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Title :

Islam

Universal Submission to God

The last of the great monotheistic faiths to arise in Southwest Asia was Islam, which emerged in Arabia during the early seventh century. *Islam* means "submission" in Arabic, and a *Muslim* is anyone who submits to the Will of God.

The Prophet of Islam was a merchant of Mecca known as *Muhammad ibn (son of) Abdullab* (ca. 571–632), who around 610 began to receive visions in which he was called to be the Messenger of *Allah* — a divinity whose Arabic name (al-Llah) means "*the God*." Muhammad's mission was to preach the Oneness of God ("there is no god but the God"), the imminence of the Resurrection of the Dead, the coming of a divine Day of Judgment, and the existence of an all-consuming hell fire for the unjust and unbelievers and a paradise of bliss for the faithful. Muhammad believed that, just as Jews and Christians had their divine revelations from God, now the Arabs were receiving the full and final word of God through him, the last and greatest of the prophets but still only a man. Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and the other prophets had been earlier messengers of God. Muhammad was the *seal* of these fore-runners.

Most Meccans, including almost all of his own kinsmen, were initially unmoved by Muhammad's message, so in 622 Muhammad and the majority of his small band of converts journeyed over two hundred miles northeast to an oasis settlement that would become known as *Medinat al-Nabi* (City of the Prophet) or, more simply, *Medina*. By this act, known as the *hijra* (breaking of ties), these first Muslims abandoned their tribal bonds — bonds that defined traditional Arabic society — and opted for membership in an Islamic community of faith, or *umma*. This migration was so pivotal in the history of Islam that Muslims later chose the year 622 to mark the beginning of the era of Islam — the Year 1 of the Islamic calendar.

It was at Medina that circumstances forced Muhammad to add the duties of statesman and warrior to that of prophet, and he proved successful at all three. After more than seven years of struggle, Muhammad and a reputed ten thousand followers were able to enter Mecca in triumph in January 630. The Messenger of Allah was now the most powerful chieftain in Arabia, and most of the tribes of the peninsula soon were united under his leadership. When Muhammad died in 632, his closest friend, *Abu Bakr*, assumed the title and office of *caliph* (deputy of the Prophet), thereby accepting leadership over the family of Islam. Abu Bakr did not claim to be a prophet; God's revelation had ceased with Muhammad's death. As caliph, Abu Bakr served as head of the *umma* — the community of God's people. Thanks to Abu Bakr's efforts at destroying secessionist elements that arose after Muhammad's death, Islam under his stewardship (632–634) remained a unified community ready to explode out of its homeland, which it did under the second caliph, Umar (r. 634–644).

Both the Sassanian Persian and Byzantine empires had exhausted each other in a series of destructive wars that ran from 503 to 627. In addition, the Byzantine Empire was rent by ethnic and religious dissension, especially in Syria-Palestine and Egypt. So, when Muslims began raiding the territories of these neighboring empires, they discovered lands ripe for conquest. Before Umar's death the Byzantines had lost all of Syria-Palestine and Egypt to the green flag of Islam, and the Arab conquest of the Sassanian Empire was virtually completed. By 750 lands under Islamic domination reached from the Pyrenees and Atlantic coast in Spain to the Indus Valley of India and Tang China's far-western borders.

Originally the Arabs considered Islam their special revelation and had little or no intention of sharing the faith with their non-Arab subjects, but several factors combined to attract large numbers of converts. These included Islam's uncompromising monotheism and the straightforwardness of its other central doctrines; the psychic and social security offered by membership in a totally integrated Muslim community, where one's entire life is subject to God's Word; and the desire to escape the second-class status of Islam's non-Muslim subjects. When the Abbasid caliphs (r. 750–1258) established their court at Baghdad on the Tigris in 762, they claimed dominion over a multiethnic *ecumene* bound together by one of the most attractive and fastest growing religions in the history of humanity. The culture of this world community was a combination of many different elements,

of which the most important were Arabic, Persian, and Hellenistic.

Later other peoples, especially the Turks, would convert to Islam and carry it farther afield, especially into the heart of India and deep into Central Asia. Arab and East African merchants would transport the faith across the Indian Ocean to the ports of Southeast Asia, and Berbers from North Africa would introduce Islam into western sub-Saharan Africa.

