

Exposing Myths of Early Islam

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Introduction

1. Forensic science, archaeology, and first-hand written documents are revealing a very different picture of the first 100 years of Islam.
2. The Traditional Islamic view states that an Arab named Muhammad received revelations from Allah through the angel Gabriel in a city called Mecca, and within 20 years after Muhammad's death these revelations were written down in a book called the Qur'an. However, new information is turning this traditional view upside down.
3. We are learning that the Muhammad of traditional Islam was probably an invention of a later Arab leader, that the Qur'an was probably not collected and written down until the early 8th century (from many sources, including Christian and Jewish liturgy), and that the city of Petra in Northern Arabia was likely the birthplace of Islam instead of Mecca, which was probably not established as a city until after the death of Muhammad.
4. We are learning that the **Muhammad** of traditional Islam was probably an invention of a later Arab leader, that the **Qur'an** was probably not collected and written down until the early 8th century (from many sources, including Christian and Jewish liturgy), and that the city of Petra in Northern Arabia was likely the birthplace of **Islam** instead of Mecca, which was probably not established as a city until after the death of Muhammad.
5. "The more one looks at the origins of Islam, the less one sees." (Robert Spencer, Did Muhammad Exist?, p. 2)

The Claims by the Traditional Account

1. The life of Muhammad was lived out in the "full light of history"
2. Muhammad was already a revered prophet and a model of moral conduct for his followers
3. The Qur'an as a revealed book was written down in Arabic within 20 years of Muhammad's death
4. Islam as a religion was fully formed by the time Muhammad died
5. The Arabs were pagans before Muhammad came to convert them to Islam

Muhammad:

Traditional Account (TA)	Historical Data (HD)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Muhammad lived in Arabia between 570 and 632 AD; left the city of Mecca in 622 and settled in Medina until his death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are no records of Muhammad's birth, death or place of residence until over 100 years after his supposed death
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Muhammad began having revelations from the angel Gibreel (Gabriel) in 610. These were memorized and passed on to his followers. Twenty years after his death these revelations were collected in what became known as the Qur'an 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The earliest mention of Muhammad is in 691 AD in the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock. He may have been the Muhammad inscribed on a coin in 687 AD.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Muhammad was known as the last of the prophets and became the centerpiece of the religion that began through his leadership. 	<p>It all started with Abd al-Malik:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is likely that Muhammad is mostly the invention of the Caliph Abd al-Malik (685-705). The Caliph needed a prophet to be the mouthpiece of the scripture for his new religion. The Qur'an became the scripture and Islam became the religion.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The life of Muhammad was lived out in the "full light of history" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The earliest biographical information about Muhammad dates from over 150 years after his reported death. One scholar writes that the first biography of Muhammad, by Ibn Ishaq, is probably just "pious fiction" that sought to give context to the Qur'an.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Muhammad was already a revered prophet and a model of moral conduct for his followers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most, if not all, the deeds and the sayings of Muhammad were fabricated hundreds of years after his death These sayings were recorded in the Hadith The name Muhammad appears in the Qur'an only four times and three of these instances could be used as a title ("praised one") "messenger of Allah" (rasul Allah) appears around 300 times, and "prophet" (nabi) 43 times. Are these all references to Muhammad?
<p style="text-align: center;">Conclusion</p> <p>Muhammad probably was an historic person, perhaps even prophetic in the desert way, but probably nothing more than a <i>magghazi</i> leader who was later used by Abd al-Malik for his propaganda.</p>	

The Development of the Qur'an

1. What if the Qur'an is not divine?
 - If the Qur'an is not directly from God, then it is a human document; and since it claims a perfect, divine source, human authorship would undercut its authority.
 - In fact, Humphreys states boldly, "If the Qur'an is a historical document, then the whole Islamic struggle of fourteen centuries is effectively meaningless."¹
2. True Origins of the Qur'an?
 - "In his groundbreaking and complex work, Wansbrough postulated that the Qur'an was developed primarily to establish Islam's origins in Arabia and the Hadith were fabricated in order to give the Arabian Empire a distinctive religion so as to foster its stability and unity." (Spencer, *Did Muhammad Exist?*, 12)
 - "If Abd al-Malik built up the Islamic religion for political purposes, then the earlier silence from all quarters about Muhammad, Islam, and the Qur'an can be explained very simply: There was no reference to these things because Muhammad, Islam, and the Qur'an did not exist yet, or did so only in an inchoate state." (Spencer, *Did Muhammad Exist?*, 60)

