“Ingrid Mattson offers fresh, thoughtful, and learned insights into the Qur’an that are rich in scholarly and historical detail, cultural depth and breadth, and personal meaning. This book will enlighten and engage the novice reader as well as those already familiar with the Qur’an. I recommend it as an excellent companion to the study of Islam or the Qur’an itself.”

Marcia Hermansen, Loyola University Chicago

“Dr Ingrid Mattson takes her readers, effortlessly, through the Qur’an with her eloquent Zen-like writing style. The book takes its readers on a journey of discovery into Islam’s Holy Scripture. It is an excellent introduction for students of Islam as well as non-academic circles as it touches upon the personal effects of the Qur’an on the believer and its impact on society and culture, at the same time maintaining a historical perspective on its formation.”

Khaled Keshk, DePaul University

“This valuable book – written by one of the great leaders of North American Islam – should be must-reading for Muslims, Christians, Jews, and all who would understand the Qur’an and its followers. Recommended for university, church, synagogue, and mosque classes and reading groups.”

Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, Jewish Theological Seminary

Since publication The Story of the Qur’an has received high praise for its sensitivity, deft scholarship, and carefully balanced portrayal of the study of the Qur’an and its place in historic and contemporary Muslim society. Acclaimed Islamic scholar Ingrid Mattson now updates her authoritative and comprehensive introduction through the addition of expanded sections on the Qur’an in art and architecture, in the life cycle of Muslims, and in Islamic ethics and law. Through a close examination of the doctrines in the Qur’an, Mattson reveals their significance to individual Muslims and the societies in which they live.

Other key themes addressed include the Qur’an’s most important historical interpretations, significant figures who transmitted and taught the sacred scripture over the centuries, and the influence of the Qur’an on major aspects of Muslim society – including personal relationships, popular culture, political movements, science, and literature. Combining scholarly precision with an engaging style, The Story of the Qur’an, Second Edition, offers a fascinating and unique account of the history and current place of the Qur’an in Muslim life.

Ingrid Mattson is London and Windsor Chair of Islamic Studies at Huron University College at the University of Western Ontario. She is a recognized Islamic religious and interfaith leader. She has published numerous articles on Islam, she travels and lectures widely, and is past President of the Islamic Society of North America.
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“In *The Story of the Qur’an*, Second Edition, Professor Ingrid Mattson achieves a rare synthesis of cutting-edge scholarship and Islamic piety. With the Holy Qu’ran as her guide and lens, Dr Mattson graciously introduces the reader to Islam in all its major facets, from its origins to the present. This valuable book – written by one of the great leaders of North American Islam – should be must-reading for Muslims, Christians, Jews, and all who would understand the Qu’ran and its followers. Recommended for university, church, synagogue, and mosque classes and reading groups.”

**Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, Jewish Theological Seminary**
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## Brief Contents

*Extended Contents*  
*Preface and Acknowledgments to the Second Edition*  
*Preface to the First Edition*  

1. God Speaks to Humanity  
2. The Prophet Conveys the Message  
3. The Voice and the Pen  
4. Blessed Words: The Qur’an and Culture  
5. What God Really Means: Interpreting the Qur’an  
6. Conclusion: Listening for God  

*Glossary*  
*Bibliography*  
*Index of Qur’anic Citations and References*  
*Index*
EXTENDED CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments to the Second Edition ix
Preface to the First Edition xi

1 God Speaks to Humanity 1
   God Hears and Responds 1
   Defining the Qur’an 2
   Ancient Origins of the Meccan Sanctuary 4
   The Arabian Context 7
   The Arabic Language 11
   The Jahiliyya: A Time of Lawlessness and Immorality 13
   The Early Life of Muhammad 16
   Muhammad as the Messenger of God 18

2 The Prophet Conveys the Message 27
   Historicizing the Qur’an 27
   The Medium and the Message 34
   God Is One 37
   Moral Conduct and Its Ultimate Consequences 46
   Servants of God 50
   Persecution of Believers Past and Present 55
   Establishing a Viable State and a Just Political Order 61
   Building Community 68
   A Door to Heaven Is Closed 73

3 The Voice and the Pen 79
   A Sacred Pedigree 79
   Recited and Written 85
Extended Contents

The Prophet and the First Collection of the Qur’an 88
The Early Generations: Regional Schools of Recitation and the Elaboration of the *Mushaf* 100
Standardizing the Curriculum 105
Qur’anic Recitation and Ritual Life 109
Breaking the Tradition 119
The Value of Memorization 124
Transmission of the Qur’an in the Modern Age 127
Conclusion 133

4 Blessed Words: The Qur’an and Culture 141

The Qur’an as the Word of God 141
The Qur’an and Sacred Architecture 147
The Elevation of the Qur’an 155
Language, Naming, and Common Expressions 157
Ritual Purity and Purifying Rituals 161
Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife 168

