

“There is a lot of confusion about Islam and the Qur’an. Confused by the apparent similarities between the Qur’an and the Bible, many Christians have drawn erroneous conclusions and devised unbiblical approaches to Muslims. If you have ever been confused, read this book; it will clear your mind. What I love about the book is that while it is compassionate and loving toward Muslims, and acknowledges the similarities, it does not obscure the reality of fundamental differences. Dr. Bennett will challenge you to engage Muslims effectively by sharing with them the truth in love.”

—Georges Housney,  
president, Horizons International;  
author of *Engaging Islam*

“In *The Qur’an and the Christian*, Matthew Bennett invites and equips Christians to read the Qur’an with an informed understanding, in order to better understand and share the gospel with their Muslim neighbors. Warning readers about the dangers of focusing on similarities between the Bible and the Qur’an without comprehending real and profound differences, Bennett argues—with great erudition—that knowing how the Qur’an bends the worldview of its followers away from biblical truth is an ‘essential first step’ to introducing Muslims to the Jesus of the Bible. This book is an outstanding tool to help Christians understand the spiritual worldview of Muslims and share the love of Christ with them.”

—Mark Durie,  
senior research fellow, Arthur Jeffery Centre for the Study of Islam,  
Melbourne School of Theology;  
director, Institute for Spiritual Awareness

“Written with a comfortable mastery of the subject, Matthew Bennett’s *The Qur’an and the Christian* is a well-articulated, charitable work of solid scholarship. Designed to enhance meaningful discussions with one’s Muslim neighbors, it also serves as an excellent introduction to Islam. Bennett leaves no doubt about the important differences between the Qur’an and biblical revelation, but helpfully opens the door to understand how Muslims think, especially about Christians and the Bible.”

—Ant Greenham,  
retired professor of missions and Islamic studies, Southeastern Seminary;  
coauthor of *Muslim Conversions to Christ:  
A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts*

“Matthew Bennett’s newest study is one more example of his deep understanding of Islam, rigorous scholarship, and sincere passion for Christ. What a wonderful guide for Christians who seek to reflect the image of Christ to their Muslim neighbors!”

—Ayman S. Ibrahim, PhD,  
Bill and Connie Jenkins Professor of Islamic Studies,  
and director, Jenkins Center for the Christian Understanding of Islam

“This book is an excellent extension of some of the things Muslim practitioners have been telling us at the Heart for Muslims conference in New York City. However, it is more academic while still accessible to a layperson. Definitely, a must-read for pastors in urban areas. It portrays a realistic perspective of Muslims/Islam: it doesn’t try to cover up differences but to understand, making it a good book for Muslim scholarship. It provides a good emphasis on why and how Christians should read the Quran, along with helpful commentary on how to understand the Quran, which makes it a valuable resource for missions, evangelism, and academics.”

—Dr. Alfonse Javed,  
executive director of Heart for Muslim Conference, NYC;  
author of *The Muslim Next Door*

“In *the Qur’an and the Christian*, Matthew Bennett takes a deep dive into Islam’s holy book. In this helpful work, the author skillfully enters into the Muslim worldview through the prism of the Qur’an. Simultaneously fascinating and frightening, the Qur’an provides the clearest window into the Muslim mind. Most Christians, even missiologists, avoid actually studying Islam’s holy book in detail. The author shows that Christians omit such analysis at their peril. Thankfully, Matthew Bennett provides a trustworthy guide for the church to understand the Qur’an which is the key to evangelizing Muslims for Christ. I wholeheartedly recommend that each missionary, pastor, and layman interested in understanding and reaching Muslims for Jesus read this outstanding book.”

—Robin Dale Hadaway,  
senior professor of missions,  
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, MO

“The Qur’an is one of the world’s most important books since it is the fundamental source of rituals, creeds, ethics, and laws for Muslims worldwide. Yet the Qur’an is also an extremely foreign and confusing scripture to most Christians. Matthew Bennett’s *The Qur’an and the Christian* is a valuable guide, providing readers with easy access to this most challenging scripture. Bennett especially helps us recognize how differently words and concepts vital to a true understanding of the gospel—such as sin, atonement, and salvation—function within the Qur’an. He also shows us how very differently God is presented in the Qur’an from the Bible. His basic concern is to enable Christians to present the gospel with clarity, and he provides many helpful suggestions along that line. Bennett effectively demonstrates some of the more significant ways the Qur’an subverts biblical truth and, to his credit, he does so without rancor or acrimony, out of a sincere desire to see Muslims receive God’s grace. Bennett’s guide will prove very useful to anyone serious about understanding Muslims and communicating the gospel effectively to them.”

—Mark Robert Anderson,  
author of *The Qur’an in Context: A Christian Exploration*



# The Qur'an and the Christian

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK INTO  
THE BOOK OF ISLAM FOR  
FOLLOWERS OF JESUS



MATTHEW AARON  
BENNETT



KREGEL  
ACADEMIC

*The Qur'an and the Christian: An In-Depth Look into the Book of Islam for Followers of Jesus*

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*To Anabelle, Elliot, and Oliver.  
May you grow up in the gospel and be used by the Lord to bring  
it to the ends of the earth.*





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## PREFACE

**A**s a Christian attempting to discuss the sacred text and religious faith of my Muslim friends, I approach this task from a posture of caution and with a desire to exhibit charity. I recognize within myself the human desire to validate my own faith and, if unchecked, this desire could incline me toward a biased presentation of my conversation partners.

