaning, as used by later tradition, has undergone a subtle change. When, for example, one reads the Qur'anic verse "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, rather he was a *muslim hanif* and not one of the *mushrikun*" (Q. 3:67; the Arabic text reads *hanifan muslima*n), it becomes clear that *muslim* in the Qur'an must mean something other than what later (and present) usage means by "Muslim": for one thing, *muslim* in the sentence is used as an adjective modifying the noun *hanif* (the meaning of which itself remains in dispute—perhaps a pre-Islamic term for "monotheist"). The basic sense of *muslim* is "one who submits" to God or "one who obeys" God's injunctions and will for mankind, and of course also recognizes God's oneness. In other words, *muslim* in Qur'anic usage means, essentially, a committed monotheist, and *islam* means committed monotheism in the sense of submitting oneself to God's will. This is why Abraham can be considered, in this Qur'anic verse, a *hanif muslim*, a "committed, monotheistic *hanif*." As used in the Qur'an, then, *islam* and *muslim* do not yet have the sense of confessional distinctness we now associate with "Islam" and "Muslim"; they meant something broader and more inclusive and were sometimes even applied to some Christians and Jews, who were, after all, also monotheists (Q. 3:52, 3:83, and 29:46). But, we can readily

TEXT OF QUR'AN 29 ('ANKABUT/THE SPIDER): 46

Do not debate with the people of the book except by what is best (i.e., with courtesy?)—except those of them who do evil. Say, "We believe in what was revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one, and to him we submit."

understand how these Qur'anic words, *islam* and *muslim*, could subsequently have acquired their more restrictive, confessional meanings as a new faith distinct from Christianity and Judaism. Those Believers who were Christians or Jews could always be identified as such, but a Believer who had formerly been a polytheist could no longer be called *mushrik*, so the only term that was applicable to her, once she had embraced monotheism and observed Qur'anic law, was *muslim*. And, with time, the term *muslim* came to be used exclusively for these "new monotheist" Believers who followed Qur'anic law.

Besides the Qur'an, there is additional evidence for the idea that some Jews, at least, were members of Muhammad's community. Although we have until now eschewed reliance on the traditional Muslim sources, which are later than the Qur'anic era, the agreement between Muhammad and the people of Yathrib described earlier, known as the *umma* document, seems to be of virtually documentary quality. Although preserved only in collections of later date, its text is so different in content and style from everything else in those collections, and so evidently archaic in character, that all students of early Islam, even the most skeptical, accept it as authentic and of virtually documentary value.

One passage in the *umma* document reads, "The Jews of the tribe of 'Awf are a people [*umma*] with the Believers; the Jews have their *din* [law?] and the *muslimun* have their *din*. [This applies to] their

clients [*mawali*] and to themselves, excepting anyone who acts wrongfully and acts treacherously, for he only slays himself and the people of his house" [Serjeant transl. Para C2a, with modifications]. In other words, this and many other passages in the *umma* document seem clearly to confirm the idea that some of Medina's Jews made an agreement with Muhammad in which they were recognized as being part of the *umma* or community of Believers. The term *muslim* in this passage also probably refers to those Believers who followed Qur'anic law (rather than the Jews, who as the document says, had their own law.)

The *umma* document raises many perplexing questions in view of the traditional sources' description of Muhammad's relations with the Jews of Medina. For example, whereas the traditional sources describe in great detail his conflicts with the three main Jewish clans of Medina—the Qaynuqa', Nadir, and Qurayza—none of these clans is even mentioned in the *umma* document. How are we to interpret their omission from the document? Is the *umma* document's silence on them evidence that the document was only drawn up late in Muhammad's life, after these three Jewish tribes had already been vanquished? Or were there once clauses (or other documents) that were simply lost or that were dropped as irrelevant after these tribes were no longer present in Medina? Or should we interpret this silence as evidence that the stories about Muhammad's clashes with the Jews of Medina are greatly exaggerated (or perhaps invented completely) by later Muslim tradition—perhaps as part of the project of depicting Muhammad as a true prophet, which involved overcoming the stubborn resistance of those around him? These and many other questions remain to be resolved by future scholarship. We can note here, however, that later Muslim tradition mentions a number of Believers of Muhammad's day who were of Jewish origin—that is, they are described as "converts" from Judaism to Islam. We may wish to ask whether in fact these figures were converts; might they have been simply Jews

who, without renouncing their Judaism, joined the Believers' movement, and so were subsequently dubbed "converts" by later traditionalists for whom the categories of Believer and Jew had in the meantime become mutually exclusive?