5 What God Really Means: Interpreting the Qur’an 185

Exegesis before Hermeneutics 185
The Epistemological Challenge 193
Intertextuality: The Isra’iliyyat 197
Occasions of Revelation 201
Understanding the Language of the Qur’an 204
Relating the Sunna to the Qur’an 210
Deriving Legal Norms from the Qur’an 215
Consensus and Diversity in Legal Reasoning 223
Modernity: Making the Words “Reasonable” 226
Some Contested Issues 235
Inheritance 235
Wife-beating 237
Conclusion 242

6 Conclusion: Listening for God 247

Glossary 267
Bibliography 271
Index of Qur’anic Citations and References 287
Index 289
The second edition of this book includes corrections to printing errors, misstatements of fact, infelicities of style, and missing citations in the first edition. This revised edition also includes additional discussion on suffering, death, mourning, and the afterlife as well as an expanded discussion of various hermeneutical approaches to the Qur'an and controversial legal issues.

I am grateful to all those readers and reviewers whose comments on the first edition helped me improve the book. Special thanks are due to Professor Shawkat Toorawa for his extensive corrections and to HRH Ghazi Bin Muhammad for his valuable suggestions. I am greatly appreciative of Rebecca Harkin, my publisher at Wiley-Blackwell, who requested the second edition and who has always been responsive to my concerns and inquiries.
I chose to write this book after teaching an introductory, graduate-level course on the Qur’an at Hartford Seminary for a number of years. To that end, it reflects my interest in having an academically grounded but accessible introduction to the Qur’an. I have tried not to burden the general educated reader with too many specialized terms and concepts. At the same time, by referencing a number of important Islamic thinkers and providing annotations to specialized research, I have sought to make this book a starting point for those interested in a deeper study of the Qur’an and Islam. I have included both English-language studies and original Arabic sources in the Bibliography. When available, I have referred to English-language translations of Arabic sources to facilitate further study by a broader readership.

In many ways, this book reflects my personal perspective on the Qur’an. In an introductory work like this, the author can select only a small number of Qur’anic verses to discuss, refer to only a fraction of the important Muslim thinkers and writers in this field, and highlight only a handful of significant historical incidents and cultural developments. At the same time, the reader might notice that I approach the Qur’an from the perspective of a Western academic who is also trying to live as a faithful Muslim. This is not the only perspective on the Qur’an, but it is one that, perhaps, has been underrepresented in the literature.

The Qur’an has been a topic of great interest on the part of Western media and the general public in recent years. Unfortunately, many people take the liberty of speaking about the meaning of the Qur’an without having studied it. What is most remarkable is the rise of what I will call the “non-Muslim Islamic fundamentalist.” These are people who (perhaps because they read their own scripture in a literal and decontextualized fashion)
open an English translation of the meaning of the Qur’an and, plucking a verse out of context, declare that this is proof that “Muslims believe (this) or (that).” Some of these individuals might honestly be interested in knowing what the Qur’an says. I hope that this book will be of some assistance to those people. Others, who are ideologically opposed to Muslims and Islam – whether because of religious intolerance or for political reasons – will continue to try to reduce the breadth and diversity of the Islamic experience to the views of an extremist, militant minority.

Citing the Qur’an

Passages of the Qur’an are cited throughout this book with two distinctive features. First, most passages are set apart in italics and block quotes. I have chosen to distinguish the verses I cite in this manner to slow the reader down, and to give him or her the opportunity to reflect individually on these citations. In the end, the context provided for each citation is of my own choosing. But each of these verses can be found in other, often drastically different contexts throughout Muslim societies. Thus, a verse the reader encounters in my chapter on “culture,” where it serves as a decorative or sacred feature of an architectural space, might alternatively be found as proof for a legal judgment in a medieval text. In structuring this book in a way that allows the reader to randomly and independently skim through the chapters and reflect on the Qur’anic verses scattered throughout, I hope to replicate an aspect of the way in which Muslims can decontextualize and recontextualize verses they encounter throughout their lives.

Secondly, in most cases when citing a Qur’anic passage, I give the name of the sura in which it is found, not simply the number of the sura. Although the numbering of Qur’anic suras and verses in the text of the Qur’an (the mushaf) is not new, until very recently, in scholarly works, suras were always referred to by their name, not their number. In my experience, it is far easier to remember the name of a sura than its number when trying to recall the location of a specific verse. Consequently, I believe that it is more advantageous to readers generally, and to students specifically, to identify the name of the sura in which cited verses are found.
Arabic Transliteration

There are a number of different systems for transliterating the Arabic language. In a complete system of transliteration, diacritics (dots or lines under or over letters) are used to distinguish a number of Arabic phonemes. For the sake of simplicity, I have not used any diacritics except for ‘ and ’ to signify ‘ayn and hamza.

To avoid confusion, throughout the book, wherever an author I am citing uses a different transliteration for Qur’an (i.e., “Koran,” “Qoran,” “Quran,” etc.) I have changed it to “Qur’an.” I have done the same with muslim and other common Islamic terms.