At the same time, I also am committed to the Christian message of salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Any alternative message and worldview that distorts or denies that good news is something that is incompatible with the biblical worldview that I believe to be objectively true. Therefore, in this book I intend to walk the line between presenting my understanding of my Muslim friends and their beliefs in ways that they would recognize as accurate while also being clear to demonstrate where their claims and beliefs diverge from biblical teaching.

While some might contend that exposing areas of presumed common ground as superficial is detrimental to the cause of loving our Muslim neighbors, I beg to differ. I believe that an accurate presentation of the differences between these two faiths is the best way to cultivate an honest understanding of Islam and to maintain a Christian commitment to the gospel of Jesus. If we take the time and invest the labor required to understand the formative influences shaping our neighbor's worldview, we prove ourselves to be concerned to understand their convictions rather than settling for shallow agreement over assumed similarities.

This book is my humble attempt to help Christians avoid the tendency to hastily agree with superficially similar beliefs that we have not taken the time to understand. I have benefitted from the work and insight of many scholars, global Christians, and friends who have helped me to deepen in my love for my Muslim neighbors while seeing increasingly divergent worldviews. While there are too many to list exhaustively, I would specifically like to extend my gratitude to Ayman Ibrahim, Gabriel Said Reynolds, Mark Anderson, Mark Durie, and Gordon Nickel for their insightful, charitable, and scholarly contributions that have shaped my thinking and approach to many of these matters through their writings and, for some, through personal interactions. I am grateful for you, brothers. I am also grateful for the work of the late Evelyne Reisacher, whose dedication to ministry among Muslims is characterized by the title of one of her final volumes before she passed into glory: *Joyful Witness in the Muslim World*.

I hope that this investigation of the Qur'an will consolidate some of the valuable insights I have gleaned from these and many others. I recognize that I am standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before me and have been supported by those beside me, so I credit any beneficial aspects of this project to that host of contributors to my thinking while also taking responsibility for any deficiencies or infelicities herein as my own shortcomings.

If you are reading this book as a Christian, I want to say thank you for your engagement with this material. I also want you to know that I am praying for you, that this book would be helpful in your thinking and fruitfully formative in your engagement with your Muslim friends. I am praying that you would deepen in your love for Muslims and also in your conviction that the Qur'an obscures and undermines the gospel of Jesus. And would it be that God would use you to speak meaningfully and beautifully to your Muslim friends of the hope that there is in the biblical Jesus, as a result of your investment in working through this book.



## INTRODUCTION

*This is indeed [a Book] sent down by the Lord of all the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit upon your heart (so that you may be one of the warners), in a clear Arabic language. It is indeed [foretold] in the scriptures of the ancients.*

Qur'an 26:192–196

**T**raditional Islamic theology teaches that the Qur'an is a book like no other. Though it is only considered to be authentic in its original Arabic form, it commends itself to all of humankind as guidance and as a reminder of the ways of God. Muslims contend that the Qur'an exhibits its truth and power through its scientific insight, its ethical teaching, and its incomparable beauty. In fact, stories of non-Muslims converting to Islam as a result of simply hearing the beauty of the Qur'an recited proliferate throughout the Muslim world.

Believing it to be the heavenly and incorruptible record of God's revealed will, Muslims view the Qur'an as a merciful gift to humanity

from God. Indeed, to the believing Muslim, the Qur'an is a truly unique book. Different audiences, however, respond to the purported uniqueness of the Qur'an in a variety of ways.

### A VARIETY OF APPROACHES: BELIEVERS, SCHOLARS, AND MISSIONARIES

For believing Muslims, the Qur'an's uniqueness proves its message persuasive. For secular scholars, on the other hand, this claim proves historically questionable. For Christian witnesses among Muslim populations, it proves problematic. Though this book will consider all three audiences and their approaches to the Qur'an, it is this final category of readers—Christian witnesses—who are likely to benefit most from a broad consideration of Islam's sacred text.

The present book is an attempt to listen to the insights gleaned by various readers of the Qur'an—believing adherents, skeptical scholars, and Christian communicators. In a way, it might be seen to offer *introductions* to the Qur'an in the plural rather than presenting a singular, monolithic approach. Yet the purpose of this multi-perspectival introduction is not simply to provide a survey of the field. Rather, by including each of these perspectives, this book intends to equip Christian readers with a better understanding of what the Qur'an is, how to read it, and what influence the Qur'an has had on their Muslims neighbors. By taking all of these perspectives together, a Christian will be better equipped to communicate the biblical Gospel to their Muslim friends.

In an effort to encourage this understanding, the following chapters attempt to approach the Qur'an from a posture of charity, seeking to hear it speak its own message in its own voice. Such an approach should not be understood as an endorsement of the Qur'an's message. Rather, this posture encourages a Christian to listen to the Qur'an closely in order to understand how and where it employs language, concepts, and narratives that appear to be shared with the Bible, yet which function within the Qur'an to promote its own distinct message and concerns. Such awareness will help a Christian witness to discern and distinguish common ground from that which leads down a theologically divergent path.