Recognizing the confessionally ecumenical character of the early Believers' movement as one that was open to piety-minded and God-fearing monotheists, of whatever confession, requires us to revise our perceptions of what may have happened in various episodes during the life of Muhammad (to the extent that we wish to accept the reconstructions of his life as related by the traditional sources). For example, parts of the traditional story of Muhammad's life, involving his clashes with certain groups of Jews, have led some scholars to see Muhammad's preaching and movement as in some way specifically anti-Jewish. This is especially true of the story of the ugly fate of the clan of Qurayza, members of which were executed or enslaved following the battle of the Trench. But in view of the inclusion of some Jews in the Believers' movement, we must conclude that the clashes with other Jews or groups of Jews were the result of particular attitudes or political actions on their part, such as a refusal to accept Muhammad's leadership or prophecy. They cannot be taken as evidence of a general hostility to Judaism in the Believers' movement, any more than the execution or punishment of certain of Muhammad's persecutors from Quraysh should lead us to conclude that he was anti-Quraysh.

Muhammad's Status in the Community

Traditional narratives describe how Muhammad was invited to Yathrib/Medina to serve as arbiter of disputes between feuding tribes there, particularly the Aws and Khazraj and their Jewish allies. The selection as arbiter of an outsider—one not belonging to any of the feuding parties—who was recognized as being of upright character was not unusual in the Arabian context. The numerous

Qur'anic verses that enjoin hearers to "obey God and His apostle," or merely to obey the apostle, presumably reflect his role as arbiter. There is no reason to think that Yathrib's important Jewish tribes were at the start any less willing to accept him as arbiter, and as noted above, the Jews were included as part of the new, unified community in the *umma* document. Muhammad's role as political leader, then, probably posed little problem for Jews or Christians of Muhammad's day.

More difficult to assess, however, is the status of Muhammad himself in the religious ideology of the Believers' movement. The Believers, as we have seen, belonged to a strongly monotheistic, intensely pietistic, and ecumenical or confessionally open religious movement that enjoined people who were not already monotheists to recognize God's oneness and enjoined all monotheists to live in strict observance of the law that God had repeatedly revealed to mankind—whether in the form of the Torah, the Gospels, or the Qur'an. But what did the Believers perceive Muhammad's role to be, and in particular, how might this understanding have affected the willingness of Jews or Christians who heard Muhammad's message to join the Believers' movement?

Once again, our only sure source of evidence for approaching this question is the Qur'an, which offers many specific passages about Muhammad and his religious status. A number of different words are applied to Muhamamad in the Qur'an; he is called, above all, messenger or apostle *(rasul)*, that is, God's messenger, and prophet *(nabi)*. Whether these two terms are to be considered synonyms is not clear, but in at least one verse (Q: 33:40), where he is called "apostle of God and seal of the prophets," both terms are applied to him simultaneously. In Q. 7:157, they seem to be essentially interchangeable: "... Those who follow the messenger, the *ummi* prophet . . ." He is called the prophet who is foretold in the Torah and Gospels (Q. 7:94). He is also called a bearer of good tidings *(mubashshir)*, a warner *(nadhir)*—particularly a warner of the coming

Last Judgment—and occasionally, a witness *(shahid)* or inviter/summoner *(da'i)*, one who invites others to believe. He is described frequently as the recipient of inspiration or revelation *(wahy)*, charged with bringing to those around him what was revealed to him. The process of inspiration or revelation itself is called "sending down" (usually *tanzil*) and is clearly identified as having divine origin (for example, see Q. 11:14). The substance of what was sent down is described variously as the Qur'an (Q. 6:19, 12:3, and 42:7), the book (29:45, 3:79, 6:89, 18:27, 35:31, and 57:26), wisdom (3:79, 6:89, 57:26, and 17:39), prophecy (3:79, 6:89, and 57:26), knowledge of hidden things (3:44, 12:102, and 11:49), and knowledge that God is one (Q. 11:14 and 18:110).