Qur'an:

1. Traditional Account (TA)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Muhammad began having revelations from the angel Gibreel (Gabriel) in 610. These were memorized and passed on to his followers.• These revelations were collected in what became known as the Qur'an |
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Historical Data (HD)

- The Qur'an probably took its present shape not in the middle of the 7th century, but probably not until late in the 8th century, if not into the 9th (over 200 years after Muhammad's death)

2. Traditional Account (TA)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Qur'an as a revealed book was written down in Arabic within 20 years of Muhammad's death |
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Historical Data (HD)

- The Arabic alphabet in which the Qur'an is written was not finalized until the end of the 7th century, six decades after Muhammad died.
- It is likely that the earliest form of the Qur'an was derived from Christian liturgy and Jewish commentary (Targum), at first in Syriac and other foreign languages.
- These were carried orally and subsumed in Arabic formats, though retaining much of the former structure and phraseology.
- Some of the foreign words remained in the amalgamations.

¹ Toby Lester, "What is the Koran?," chap. in *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 110.

- Early forms of written Arabic came from two possible sources,
 - Christian missionaries producing a script from Syriac liturgy and
 - merchants developing that script for simple economic transactions.
- Both forms of the script probably were based on Syro-Aramaic (Syriac) and Nabataean scripts, which were both developed from Aramaic.
- “Gunter Lüling maintains that the original Qur’an was not an Islamic text at all but a pre-Islamic Christian document.... Lüling believes that the Qur’an reflects the theology of a non-Trinitarian Christian sect that left traces on Islamic theology, notably in its picture of Christ and its uncompromising Unitarianism.” (Spencer, 13)
- In the 1999 Atlantic Monthly article referenced below, Gerd Puin is quoted as saying that

“My idea is that the Koran is a kind of cocktail of texts that were not all understood even at the time of Muhammad. Many of them may even be a hundred years older than Islam itself. Even within the Islamic traditions there is a huge body of contradictory information, including a significant Christian substrate; one can derive a whole Islamic anti-history from them if one wants. The Qur’an claims for itself that it is ‘*mubeen*,’ or clear, but if you look at it, you will notice that every fifth sentence or so simply doesn’t make sense. Many Muslims will tell you otherwise, of course, but the fact is that a fifth of the Qur’anic text is just incomprehensible. This is what has caused the traditional anxiety regarding translation. If the Qur’an is not comprehensible, if it can’t even be understood in Arabic, then it’s not translatable into any language. That is why Muslims are afraid. Since the Qur’an claims repeatedly to be clear but is not—there is an obvious and serious contradiction. Something else must be going on.” (The Atlantic Monthly; *January 1998; What is the Koran?; Volume 283, No. 1; pages 43-56*).

3. Traditional Account (TA)

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Qur’an is written in “Arabic, pure and clear” (16:103) |
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Historical Data (HD)

- There are over 100 non-Arabic terms in the Qur’an. (Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek, Syrian, Akkadian, Ethiopian, and Persian words are used)
- Even the word “Qur’an” probably comes from the Syrian word “Quryana,” which means “lectionary” (and usually refers to Christian lectionaries).
- “Almost all the religious terms in the Qur’an are derived from Syriac.” (Mingana, q. in Spencer, 156)
- 20% of the Qur’an is not understandable, even to experts in Arabic!
- Luxemburg demonstrates that it makes more sense when it is translated “back” into Syriac.
- The earliest biographies seem to be written to give context to the Qur’an and provide details that are not in the Qur’an.
- The Hadiths were probably invented later to provide more context to Qur’anic verses.
- It may be “that the Qur’an was not originally written in Arabic at all but was eventually rendered in Arabic as the new religion was being developed.” (Spencer, 160)
- “The Qur’an itself betrays evidence of having been adapted from a Christian text.” (Spencer, 162)