The Foundations of Islamic Life

Like the Buddha and Jesus, Muhammad was a teacher who spoke rather than wrote his message, but also like Buddhism and Christianity, following its Messenger's death, Islam quickly became a religious culture centered on a body of sacred texts, and it has remained so to the present. Islam's text without equal is the *Qur'an* (the Recitations), which Muslims believe contains, word for word, absolutely everything that God revealed to Muhammad and nothing else. As the full and final revelation of God, the *Qur'an* encompasses all that any human needs to know. Its verses, each a poetically perfect proclamation from Heaven, are both doctrine and law, governing essentially every aspect of a Muslim's life. Islam without the *Qur'an* is unimaginable.

A second source of guidance for most Muslims is *al-Hadith* (Tradition), a vast body of transmitted stories and sayings attributed to the Prophet and his Companions. Unlike the *Qur'an*, these stories, individually known as *hadiths* (tales or instructions), are not assembled in a single, absolutely accepted text. Rather, there are many collections of Hadith, some more authoritative than others, some even largely dismissed as spurious. The majority of Muslims believe that authentic hadiths enshrine the *sunna* (the beaten track), or valid traditions, of the Prophet and the first Islamic community and thereby provide perfect models for behavior in all aspects of life, especially those not expressly covered in the precepts of the *Qur'an*.

A third source that provides inspiration and guidance is the earliest extant biography of the Prophet of God. Because Muslims regard Muhammad as only a man, Islam has no Gospels in the sense that Christianity does — divinely inspired and infallible accounts of its Teacher's miracles and salvific deeds. Islam, however, does have the recorded remembrances of the Messenger of God's Companions from Mecca and his earliest converts at Medina, which document portions of Muhammad's life and his fully human deeds. Collected and arranged into a coherent biography in eighth-century Baghdad, this work has served through the centuries as a model for devout Muslims who desire to follow the path of Allah's perfect servant.

Like the Jewish Torah, the *Qur'an* provides its believers with a total way of life. The dichotomy between Church and state that the European West developed

has no meaning in Islam, at least as it emerged in the seventh century. Indeed, Islam has no Church in the Christian sense, and it has no separate secular polity — at least in the ideal. In the ideal, there is only God's *umma*, which is governed by God's Holy Law, or *Shari'a*. The study and application of *Shari'a* is one of the highest callings in Islamic life and stands at the center of its civilization.

The Word of God



56 ▼ THE QUR'AN

As long as the Prophet was alive, there was no compelling reason to set his messages down in some definitive form. However, following Muhammad's death in 632, Caliph Abu Bakr ordered one of the Prophet's Companions, Zayd ibn Thabit, to collect from both oral and written sources all of Muhammad's inspired utterances. Subsequently, Caliph Uthman (r. 644–656) promulgated an official collection of these Recitations and ordered all other versions destroyed.

This standard text became the basis of every pious Muslim's education. As Islam spread beyond Arab ethnic boundaries, Muslims all over the world continued to learn Arabic in order to study and recite (usually from memory) the sacred *surabs* (chapters) of this holy book. Because of the Qur'an's centrality to Islam, Arabic literacy became the hallmark of Muslims from sub-Saharan West Africa to South-east Asia.

The following excerpts come from the third of the Qur'an's 114 surabs, *The House of Imran*. Islam reveres the memory of two men named *Imran*: the father of Moses, the prophet to whom Allah gave the Torah, the sacred book and law of the Jews; and the father of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The term *the House of Imran* as used in this surah refers to the families of both prophets.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What evidence is there that Muhammad was experiencing difficulty converting Jewish and Christian Arabs?
2. How does the Qur'an portray Jews and Christians, and what is Islam's relationship with these two faiths?
3. Do you see any parallels between this text and that of the Bible's Jewish and Christian Testaments? What do you infer from your answer?
4. What basic Islamic beliefs are reflected in this excerpt?
5. How does Islam differ from Judaism and Christianity?
6. How are Muslims to deal with nonbelievers? With those who attack them?

God
there is no god but He, the
Living, the Everlasting.

He has sent down upon thee the Book
with the truth, confirming what was before it,
and He sent down the Torah¹ and the Gospel²
aforetime, as guidance to the people,
and He sent down the Salvation.

As for those who disbelieve in God's signs, for
them awaits a terrible chastisement; God is
All-mighty, Vengeful.