Muhammad thus claimed to be not only inspired in some way, but truly a prophet bringing a revealed scripture, just as earlier prophets had done. He was even called "seal of the prophets," that is, the final one in a long series of recipients of God's revelation. Those who followed Muhammad were expected to believe not only in God and the Last Day, but also in Muhammad's claim to prophecy and in the validity or authenticity of what was revealed to him (Q. 5:81). How contemporary Jews and Christians would have received the claim that Muhammad was a prophet bearing divine revelation is harder to assess.

As we have seen, the notion that prophecy was still alive in the world seems to have survived in various parts of the Near East in the centuries before the rise of Islam, although we still know far too little about it. Such ideas seem to have been widespread in Arabia; later Muslim tradition remembers a number of Arabian "false prophets" who emerged in widely scattered parts of the peninsula in Muhammad's time. The concept of prophecy that we find in the Qur'an, including the notions of a series of prophets and of a "seal of the prophets," is similar to that found in some Jewish-Christian sects of the early centuries C.E., from which it spread to other groups, such as the Manicheans. Muhammad's

prophetic activity may thus have seemed quite unexceptional to people who shared such ongoing expectations of periodic outbursts of prophetic activity. Yet, certain aspects of his teaching would doubtless have been more difficult for Christians and Jews to accept. The small number of Qur'anic verses that explicitly attack the idea of the Trinity (as defaulting from strict monotheism) would have posed an insurmountable obstacle for a committed trinitarian Christian; and some Jews may have balked at the idea that Muhammad, whom they knew and could see and hear, was to be put on the same plane as their revered patriarchs of old—Abraham, Moses, David, and so on.

Yet, when considering this question we must remember that it is much easier for us, thinking about these events almost fourteen centuries later, to be aware of the full implications of such contradictions and tensions. We must remind ourselves that in Muhammad's day, most people who joined his Believers' movement were probably illiterate; and even if they could read, they did not have a copy of the Qur'an to examine, as those parts that were known in all likelihood were known mostly from recitation of memorized passages. They did not have the advantage that we have today, of being able to comb patiently through the Qur'an text in its entirety in search of passages that might be particularly problematic. Indeed, it is fair to assume that most of the early Believers probably knew only the most basic and general religious ideas we today can find articulated in some detail in the Qur'an. That God was one, that the Last Day was a fearful reality to come (and perhaps to come soon), that one should live righteously and with much prayer, and that Muhammad was the man who, as God's apostle or prophet, was guiding them in these beliefs—that was probably all that was known to most people of Muhammad's day, even to many dedicated participants in the Believers' movement itself. And these notions would have posed few problems for Christians or Jews.

Apocalypticism and Eschatological Orientation

Another feature of the early Believers' movement, and one central to its evident dynamism and ability to mobilize its participants, was its eschatological orientation. We have already seen that one of the central ideas that Believers held was the reality of the Last Judgment. Some passages in the Qur'an suggest that this was more than simply the idea that the Judgment (also called "the Last Day" or simply "the Hour") would happen in some indeterminate, distant future. Rather, certain passages suggest that the community of Believers expected the Last Day to begin soon—or, perhaps, believed that the "beginning of the End" was already upon them. This kind of apocalyptic outlook is typically associated with movements that perceive great sinfulness in the world and that draw a sharp division between good and evil—which, as we have seen, the Believers did. They commonly articulate these ideas, moreover, in what one scholar of apocalyptic thought has described as "easily visualized scenes and strongly-drawn characters," such as we find plentifully in the Qur'an.

The idea that the Last Day was near is mentioned explicitly in several verses: "People ask you about the Hour. Say: Knowledge of it is only with God, but what will make you realize that the Hour is near? (Q. 33:63); "Truly we have warned you of a punishment near, a day on which a man shall see what his hand has done before, and [on which] the unbeliever says, 'I wish I were dead!'" (Q. 78:40). Moreover, the incessant warnings to repent and be pious in preparation for the rigors of the Last Judgment, which are such a pronounced feature of many of the shorter chapters of the Qur'an, imply very strongly that the Hour is perceived to be nigh. But other passages state explicitly that, although near, the exact time of the Judgment is known only to God (Q. 7:187).