## TO THE CHRISTIAN READER OF THE QUR'AN

Though this book urges Christians to familiarize themselves with the Qur'an, a few issues must be made clear from the outset. First of all, the teaching of the Qur'an cannot be reconciled with the biblical Gospel without doing violence to both. Though the pluralistic character of our day bristles at such a suggestion, attempts to make the message of Islam and Christianity commensurate fail to account for the actual beliefs held by members of each faith. Consider the words of Islamic scholar, Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami:

Let us recall two of the major doctrines of Christianity: Original Sin and Atonement. The former is the automatic inheritance of every human, being the progeny of Adam, whilst the latter embodies the belief that God sacrificed His only begotten Son as the sole means of absolving this Sin. The Qur'an categorically rejects both.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Muslims themselves recognize that although the Qur'an claims to continue the true biblical message, it is diametrically opposed to central doctrines taught therein. Thus, we do a better job of both respecting our Muslim neighbor's beliefs and maintaining the integrity of the biblical message when we are willing to acknowledge that Islam and Christianity diverge.

Second, the Arabic language as it is spoken today is indelibly shaped by Qur'anic theology. Since the writing of the Qur'an appears to be the first occasion that the Arabic language was used to record a substantial text, the implicit and explicit definitions given to words as they appear in the Qur'an have born influence on the subsequent use of the language.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in order to communicate biblical concepts such as God, sin, humanity, and eschatology to

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1 Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'anic Text: From Revelation to Compilation* (Lahore, Pakistan: Suhail Academy, 2005), 307.

2 For a fascinating discussion on these issues, see Sidney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Muslims, one must be conscious of the effect that the Qur'an bears on such language, whether one is speaking in Arabic or expressing these ideas in English.

Third, if you pick up the Qur'an expecting it to read like the texts with which you are familiar, you will likely encounter frustration. The Qur'an is not simply a Muslim version of the Bible. It does not contain much narrative or history. Rather, it is primarily didactic material, instructing believers through repetition concerning the importance of remembering God, submitting to his will, and striving toward upright living.

As you read the Qur'an, let me encourage you to actively fight the temptation to skip over seemingly repeated phrases and ideas. Semitic literature often uses repetition to highlight those things that are of central importance to the text. Try to discover why the Qur'an is concerned to highlight this particular material and whether or not it presents these concepts in a way that conflicts with biblical teaching.

Finally, though Western readers have been notorious for their less-than-charitable descriptions of the Qur'an as a text, I would encourage a Christian reader of the Qur'an to undertake this task as an act of neighborly love. The concepts, words, and phrases contained in this book have likely impressed themselves on your Muslim neighbor from the day they were born through to the present. By studying this book, you not only learn about how your Muslim neighbor views the world, you also show him or her that you care.

Reading the Qur'an will allow you to have increasingly engaged, meaningful conversations in which your questions and disagreements come not from a secondhand account of what the Qur'an teaches but from your own encounter of its message. Your Muslim neighbor will likely appreciate your efforts, and you will have more credibility in their eyes when you say that you have compared the Qur'an and the Bible and remain convinced of the beauty of the Gospel. Likewise, as you read the Qur'an, it may provide you opportunities to naturally invite your Muslim neighbor to consider reading the Bible.

## TO THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATOR

As mentioned above, the uniqueness of the Qur'an can prove problematic for Christian communicators. As you read the Qur'an, some of the problems that arise may present themselves to you in the form of questions: How should a Christian view this book that lays claim to biblical characters who are barely recognizable in its accounts? Where does shared vocabulary indicate shared concepts? More troublingly, where does it obscure differences? And what role does the Qur'an play in shaping our evangelism and discipleship?

The final question above might raise some eyebrows among readers familiar with some of the intramural missiological discussions regarding various contextualization strategies from the CAMEL Method to Insider Movements. We will address questions regarding the legitimacy of such strategies in due course. For the moment, however, I want to simply contend that the Qur'an and its language must inform the manner by which we discuss the Gospel with our Arabic-speaking friends. If we are ignorant of the Qur'an and its message, we will likely struggle to understand why our Muslim neighbors misunderstand us when we speak of the atonement offered through the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah.

In order to illustrate this claim, consider the fact that the previous sentence alone employs four instances of biblical language that are in conflict with Qur'anic concepts yet are expressed by the same vocabulary. The words *atonement*, *Gospel*, *Jesus*, and *Messiah* all appear in the Qur'an, with irreconcilably different meanings associated with them. In order to make disciples, we must ensure that what we intend to communicate is actually understood. Thus, one of the primary purposes for writing this book is to begin to acquaint Christian witnesses with the ways that the Qur'an has influenced the theological language necessary for communicating the Gospel among Muslim peoples.

## METHODOLOGY: TRADITION, SCHOLARSHIP, AND MISSION

In order to provide a broad a treatment of the Qur'an and its influence, this book will approach the sacred text of Islam from the three

perspectives mentioned above. More specifically, part one approaches the Qur'an from the perspective of a confessional audience in order to provide a summary of a traditional Islamic view of the role of the Qur'an in Islam, its origins, and its content. Such a presentation will help to provide a glimpse of the worldview framework that the Qur'an constructs for Muslims.