- Lüling states that about a third of the Qur’anic text is based on an originally pre-Islamic Christian text. (Spencer, 166)
- Luxenberg: “hur” (houri), usually translated as “virgins” (“large eyed,” “wide eyed,” or “lustrous eyed”) really should be read as “white grapes” (white raisins)

4. Traditional Account (TA)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no variant readings, lost verses or conflicting readings on various texts (i.e., the Qur’an is perfect)

Historical Data (HD)

- There are many variant readings
- Arthur Jeffery gives 90 pages of variant readings
- The Yemeni Qur’ans reveal that the Muslim claim of a uniform text can no longer be made
- There are many textual variants in the Qur’an. (See Keith Small’s book, *Textual Criticism and Qur’an Manuscripts*)

The Development of the Religion of Islam

Traditional Account (TA)	Historical Data (HD)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mecca was the birthplace of Islam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probably in northern Arabia – perhaps Petra
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam began through a series of revelations to Muhammad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probably began out of apocalyptic Judaism – at least an intermediate monotheism that was neither Judaism or Christianity • Centered on Abraham and his son Ishmael
<p>Islam as a religion was fully formed by the time Muhammad died</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam was probably fashioned for political reasons. In the time of Abd al-Malik, the need of legitimacy for their government was understood. • To be a credible government they needed a formulized religion, a scripture and a prophet

<p style="text-align: center;">Intermediate Monotheism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This view believes the evidence demonstrates: • In the early 700s there was an intermediate monotheism forming that was an amalgamation of Jewish and Christian influences that over time, because of influence from heretical/unorthodox Christian views (Monophysite and Nestorian) incorporated a strong animosity for central Christian doctrine such as the deity of Christ and the Trinity. • There was also a stronger Jewish element that pushed this agenda, but, after the conquests started up, this was also marginalized and, in time, vilified in later writings. • The Intermediate monotheism could have risen out of an Ebionite influence or from a form of Arianism.
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Arabs were pagans before Muhammad came to convert them to Islam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inscriptions from the 7th century demonstrate that many Arabs were not pagans, but monotheists who believed in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth (DME, x)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam began with the “Hijrah” (flight) of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Hijrah” also means “emigration” and in 622, after the Byzantines conquered the Persians, they abandoned some of the land back over to the Arabians, who began to emigrate northward into Syria.
<p>Early Conquests</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The early conquests of the Negev, Egypt, Palestine and southern Syria were probably growing raids and emigration of the Arabs into those areas due to the pulling out of the Byzantine troops (laying the land wide open) and the abandoning of the <i>foederati</i>, who were no longer receiving tribute from the Byzantine government for guarding the borders. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The words “Islam” and “Muslim” are part of the inscription around the Dome of the Rock, built in 691 AD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They were called “Mahgraye” for the Arabic term, “Muhajirun,” or “emigrants.” • They were also known as “mu’minin,” or “believers” (believers in what?) • The Arabs were not called “Muslims” until the middle of the 8th century. They were known as the “Muhajirun,” “mu’minin,” “Saracens,” “Hagarenes,” or “Ishmaelites.”
<p style="text-align: center;">Dome of the Rock Inscriptions</p> <p>The Dome of the Rock inscriptions “could be an expression of a theologically uncomplicated Arab monotheism that is deeply concerned with Christ and Christianity – to the point of polemicizing against claims of Christ’s divinity. This preoccupation with Christ leaves us far short of Islam in any clearly recognizable form as the religion of Muhammad and the Qur’an. By that point in history, the specifics of that religion still had been nowhere elaborated.” (Spencer, 57)</p>	

Conclusion

1. The best evidence we have today seems to reveal a slow development of the Qur’an from non-Muslim sources, primarily Syriac, that were adopted and incorporated into an intermediate monotheism that was neither Christian nor Jewish, but which was influenced by beliefs from both.
2. At first it was the religion of the elite, but as the Arabs became more successful and began to settle in their conquered cities, the leaders recognized that they would need to fortify their hegemony by establishing their religious beliefs, authorizing their own scriptures and supporting their own prophet.
3. For many Christians at that time, like John of Damascus, this new religion was understood as just a heresy of Christianity with anti-Christian beliefs and a false prophet.

4. As time went on, however, written Arabic, as well as the scripture written in Arabic, became standardized and Muhammad became established in a religion that would soon rival Christendom.

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