As for the nature of the Hour itself, the Qur'an, as noted previously, describes it in often terrifying detail. Its arrival will be signaled by numerous portents that display unequivocally the transcendent

might of God and the transient quality of everything in His created world, the permanence of which we take for granted. So, on that day, when the trumpet is sounded, the stars will fall and grow dark, the heavens will be torn open, the mountains will simply vanish, flowing away like sand or water. The seas will boil and burst forth. There will be deafening noise as the physical world comes apart. People will be in complete confusion; no one will ask after his own loved ones, newborns will be neglected by their mothers, children will become grey-haired like the elderly. The graves of the deceased will be opened and the dead raised up, and they will march forth to face the Judgment of their Lord. The angels will come down from on high, bearing God's throne. Then the Judgment itself will begin; the righteous will feel no fear and their faces will shine with joy, but the wicked and unbelievers will feel complete terror and despair and will faint or be convulsed with weeping. Each person's deeds will be assessed and weighed in the balance, and each person rewarded or punished accordingly. The unbelievers will be rounded up and dragged through fire on their faces, on their way to the eternal torments of a fiery hell, while the righteous will go to a garden full of greenery, shade, rushing brooks, delicious food and drink, and beautiful companions.

The Qur'an's unmistakable emphasis on the Last Judgment—a concept that is closely intertwined with the notions of God's oneness and His role as creator of all things—reflects the Believers' conviction that the Hour was imminent, which was the motive force behind the Believers' intense focus on piety and living righteously. Convinced that the world around them was mired in sin and corruption, they felt an urgent need to ensure their own salvation by living in strict accordance with the revealed law, as the Judgment could dawn at any moment. Here one senses in the Qur'an a slight tension, however, between the idea of the individual's ultimate responsibility for his belief and piety, which is emphasized repeatedly, and the notion that the individual can best attain a righteous life in a community of other

Believers—that is, a hint that one's salvation was enhanced by being a communal enterprise. A few passages in the Qur'an suggest that, at the Last Judgment, religious communities may be judged collectively (Q. 16:84–89). Hence the individual's fate is partly decided by his membership in a Believing community or in a sinful one—such as the poor souls who on the Day of Judgment will be led down to hell by Pharaoh, the Qur'anic archetype of the sinful, oppressive leader (cf. Q. 11:98–99).

Some question whether the Believers really did focus on the coming End, pointing to the Qur'an's extensive passages that regulate such matters as inheritance, the punishment of torts, and the like. In their view, these passages seem to reflect a concern for the here and now, not for the afterlife. But the two sets of concerns are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, one who believes that the End is nigh and that one's salvation in the afterlife depends on the righteous conduct of his community would, for this very reason, pay meticulous attention to the details of social conduct in the community. The very prevalence of these "here and now" rulings in the Qur'an, in other words, may be merely another reflection of an end-time mentality among the early Believers.

For the early Believers, then, the terrifying expectation of a Judgment soon to come made them intent on constructing a community of the saved, dedicated to the rigorous observance of God's law as revealed to His prophets. It was a community that followed closely the leadership of the latest prophet, Muhammad; they believed that his guidance, more than any other thing, would ensure their individual and collective salvation when the End suddenly came.

But this is not all. We noted earlier that traditional Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an, and many contemporary studies of it as well, divide the Qur'an text broadly into "Meccan" and "Medinese" verses, according to when in Muhammad's life a particular verse is thought to have been revealed. If we choose to accept this division, an interesting fact emerges: The overwhelming majority of the in-

tensely apocalyptic verses are clustered in Meccan verses. The Medinese verses, by comparison, seem much less explicitly absorbed with warning of the Last Judgment and do not indulge in such potent apocalyptic imagery as do the Meccan verses; on the other hand, the Medinese verses contain the majority of the Qur'an's "legal" material, regulations and rulings on social and personal issues presumably intended as guidelines for the Believers' new "community of the saved." Scholars sometimes suggest that this reflects the fact that, in Medina, the community had grown larger and hence needed social regulation, whereas in Mecca the religious message had been imperative. It seems just as likely, however, that the early Believers were convinced that, by establishing their community in Medina, they were ushering in the beginning of a new era of righteousness, and hence that they were actually witnessing the first events of the End itself. It is possible, then, to conjecture that they thought that the events leading to the Last Judgment were actually beginning to unfold before their very eyes. We have noted that some passages in the Qur'an express an apocalyptic eschatology and speak of the many portents that would herald its arrival; but other verses describe those telltale portents as already happening: "Are they waiting for anything but the Hour that will come to them suddenly? For its portents have already come . . ." (Q. 47:18); "The Hour has drawn nigh, the moon is split in two!" (Q. 54:1). Still other passages portray the Believers as already beginning to realize the events of the Judgment, which included, it seems, the vanquishing of sinful communities by the righteous and the transfer of sovereignty to the Believers. As Q. 10:13–14 states: "We destroyed generations before you when they acted oppressively while their apostles brought them proofs, yet they did not Believe. Thus do we repay a guilty people. Then we made you successors in the land after them, so we may see how you behave."