From God nothing whatever is hidden
in heaven and earth. It is He who forms you
in the womb as He will. There is no god but
He,
the All-mighty, the All-wise.

It is He who sent down upon thee the Book,³
wherein are verses clear that are the Essence
of the Book. . . .

Our Lord, make not our hearts to swerve
after that Thou hast guided us; and give us
mercy from Thee;
Thou art the Giver.

Our Lord, it is Thou that shall gather
mankind for a day whereon is no doubt;
verily God will
not fail the tryst.⁴ . . .

The true religion with God is Islam.
Those who were given the Book⁵ were not at
variance
except after the knowledge came to them,
being insolent one to another.⁶ And whoso

disbelieves in God's signs, God is swift
at the reckoning.
So if they dispute with thee, say: 'I have
surrendered my will to God, and whosoever
follows me.'

And say to those who have been given the
Book⁷
and to the common folk: 'Have you
surrendered?'

If they have surrendered, they are right
guided;
but if they turn their backs, thine it is only
to deliver the Message; and God
sees His servants.⁸

Those who disbelieve in the signs of God
and slay the Prophets without right,
and slay such men as bid to justice —
do thou give them the good tidings of
a painful chastisement;
their works have failed in this world and the
next;
they have no helpers.

Hast thou not regarded those who were given
a portion of the Book, being called to the Book
of God, that it might decide between them,
and then a party of them turned away,
swerving aside?
That, because they said, 'The Fire shall not
touch us, except for a number of days';
and the lies they forged have deluded them
in their religion.

But how will it be, when We⁹ gather them
for a day whereon is no doubt, and every soul
shall be paid in full what it has earned, and
they
shall not be wronged?

¹The Law — the first five books of the *Tanakh* (the Jewish Bible). See Chapter 6, source 46, and Chapter 7, source 49.

²Chapter 7, source 48.

³All three books of revelation: the Qur'an, the Gospels, and the Torah.

⁴God's covenant with humanity.

⁵Jews and Christians who respectively received from God the Torah and the Gospels.

⁶Through sheer insolence, especially toward one another, Jews and Christians strayed from the path of God's revelation.

⁷Jews and Christians.

⁸God knows who are His submissive servants.

⁹God.

Say: 'O God, Master of the Kingdom,
Thou givest the Kingdom to whom Thou wilt,
and seizest the kingdom from whom Thou
wilt,

Thou exaltest whom Thou wilt, and Thou
abasest whom Thou wilt; in Thy hand
is the good; Thou art powerful
over everything.

Thou makest the night to enter into the day
and Thou makest the day to enter into the
night,

Thou bringest forth the living from the dead
and Thou bringest forth the dead from the
living,
and Thou providest whomsoever Thou wilt
without reckoning.' . . .

Say: 'If you love God, follow me, and God
will love you, and forgive you your sins;
God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate.'
Say: 'Obey God, and the Messenger.'¹⁰ But
if they turn their backs, God loves not
the unbelievers.

God chose Adam and Noah
and the House of Abraham
and the House of Imran¹¹
above all beings, the
seed of one another;
God hears, and knows.

When the wife of Imran¹²
said, 'Lord, I have vowed
to Thee, in dedication,
what is within my womb.
Receive Thou this from me;
Thou hearest, and knowest.'
And when she gave birth to her

she said, 'Lord, I have given
birth to her, a female.'
(And God knew very well
what she had given birth to;
the male is not as the female.)
'And I have named her Mary,
and commend her to Thee
with her seed, to protect them
from the accursed Satan.'
Her Lord received the child
with gracious favor. . . .

When the angels said,
'Mary, God gives thee good
tidings of a Word¹³ from Him
whose name is Messiah,¹⁴
Jesus, son of Mary;
high honored shall he be
in this world and the next,
near stationed to God.
He shall speak to men
in the cradle, and of age,
and righteous he shall be.'
'Lord,' said Mary,
'how shall I have a son
seeing no mortal has
touched me?'¹⁵ Even so,
God said, 'God
creates what He will.

When He decrees a thing
He does but say to it
"Be," and it is.
And He will teach him
the Book, the Wisdom,
the Torah, the Gospel,
to be a Messenger
to the Children of Israel
saying, "I have come to

¹⁰Muhammad.

¹¹Moses and his brother Aaron (Musa and Harun in Arabic).