Though perhaps an obvious statement, it should be noted that this traditional perspective will not characterize the understanding of every Muslim community. With a global population of nearly two billion adherents, Islam is certainly not monolithic, and a variety of confessional Muslim approaches to the Qur'an might be taken.<sup>3</sup> By restricting myself to the most common traditions, I admit my inability to adequately represent many of the interesting approaches to the Qur'an taken by minority Muslim communities. Yet for the purposes intended herein, my priority is to offer as broad a representation of Islamic understanding as possible.

In order to provide the most common understanding, I will predominantly draw on the accounts from the Sunni traditions (*Sunnah*) and those recorded the biography of Muhammad's life (*Sirat Rasul Allah*, hereafter *Sira*). Unless otherwise noted, the material will be drawn from Sunni accounts, due to the fact that Sunni expressions of Islam account for approximately 90 percent of the world's population of Muslims. Where appropriate, I will use footnotes to direct the reader to additional resources that are concerned to explore issues in greater depth than is permitted by the scope of this current project.

Following the traditional treatment, part two approaches the Qur'an from the perspective of contemporary critical scholarship. This section aims to provide some context for how the last hundred years of secular scholarship have questioned the veracity of the traditional narratives surrounding the origins of the Qur'an. Through such an investigation, the reader will become acquainted with some of the

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3 See the helpful chapter by Evelyne Reisacher, "Defining Islam and Muslim Societies in Missiological Discourse," in *Dynamics of Muslim Worlds*, 219–41 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).



most pressing textual issues that appear to suggest a different audience than is presumed by traditional Islamic history.

Though these chapters will present information that is sometimes used to construct a polemic against Islam, this book is not interested in such an endeavor. Instead of utilizing the findings of critical scholarship to discredit the Qur'an, they will be used to encourage a reader to hear its message more clearly. By hearing its message clearly, we will begin to identify the places that our Gospel presentations must labor more rigorously to ensure communication occurs.

Finally, in light of parts one and two, the third part of this book will offer some missiological reasons that a Christian should be familiar with the Qur'an. These chapters will address both why and how a Christian witness should read the Qur'an. Ultimately, this book argues that it is crucial for a Christian disciple-maker to understand the Qur'an in order to effectively communicate biblical truths and the gospel to their Muslim friends and neighbors.

### PURPOSE: INSPECTING BRIDGES WITHOUT BURNING THEM

As I write this, Western nations all around the world are struggling with how to view Muslim refugees who are streaming across their borders. Western churches within those nations are also embroiled in their own debates regarding how to interact with their newly arrived Muslim neighbors. Unfortunately, the many political issues that attend immigration and diversity discussions can often overshadow some of the Great Commission opportunities presented by these people movements.

In the midst of such discussions, many who view the influx of Muslim peoples as an opportunity for the church to both embody and proclaim the Gospel through hospitality and compassion have urged Christians to find common ground with Muslims. In so doing, some have used the language of crossing bridges of commonality to Islam. Using such language, Christians are urged to view apparently common ethical and theological common ground as a bridge to understanding the similarities between themselves and their Muslim friends.

My prayer is that through this book I might add my voice to those who are encouraging a compassionate and intentional engagement with Muslims—not only with these communities of newly arrived displaced people but also with the Muslims who have long lived as our neighbors, coworkers, and friends. At the same time, I also pray that this book might help to clarify where exactly our common ground exists and where some of the apparently shared theological concepts actually set us on divergent trajectories.

While myriad bridges to friendships with Muslims exist, Christians should be quick to inspect bridges constructed of apparent theological similarity before crossing them. If this book achieves its goal, the reader will gain an ability to ask helpfully informed, conversation-deepening questions of their Muslim neighbors. Most of these questions must be asked at the very places that appear to be points of commonality.

Highlighting the underlying differences between Islam and Christianity may seem discourteous to Western readers raised in politely pluralistic societies. It may even seem counterintuitive to a Christian seeking to establish friendly relations with Muslim communities—all the more so when encouraged to probe beyond apparent agreement to discover dissimilarity. Yet by uncritically embracing superficial similarity, one actually inhibits the process of mutual understanding.

In the end, this book does not intend to encourage boorish Christians who stubbornly refuse to admit that there is any commonality between Christianity and Islam. Nor do I hope it promotes nitpicking every word our Muslim friends say. Instead, I hope that we begin to ask good questions, listen well to the answers, and learn how to clearly define and communicate the way the Bible uses the words that also appear in the Qur'an. Might it be that we learn, not to burn nor to uncritically cross bridges of apparently shared theological concepts, but to inspect them with missiological wisdom and with biblical precision. Ultimately, the purpose of this book is to help Christians deepen friendships, promote understanding, and clarify the biblical Gospel for our Muslim friends and neighbors.