As a result of this process, the Believers would literally inherit the Earth from the sinful, just as the followers of earlier prophets had

done: in Q. 14:13–14, for example, Moses is told how God will drive Pharaoh and the evildoers out of their lands and "settle you in the land after them." A Qur'anic passage that exegetes traditionally connect with the battle of the Trench, after which Muhammad's followers occupied the properties of the Qurayza Jews, provides an example contemporary with the prophet's time: "God repulsed those who had disbelieved in their rage; they attained no good. God was sufficient for the Believers in combat: God is strong and mighty./And those people of the book who had backed them [i.e., they backed the unbelievers], he brought them down from their fortresses, and cast terror in their hearts; some you kill, and some you take captive./And he made you inherit their land and homes and property, and land you have never trodden. God is powerful in all things" (Q. 33:25–27). The notion that God's reward and punishment affects not only one's fate in the afterlife but also one's fate here on Earth could suggest that this change of fortune for the Believers might be part of the dawning Judgment scenario.

For those Believers who fully accepted Muhammad's mission, this complex of ideas, which combined the displacement of unbelieving opponents from their property with God's plan for the End of Days, must have been a powerful motivator to engage in positive action—military if necessary—to vanquish unbelief in the world and to establish what they saw as a God-guided, righteous order on Earth. This brings us to the final feature of the early Believers' movement we wish to consider: its militancy.

Militancy

As the preceding remarks suggest, another characteristic of the early Believers' movement of which the Qur'an provides evidence was its militancy or activist orientation, for which the Qur'anic term is *jihad*. In the Qur'an, *jihad* seems to be a voluntary, individual commitment to work "in the cause of God," (literally, "in the path of

God," *fi sabil allah*), not yet the classic doctrine of religious warfare that would crystallize in later Islamic law (by the eighth century C.E.). It was not enough for the Believers to be merely pious in their own lives and complacent about the world; they were also to strive actively to confront, and if possible to root out, impiety in the world around them. Q. 4:95, for example, reads, "Those Believers who remain passive [literally, "who sit"], other than those who are injured, are not on the same plane with those who strive in the way of God with their property and their selves." This "striving" *(jihad)* sometimes meant working tirelessly to realize righteousness in his or her own life, but it also meant that the Believer should try to spread knowledge of what God has revealed (Q. 3:187), and should actively "command what is good and forbid what is evil, and Believe . . . in God" (Q. 3:110). Other Qur'anic verses, however, take a much more aggressive stance. Q. 9:73 commands the Believers to "strive against the unbelievers and hypocrites and to treat them roughly." In another, Muhammad is actually instructed to incite the Believers to fight against unbelief (Q. 8:65) and even to "make great slaughter in the earth" in the struggle against unbelievers (Q. 8:67). Nor are the prophet and the Believers to seek pardon for the *mushrikun.* Their sin of denying God's oneness was so abominable in God's sight that showing mercy to them was not possible: "It is not for the prophet and those who Believe to ask forgiveness for the *mushrikun,* even if they are close relatives . . ." (Q. 9:113).

It is a distinctive feature of Qur'anic discourse, however, that many of its most uncompromising indictments of unbelief and impious behavior are conjoined with mitigating clauses that temper their apparent harshness and provide an opening for a more flexible approach. For example, verses 5 and 6 of the Qur'an's ninth chapter, *Surat al-tawba,* which is generally one of the most uncompromising and militant in the whole Qur'an, begins with passages ordering the Believers to capture or kill unbelievers by every means, but it then pulls back rather abruptly and commands that unbelievers should be

allowed to go unharmed if they repent or if they ask the Believers for protection. This use of "escape clauses" is characteristic of the Qur'an and seems to be its way of providing for the flexibility that is needed in practical situations in life. On the one hand, Believers should try to coerce unbelievers into believing when possible, but, on the other, one should not be fanatical and must make allowances for the realities of a given situation and for the behavior of the individual unbeliever. It seems to be advising its hearers that leniency may, in certain cases, be more effective than brute force and that a range of policies is most effective in pursuing the one goal of universal recognition of God.