¹²This clearly is the second Imran, the father of Mary.

¹³*Logos* in Greek; it is a term used by Christians to describe Jesus Christ, the Living Word of God. Christians believe

that the Logos is coeternal and codivine with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴Hebrew for "the Anointed One"; *Christos* in Greek.

¹⁵She is a virgin. Compare this with the Gospel of Luke, 1: 26-38.

you with a sign from
your Lord. I will create
for you out of clay as
the likeness of a bird;
then I will breathe into
it, and it will be a
bird,¹⁶ by the leave of God.

I will also heal
the blind and the leper,
and bring to life the
dead, by the leave of God.

I will inform you too
of what things you eat,
and what you treasure up
in your houses. Surely
in that is a sign for you,
if you are believers.

Likewise confirming the
truth of the Torah that
is before me, and to make
lawful to you certain
things that before were
forbidden unto you.

I have come to you with
a sign from your Lord;
so fear you God, and
obey you me. Surely
God is my Lord and
your Lord; so serve Him.
This is a straight path".

And when Jesus perceived
their unbelief, he said,
'Who will be my helpers
unto God?' The Apostles¹⁷
said, 'We will be helpers
of God; we believe in God;
witness thou our submission.

Lord, we believe in that
Thou hast sent down, and we
follow the Messenger.
Inscribe us therefore with
those who bear witness.'

And they devised, and God
devised, and God is
the best of devisers. . . .

This We recite to thee
of signs and wise remembrance.
Truly, the likeness of
Jesus, in God's sight,
is as Adam's¹⁸ likeness;
He created him of dust,
then said He unto him,
'Be,' and he was.¹⁹
The truth is of God;
be not of the doubters.
And whoso disputes with thee
concerning him, after the
knowledge that has come to thee,
say: 'Come now, let us call
our sons and your sons,
our wives and your wives,
our selves and your selves,
then let us humbly pray
and so lay God's curse
upon the ones who lie.'
This is the true story.
There is no god but God,
and assuredly God is
the All-mighty, the All-wise.
And if they turn their backs,
assuredly God knows
the workers of corruption.

¹⁶An echo of the so-called *Infancy Gospel*, 15:6, ascribed to the Apostle James the Less. This uncanonical, second-century collection of tales relating to Jesus' miracle-filled boyhood was well-known in the Christian communities of the eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea areas.

¹⁷Jesus' twelve closest friends and followers.

¹⁸The first man.

¹⁹Jesus was one of God's creatures — created as Adam had been created; he is not coeternal and codivine with the Father. (See Chapter 7, source 51, note 7, for the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity.)

Say: 'People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him,²⁰ and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God.' And if they turn their backs, say: 'Bear witness that we are Muslims.'

People of the Book! Why do you dispute concerning Abraham? The Torah was not sent down, neither the Gospel, but after him.²¹

What,
have you no reason?

Ha, you are the ones who dispute on what you know; why then dispute you touching a matter of which you know not anything? God knows, and you know not.

No; Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim and one pure of faith; certainly he was never of the idolaters.

Surely the people standing closest to Abraham are those who followed him, and this

Prophet,²²
and those who believe; and God is the
Protector
of the believers.

There is a party of the People of the Book yearn to make you go astray; yet none they make to stray, except themselves, but they are not aware.

People of the Book! Why do you disbelieve in God's signs, which you yourselves witness? People of the Book! Why do you confound the truth with vanity, and conceal the truth and that wittingly? . . .

Say: 'We believe in God, and that which has been sent

down on us, and sent down on Abraham and Ishmael,²³

Isaac²⁴ and Jacob, and the Tribes,²⁵ and in that which was

given to Moses and Jesus, and the Prophets, of their

Lord; we make no division between any of them, and

to Him we surrender.'

Whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall

not be accepted of him; in the next world he shall

be among the losers.

²⁰God has no divine associates; there is only one God.

²¹The Torah and the Gospels and, therefore, Jews and Christians postdate Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic), the father of all Arabs and Jews.

²²Muhammad.

²³Abraham's elder son (Ismail in Arabic), from whom the

Arabs (and, by spiritual extension, all Muslims) claim descent.

²⁴Abraham's younger son (Ishaq in Arabic), from whom the Hebrews are descended.

²⁵The twelve tribes of Israel.