PART ONE  
THE QUR'AN  
AS REVELATION





# 1



## THE EVENT OF THE QUR'AN

*In the Name of God, the Merciful, the  
Compassionate. Recite in the Name of your  
Lord who creates; creates the human from a  
clot. Recite, for your Lord is the Most Generous,  
who teaches by the pen, teaches the human what  
he does not know.*  
Qur'an 96:1–5

According to Islamic tradition, the first verses of the Qur'an that the angel Jibril revealed to Muhammad are found in Qur'an 96:1–5.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, these five verses prepare the reader for the major themes with which the rest of the Qur'an concerns itself. These verses introduce the creator as a beneficent and merciful sovereign. They depict humanity as the result of God's creative act. And they demonstrate that a life rightly lived consists of learning God's teaching.

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1 A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1982), 106.

On the other end of the spectrum, many commentators believe that the final words of the Qur'an that Muhammad received are found in Qur'an 5:3: "Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed my blessing on you, and I have approved Islam for you as a religion."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Qur'an concludes its teachings with a transcendent affirmation of Islam as the perfection of human religion. What lies between these two passages suffices to instruct all of humanity on how to live a life that is in keeping with God's revealed will.

As you may have already noticed, the first verses and the final verse are not where one expects to find them. Most readers are accustomed to finding the first events of a book on the first page, and the final events on the last page. That this is not the case with the Qur'an provides an important initial observation about how different the Qur'an is from other works.

In order to draw out these differences, we must consider the Qur'an from a variety of angles. The first part of this book will primarily lean on traditional Islamic accounts of the reception, function, and miracle of the Qur'an. As a component of this approach, the current chapter looks at the event of the Qur'an as God's final and incorruptible communication of the divine will to humanity.

Understanding the traditional perspective requires investigation into the body of material known as the *Sunnah*. These extra-qur'anic records consist of Muhammad's biography (known as the *Sira*), traditional accounts of Muhammad's explanation and exhibition of qur'anic living (*hadith*), and some of the earliest qur'anic commentators (*tafsir*). This material is the only available means of reconstructing the historical context surrounding the Qur'an, because the Qur'an itself contains very little historical narrative and admits only the slightest hints of its chronology.<sup>3</sup>

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2 See also, Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an* (Miami: Convivium, 2009), 85.

3 Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9. While noting the tendency of scholars and believers to trust the *Sunnah* as historically reliable, Reynolds argues that the biography of Muhammad should not be understood as history. Rather, it should be viewed as a product of qur'anic exegesis, and should not be used to interpret the Qur'an since such an approach is simply a circular argument. Part 2 of this book will revisit this idea in more detail.

As such, the Qur'an proves unique in a variety of ways. Recognition of these distinctions is vital for a Christian as they engage their Muslim friends and neighbors lest they make the mistake of assuming the Qur'an to be the Muslim equivalent of the Bible. In fact, the Qur'an is a thoroughly different book that plays a different role in Islam than the Bible plays in Christianity.

Perhaps the best place to begin our investigation, then, is with the traditional backstory of the one who received God's final dispensation of revelation. Though Muhammad is not considered to be the author of the Qur'an, as its chosen recipient, his biography plays an important role in validating the message of the Qur'an. This chapter will highlight a few aspects of his life that help to illuminate why Muslims believe the Qur'an itself to be a miracle.

### MUHAMMAD: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Most evangelical Christians view the Bible as having sixty-six books written by around forty human authors. These human authors express their thoughts using vocabulary, grammar, and phrases that bear the marks of their context. At the same time, 2 Timothy 3:16 clearly states that the Scriptures have been inspired (lit. "breathed out") by the divine author who superintended the writing of Scripture. Thus, while we can speak truly of the human authors of the Bible, the Holy Spirit stands behind and over the text of the biblical canon.

In contrast to a Christian understanding of human-divine authorship of the Bible, the Qur'an exists apart from Muhammad's reception, recitation, and transmission. In fact, as we will see later on in this chapter, many Muslims believe that the Qur'an is an eternal book that has always existed with God in the heavenly realm. Muhammad is merely the human conduit by whom God has made the content of this eternal book known to his creatures. In several ways Muhammad's life story reinforces the divine origins of the text he transmitted.

### A TRAGIC BEGINNING

According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad was born in 570 CE into the Quraysh tribe in the region of Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula.

His childhood was marked by tragedy and loss. Muhammad's father died before he was born, and his mother died when he was six. As an orphan of such a tender age, he was admitted into the care of his grandfather. However, his grandfather also died before Muhammad had turned eight years old.

Thus, from the age of eight through adolescence, Muhammad's uncle, Abu Talib, took responsibility for raising him. The home of Abu Talib provided a loving and caring environment, and one rich with opportunity for experience beyond his immediate surroundings. Including Muhammad on his trading journeys, Abu Talib exposed his nephew to the people and places stretching from the Arabian Peninsula to Syria. Despite the instability of living in three different households and being part of a trading caravan during the first decade of his life, Muhammad grew up and gained the reputation of being a well-rounded, respectful, and pious young man.

### AN UNLETTERED MAN

Not only was Muhammad known for his character, but even from his youth he was reported to have exhibited natural intelligence and wisdom. In a recent biography, Safiur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri refers to Muhammad as “an exemplary man of weighty mind and faultless insight. He was favored with intelligence, originality of thought and accurate choice of the means leading to accurate goals.”<sup>4</sup> Such lauding of Muhammad's intellect is not surprising considering that he is viewed in Islam as the only proper and perfect interpreter of the Qur'an.