The Qur'an thus displays a considerable variety of opinions on the question of activism or militancy, ranging from an almost pacifistic

TEXT OF QUR'AN 9 (TAWBA/REPENTANCE), 1–6

[1] A disavowal (*bara'a*) from God and His apostle [addressed] to those *mushrikun* with whom you had concluded an agreement. (2) Go about in the land for four months, but know that you do not weaken God, rather God disgraces the ungrateful (*kafirun*). (3) An announcement from God and His Apostle to the people on the day of the greater pilgrimage: God disavows the *mushrikun*, and his apostle [likewise], (4) except those *mushrikun* with whom you concluded an agreement, and who have not failed you in anything and have not aided anyone against you; fulfill your agreement with them to this term: verily, God loves the [God-] fearing. (5) [But] when the sacred months are over, then kill the *mushrikun* wherever you find them. Seize them, besiege them, ambush them in every way—but if they repent, and do the prayer, and bring *zakat*, let them go their way. God is forgiving, merciful. (6) And if one of the *mushrikun* asks you for protection, grant him protection so that he may hear God's word, then deliver him to his refuge—that is because they are a people who do not know.

quietism, in which only verbal confrontation is allowed, through permission to fight in self-defense, to full authorization to take an aggressive stance in which unbelievers are not only to be resisted but actually sought out and forced to submit. Muslim tradition has construed this range as evidence of a smooth progression occurring over Muhammad's lifetime and corresponding to the gradually increasing strength and security of the Believers' community. Recent work, however, has shown that these different injunctions may reflect the divergent attitudes of different subgroups that coexisted simultaneously within the early community of Believers. Although, as noted above, the classic doctrine of *jihad* was not yet formulated, it also seems clear that by the end of Muhammad's life the dominant attitude in the community had become the legitimation of, and the exhortation to pursue, ideological war. Unbelievers were now to be sought out and fought in order to make them submit to the new religious ideology of the Believers' movement—even though the other, less aggressive, positions were still held by some. It is important to remind ourselves here, however, that the Qur'an speaks of fighting unbelievers, not Christians or Jews, who were recognized as monotheists—*ahl al-kitab*—and at least some of whom, as we have seen, were even numbered among the Believers.

By the end of Muhammad's life, then, the Believers were to be not merely a pietist movement with an emphasis on ethics and devotion to God, but a movement of militant piety, bent on aggressively searching out and destroying what they considered practices odious to God (especially polytheism) and intent on spreading rigorous observance of God's injunctions. Although the Qur'an never uses the phrase, this sounds like a program aimed at establishing "God's kingdom on Earth," that is, a political order (or at least a society) informed by the pious precepts enjoined in the Qur'an and one that should supplant the sinful political order of the Byzantines and the Sasanians. There are some grounds for believing that another expression of this activist orientation was the notion of *hijra*. In the

traditional sources, *hijra* is interpreted mildly to mean "emigration" (used, as we have seen, particularly to refer to Muhammad's move from Mecca to Medina). But closer examination of the uses of the word *hijra* in the Qur'an (and, as we shall see, in some later sources as well) suggests that *hijra* had a broader range of meanings. For one thing, there is some evidence that *hijra* required leaving a nomadic life. In this sense, the Believers' movement was one based in towns and settlements, for it was only there that the full ritual demands of the faith could be properly observed. This may be why the Believers, when they spread outside of Arabia after the prophet's death, seem to have become known to the peoples they contacted as *muhajirun* (Syriac *mhaggraye*; Greek *agarenoi*). On another level, *hijra* meant taking refuge with someone in order to escape oppression—hence the traditional sources' references to some early Believers' *hijra* to Abyssinia. In a related sense, there are also Qur'anic references to those who "make *hijra* to God and His apostle" to escape from a sinful environment (Q. 4:100). But those passages that speak of "making *hijra* in the way of God" imply that *hijra* is roughly equivalent to *jihad*, "striving," which is also done "in the way of God," and several passages associate *hijra* with leaving home for the purpose of fighting (Q. 3:195, 22:58). Indeed, *hijra* in this larger sense may have served as the decisive marker of full membership into the community of Believers, much as baptism does for Christians: "Verily, those who have Believed and made *hijra* and strive [*yujahidun*] in God's way with their property and themselves, and those who gave asylum and aided [them]—those shall be mutual helpers of one another. But those who have Believed and [yet] have not made *hijra*, they have no share in the mutual assistance [of the others], until they make *hijra* . . ." (Q. 8:72).