What is surprising, however, is the fact that most Muslims believe that he was not afforded the opportunity of formal education. This belief derives from places in the Qur'an such as Qur'an 7:157–58, where Muhammad is twice identified as the *'ummi* prophet. Muslims have long understood the Arabic word *'ummi* to mean that Muhammad was unlettered or illiterate.

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4 Safiur-Rahman Al Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed Nectar: Biography of the Noble Prophet*, rev. ed. (Riyadh, KSA: Darussalam, 2002), 64.



Further support for the idea that Muhammad was illiterate comes from Qur'an 29:48, which addresses Muhammad, saying, "You were not accustomed to read from any book before it, or to write it with your right (hand), (for) then the perpetrators of falsehood would indeed have had (reason to) doubt (you)." Thus, many early Muslim commentators contend that Muhammad was neither able to read nor write.<sup>5</sup> Though some contemporary scholars have argued that *'ummi* should not be understood to refer to Muhammad's education, the idea of Muhammad's illiteracy is still employed as evidence of the miraculous nature of his reception of the Qur'an.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of how one understands the word *'ummi*, Muhammad's educational background is not the only aspect of his biography that supports his role as a prophet.

### PROPHETIC MARKERS

According to the *Sira*, several signs identified Muhammad as a prophet long before he received his call. First, when Muhammad's mother, Amina, was pregnant, she reported hearing a voice that told her, "You are pregnant with the lord of this people and when he is born say, 'I put him in the care of the One from the evil of every envier; then call him Muhammad.'" <sup>7</sup> When Amina told this story to Abd Muttalib, Muhammad's grandfather, he brought the infant Muhammad into the Ka'ba where he thanked God for the child. Thus, Muhammad's life began with prophetic premonition and with a pilgrimage to the Ka'ba.

5 Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'anic Text: From Revelation to Compilation* (Lahore, Oakistan: Suhail Academy, 2005), 55.

6 A. J. Droge, *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation* (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2015), 102n152. Droge writes, "Traditional scholars interpret *ummi* as 'illiterate,' and claim that Muhammad could not read or write (further emphasizing the miraculous character of the Qur'an)." See also Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 252n1. Guillaume states, "Practically all Arab writers claim that he means that he could not read or write." Guillaume, however, contends that "gentile" is a better translation and a more appropriate interpretation of *'ummi*. Perhaps the clearest reason that Muslims might consider abandoning this claim to Muhammad's illiteracy is that the *Sira* records Muhammad writing the constitution of Medina (Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 231–33).

7 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 69. In addition to this prophetic premonition, Amina claimed to have emitted a mysterious light in which she was able to see a projection of the castles of Busra in Syria.

Second, as per custom of the people, a Bedouin wet nurse named Halima took Muhammad into her care. At this time, Halima and her husband had a camel that would not yield milk, and she herself struggled to produce sufficient milk. As soon as she brought Muhammad to her bosom, however, her supply of milk rushed in, and she was able to feed not only Muhammad but also her own infant son. When her husband went out to check on their livestock, he found that the camel, too, had resumed milk production and was able to provide sustenance for the family amid the famine that surrounded them.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these events, the *Sira* records various occasions when Christians recognized the bright future that stood before Muhammad. For example, just before Halima returned the weaned Muhammad to Amina, a group of Abyssinian Christians attempted to take Muhammad, declaring, “Let us take this boy, and bring him to our king and our country; for he will have a great future. We know all about him.”<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, on a trip to Syria, Muhammad’s caravan was stopped by a Christian monk named Bahira. This monk possessed a book that spoke of a child who would bear the mark of a great prophet on his body. After speaking with Muhammad and finding him to be devoted to God, Bahira eventually asked to see the child’s back. The *Sira* reports that Bahira discovered between Muhammad’s shoulder blades the seal of prophethood in the very place described in his book.<sup>10</sup> Before the caravan left, Bahira is reported to have told Muhammad’s uncle, “Take your nephew back to his country and guard him carefully against the Jews, for by Allah! if they see him and know about him what I know, they will do him evil. A great future lies before this nephew of yours so take him home quickly.”<sup>11</sup>

These events—along with many other similar accounts—provide the prescript to Muhammad’s prophetic call. However, evidence of Muhammad’s prophetic future is not exhausted by such passive and

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8 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 70–71.

9 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 73.

10 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 80.

11 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 81.

external support. Reports of his reputation as a pious and prayerful youth along with his impeccable record of honesty in his adult life endorse him as a summarily suitable prophet.

### RELIGIOUS REPUTATION

According to the traditional narrative, Muhammad was born into a polytheistic pagan society. His hometown of Mecca reportedly served both as a bustling hub of trade and as a place of religious pilgrimage due to the temple housed in the city. Muslims believe that this temple—the Ka'ba—was originally built by Ibrahim and Ismail as a place of worship dedicated to the one true God. However, by the time Muhammad was born, it had been desecrated by the polytheists, having come to serve as a house of worship for some 360 idols.

Despite the surrounding milieu of pagan worship and the often dishonest business practices to which Muhammad would have been privy, he was known as “an honest man of unusual moral sensitivity.”<sup>12</sup> Such was his reputation within his community that “his fellow citizens, by common consent, gave him the title of *Al-Ameen* (the trustworthy).”<sup>13</sup> Not only was Muhammad known for his integrity and character, but he also was known to be pious and dutiful in his pursuit of religious truth.