Muhammad was an inspired visionary who lived in western Arabia in the early seventh century and who claimed to be a prophet re-

ceiving revelations from God. He inaugurated a pietistic religious movement that we can best call, following its adherents' own usage, the "Believers' movement." The testimony of the Qur'an reveals the basic tenet of this movement to have been insistence on the oneness of God and absolute rejection of polytheism, or even of a lukewarm commitment to monotheism. Because many, if not most, of the people of the Near East were already ostensibly monotheists, the original Believers' movement can best be characterized as a monotheistic reform movement, rather than as a new and distinct religious confession. Nevertheless, the Believers seem to have had a clear sense of being a unique community founded on observance of God's revelations and unified, perhaps, by the notion of *hijra*.

The Believers also were convinced of the imminence of the Last Judgment, and, feeling themselves surrounded by corruption and sin, they strove to form themselves into a righteous community so as to attain salvation on Judgment Day. Hence the movement was one of intense piety, demanding of all Believers strict observance of God's revealed law. As this movement was at the start not yet a "religion" in the sense of a distinct confession, members of established monotheistic faiths could join it without necessarily giving up their identities as Jews or Christians; "New monotheists" who had just given up paganism were expected to observe Qur'anic law, but Believing Jews could follow the injunctions of the Torah and Christians the injunctions of the Gospels. (As we have seen, some Christian groups especially engaged in stringent, even ascetic, religious observance on the eve of Islam.) Toward the end of Muhammad's life, the piety of the Believers' movement became increasingly militant, so that the Believers more and more interceded in the sinful world around them, engaging in *jihad* in an effort to establish a righteous order and to spread what they considered to be true Belief. This activist or militant quality eventually came to include confronting unbelievers militarily—fighting or striving "in

the path of God" (*fi sabil allah*, as the Qur'an states)—in order to vanquish unbelief. The Believers may even have felt that they were witnessing, in the military successes that are traditionally reported to have come in Muhammad's last years, the beginnings of the great events leading up to the Last Day; for among these events would be their victory and the establishment of their hegemony, replacing the sinful polities around them. Thus they would inherit the Earth and establish in it a righteous, God-guided community that could lead humanity to salvation when the Judgment scenario reached its culmination. This is not entirely an unfamiliar program, for there is something in the Believers' aim of bringing all of mankind to salvation that is reminiscent of the Byzantines' objectives of bringing everyone in the world to what they considered the true faith; and, in both cases, this objective was to be achieved either by mission or, if necessary, by war.

Having examined what the early Believers' movement was, it is also important to consider here what it was not. It is often alleged—or assumed—that Muhammad and the Believers were motivated by a "nationalist" or nativist impetus as "Arabs," but this identity category did not yet exist, at least in a political sense, in Muhammad's day, so it is misleading to conceive of the Believers as constituting an "Arab movement." The Qur'an makes it clear that its message was directed to people who conceived of themselves as Believers, but being a Believer is not related to ethnicity. The term *a'rab* (usually meaning "nomads") is used only a few times in the Qur'an, and mostly seems to have pejorative overtones. The Qur'an does refer to itself a few times as an "Arabic Qur'an," but this seems to be a linguistic designation, perhaps an indication of a certain form of the spoken language we today call Arabic.

Nor was the Believers' movement primarily an effort to improve social conditions. It is true that the Qur'an often speaks of the need to have pity on the poor, widows, and orphans, among others, but these social actions are enjoined because compassion for others is

one of the duties that come with true Belief in God and His oneness. The social dimensions of the message are undeniable and significant, but they are incidental to the central notions of the Qur'an, which are religious: Belief in the one God and righteous behavior as proof of obedience to God's will.