Perhaps the central manifestation of Muhammad's piety was his fervent opposition of polytheism from a young age. For instance, in his dialogue with the Syrian monk Bahira, he refused to swear by two pagan gods, saying, “Do not ask me by al-Lat and al-Uzza, for by Allah nothing is more hateful to me than these two.”<sup>14</sup> As a result of his rejection of polytheism, Muhammad often sought spiritual truth and guidance by retiring to the desert for long periods of prayer, meditation, and fasting. In his fortieth year, during one such visit to a small cave named Hira', Muhammad had an encounter that would change history.

12 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), 11.

13 Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed Nectar*, 65.

14 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 80.

## THE CAVE OF HIRAA' AND THE ANGEL JIBRIL

Located about four miles outside of Mecca, one can find a small, nondescript cave just big enough for an adult to take shelter in. This cave is called Hiraa', and it is where Islamic tradition reports that Muhammad encountered the angel Jibril. Though he did not understand it immediately, Muhammad's biography cites this event as the moment that "God sent [Muhammad] in compassion to mankind, 'as an evangelist to all men.'"<sup>15</sup> This night, as Muhammad met Jibril in the cave, he received his prophetic call.

It should be noted that neither the Qur'an nor the *Sunnah* explicitly record the exact date on which Muhammad began to receive revelations. However, by drawing inferences from various hints throughout the literature, Islamic scholars generally believe that the events of the cave of Hiraa' occurred sometime in August of the year 610 CE.<sup>16</sup> What is clear according to Qur'an 2:185 is that the Qur'an was sent down during the month of Ramadan.

## ASCETIC TENDENCIES

As mentioned above, Muhammad's pursuit of religious truth pushed him away from the city of Mecca and into the seclusion of the desert, hills, and valleys in the surrounding area. This devotional impulse was not necessarily unique to Muhammad but had apparently been a part of prior Qurayshi custom.<sup>17</sup>

Each year during the month of Ramadan, Muhammad retreated to the cave of Hiraa' to pray and seek spiritual understanding. Though there was nothing ostensibly different about the month of Ramadan in 610 CE, it was this year that God chose to commission Muhammad as a messenger of God's will and as the Seal of the Prophets. He did so by sending the angel Jibril, who transmitted the message of the Qur'an to Muhammad.

15 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 104.

16 Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed Nectar*, 68n2.

17 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 105. The *Sira* records, "The apostle [Muhammad] would pray in seclusion on Hiraa' every year for a month to practice *tabannuth* as was the custom of the Quraysh in heathen days. *Tabannuth* is religious devotion."

### “RECITE!”

Throughout the Qur'an one finds various references to Jibril as the conduit of divine revelation to Muhammad. For instance, Qur'an 2:97 reports Jibril as the one who brings down the Qur'an as guidance and good news. Likewise, some commentators understand the phrase “holy spirit” in Qur'an 26:192–200 to refer to Jibril and his role as the transmitter of the Qur'an.<sup>18</sup>

This Qur'anic allusion to Jibril as the angelic messenger who taught Muhammad the Qur'an is reinforced and made explicit in the *Sira*. According to the traditional narrative, Muhammad was sleeping in the cave of Hira' when Jibril appeared to him suddenly. The angel pressed upon Muhammad to the point that Muhammad thought he was going to die, and he repeated the instruction to “Recite!” three times.<sup>19</sup>

After each command, Muhammad responded by asking, “What shall I recite?” Finally, Jibril said, “Recite: In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Recite in the Name of your Lord who creates; creates the human from a clot. Recite, for your Lord is the Most Generous, who teaches by the pen, teaches the human what he does not know.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the *Sira* provides the source of the tradition that the first verses revealed are found in Qur'an 96:1–5.

Muhammad awoke and emerged from the cave after this encounter in a state of confusion and despair. The *Sira* even records that Muhammad considered killing himself as he was unsure as to whether he had been possessed by a demon or had an ecstatic experience like the ones described by the pagan poets he so despised. As he was descending the mountain, Jibril again appeared to him, saying, “O

18 Droge, *The Qur'an*, 244n70.

19 It should be noted that there is disagreement over how to understand Jibril's instruction to Muhammad. The Arabic word *iqra'* could be understood as a command to recite or to read. Most traditional scholars, believing Muhammad to be illiterate, render this as a command to recite. Al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'anic Text*, 47, retains the more natural translation, “Read!” However, he takes some liberties in translating Muhammad's response as indicating that he could not read. Others, however, find it more appropriate and natural to translate it as a command to read, eschewing the idea that Muhammad was illiterate. See Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 106.

20 Qur'an 96:1–5.

Muhammad! Thou are the apostle of God and I am Jibril!"<sup>21</sup> Once Muhammad regained his faculties from this encounter, he returned to his wife Khadija and told her what he had just experienced.

### AFFIRMATIONS

Even after the second encounter with Jibril on the mountain, Muhammad was unconvinced that he was not being oppressed by a demon. Upon recounting the tale to Khadija, however, his wife assured him that he was neither ecstatic nor possessed. Rather, she exclaimed, "Rejoice, O son of my uncle, and be of good heart. Verily, by Him in whose hand is Khadija's soul, I have hope that thou wilt be the prophet of this people."<sup>22</sup> By recognizing Muhammad as a prophet, Khadija is known in Islamic history as the first person Muhammad converted to Islam.

Not only did Khadija accept her husband's prophethood, but she also related the events to her cousin, Waraqa, who also affirmed Muhammad as a messenger of God. Waraqa was known as a Christian learned in the Scriptures. Upon hearing Khadija's report of Muhammad's experience, he exclaimed, "Holy! Holy! Verily by Him in whose hand is Waraqa's soul, if thou hast spoken the truth, O Khadija, there hath come unto him [Gabriel] who came to Moses aforetime, and lo, he is the prophet of this people. Bid him be of good heart."<sup>23</sup>

In the course of time, Muhammad gathered additional followers from among a variety of peoples. The *Sira* records the testimony of one group of polytheists who became Muslims because of the prophecy about Muhammad that came from the Jews. The Jews had been threatening these idolaters by saying that a prophet would arise who would help them in destroying polytheism. When Muhammad arrived, however, the polytheists recognized Muhammad's authority as the prophet, while the Jews rejected him.<sup>24</sup>

The *Sira* and the compilations of traditions known as the Hadith are littered with such stories of conversion. Some from among the

21 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 106.

22 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 107.

23 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 107.

24 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 93.

Jews, Christians, pagans, and foreigners recognize Muhammad as a prophet of God with a sacred message. These stories of diverse recognition of Muhammad as a prophet are told and retold to demonstrate broad affirmation that he truly heard from heaven on what has come to be known as the Night of Power (*Laylat al-Qadr*).

### THE NIGHT OF POWER

Though the Qur'an itself is not forthcoming with a lot of details regarding the circumstances of its transmission, it does refer to the time of year that Muhammad began receiving revelations. As we have already seen, Qur'an 2:185 affirms that God sent the Qur'an down to Muhammad in the month of Ramadan. Furthermore, Qur'an 44:3 and Qur'an 97 single out the day on which Muhammad encountered Jibril as a night of blessing.

This night is hallowed by Qur'an 97:3–5, which declares, “The Night of [Power] is better than a thousand months. The angels and the spirit come down during it, by the permission of their Lord, on account of every command. It is (a night of) peace, until the rising of the dawn.”<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, it has come to be a tenet of Islamic practice to consider prayers offered during the last ten days of Ramadan to be especially meritorious. Though the specific day is unknown, one of the last ten days of the annual fast is thought to correspond with the Night of Power and is marked by the angels drawing near and God being more inclined to bless the faithful.

Along with the question of which night of Ramadan is the Night of Power, scholars debate whether or not Muhammad was given the entire Qur'an on this night. Multiple places throughout the Qur'an appear to indicate that God sent down the entire Qur'an to Muhammad in the cave of Hira'a'. However, traditional understanding of the process of reception favors occasional revelations corresponding to the developing needs of the community. Some interpreters resolve

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25 The Arabic should be translated, as Droge does, “The night of destiny” or “The night of decree.” However, in common Islamic parlance, this night is referred to as the Night of Power; thus, I have glossed Droge’s translation to make the connection with contemporary practice more apparent for the reader.

this apparent discrepancy by saying that God sent the Qur'an down from the highest heaven to the lowest heaven on the Night of Power, and that it was from there that Muhammad received its message on the appropriate occasions.<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of how one understands how much of the Qur'an Muhammad was privy to on the Night of Power, most all Muslims contend that various verses, passages, and chapters of the Qur'an were given to address specific moments in Muhammad's life and in the circumstances of the community of believers. In order to begin to understand how the Qur'an functions to inform Islamic faith and practice, we must consider how this process of revelation affects the interpretation and application of each passage.

### OCCASIONS OF REVELATION (*ASBAB AN-NAZUL*)

The introduction to this chapter highlights a peculiarity about the Qur'an that often confuses new readers: what are thought to be its first verses (Qur'an 96:1–5) are recorded long after one reads its final verse (Qur'an 5:3). Furthermore, the chapters of the Qur'an appear disconnected from one another, and narrative sections that would suggest a chronological order are few and far between. In light of this, Gabriel Said Reynolds concludes, “Without the library of [Qur'anic commentaries], scholars might feel themselves in a sort of intellectual wilderness, with no orienting landmarks to guide their thoughts.”<sup>27</sup>

In order to assign a chronology to various parts, and to set the Qur'an's verses in a historical context, one must refer to the *Sunnah* to decipher the occasions of revelation. The following section, then, will provide a glimpse of some of the salient features of the Qur'an that one must understand in order to make sense of the traditional approach to distilling Islamic theology and practice from its pages.

26 Droge, *The Qur'an*, 442n1. Droge writes, “The references to the descent of the Qur'an on a single night reflect a different understanding than the traditional one, according to which the Qur'an was ‘sent down’ or revealed at intervals over a period of some twenty years. Some interpreters understand this verse as referring to the descent of the Qur'an from the highest to the lowest of the seven heavens, whence it was revealed to Muhammad as occasion required.”

27 Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext*, 18.