Dates

The Islamic calendar begins in 622 CE with the emigration (hijra) of the Prophet Muhammad to Medina. The Islamic hijri year is comprised of 12 lunar months of 29 or 30 days each. This means that an Islamic calendar is approximately 11 days shorter than a year of the Gregorian (solar) calendar. January 1, 2007 falls within the year 1427 AH (“after hijra”). In this book I will generally give both dates, hijri first, “common era” (CE) dates second. Sometimes biographical literature cites only the year of death; in such cases, converted dates are approximate and might be off by one year.
1

God Speaks to Humanity

God Hears and Responds

Before God mentioned her, Khawla bint Tha’lab was apparently an ordinary woman living in seventh-century Medina in the Arabian Peninsula. For every person in this tribally organized sedentary community, dignity and honor were, to a large extent, commensurate with the status of his or her group. Descent (nasab) or affiliation (wala’) with a powerful clan was, for many people, a decisive factor in determining physical security and material success. Still, every individual had opportunities to prove the strength of his or her own character (hasab). For men, politics and war were arenas of particular distinction. Most women had little chance of significantly contributing to these areas of public life, although there were notable exceptions. Rather, most women distinguished themselves by establishing and maintaining beneficial relationships with family, neighbors, and guests. Beauty, an energetic spirit, generosity, loyalty – these were the hallmarks of a noble woman. As the charms of youthful beauty faded, a woman could expect to earn increasing respect and gratitude for the relationships she had cultivated over the years.

It may have been anger that made Aws ibn Samit reject his wife with the vulgar expression, “To me, you are like the backside of my mother.” Whatever the reason, after so many years of marriage, these words reduced Khawla to the status of his mother’s behind (devoid of sensual attraction and taboo). Moreover, according to Arab custom, there was no way to revoke the declaration of zihar. Henceforth, it was prohibited for Aws to touch Khawla, yet she was not free of the marital bond. Sympathetic family
and friends had no power to override such norms and customs. Khawla’s only chance was to appeal to a power higher than social custom and patriarchal authority. And so, Khawla complained to God.

Complaining to God is not difficult; the challenge is eliciting a satisfactory response. In what Marshall Hodgson termed the “Irano-Semitic” tradition, the expected response from God entailed not only spiritual comforting but also social transformation. At the individual level, God could send a sign: a kind stranger with food and comforting words, the sun breaking free of the rain clouds, a heavenly vision appearing in a dream. Transforming society, on the other hand, required a different kind of intervention. It is for this purpose that God sent prophets with authority to speak on his behalf, empowered to overturn the existing social order.

When Khawla first went to the Arabian prophet to complain of the injustice done to her, she was disappointed. Muhammad indicated that existing customs remained normative unless God revealed a new ruling, and the Prophet had received no revelation about this issue. Khawla did not give up hope, for she knew that this custom was unjust; she continued to complain to God, and waited near his Messenger, expecting him to receive a revelation. Then the answer arrived:

God has heard the words of she who disputes with you regarding her husband and made her complaint to God. God hears your conversation. Verily God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.

Those of you who shun their wives by zihar – they are not their mothers. Their mothers are only those women who gave birth to them. Indeed they utter words that are unjust and false; but God is Absolving of Sins, All-Forgiving.

(Mujadila; 58:1–2)

With these verses God confirmed Khawla’s conviction that what had been done to her was unjust and was to be prohibited by law. Upon hearing this revelation, ‘A’isha, the Prophet’s wife who later would herself desperately need God to hear and respond to unjust claims made against her, declared, “Blessed is He whose hearing encompasses all things!”

Defining the Qur’an

Khawla’s story shows the Messenger of God to be a man deeply involved in the lives of those around him. More importantly, Khawla’s story shows that God’s speech can be elicited by the concerns of ordinary people.
The Qur’anic revelation, although transmitted through the Prophet, is not a response to his concerns alone. From an Islamic theological perspective, God created a community of men and women to whom he wanted to speak, in a manner that would have universal and eternal significance for people of other times and places.

This ruling on a form of divorce customary among pre-Islamic Arabs is one of a number of specific rulings that were revealed to Muhammad to rectify injustices present in his community. Other rulings deal with more general evils present in all societies, such as murder, theft, and betrayal of trust. Exhortations to strengthen the bonds of community are also found in abundance in the Qur’an. Honoring parents, sheltering orphans, giving charity, and fighting oppression are among the duties and hallmarks of the righteous. The foundation of all these legal and ethical pronouncements is faith in the one true God, the creator and sustainer of all creation.

Much of the Qur’anic revelation, however, is not, as is the case with Khawla’s story, obviously related to any historical event or legal dispute. The Qur’an is also infused with invocations, supplications, and doxologies:

Blessed is He in whose hand is the dominion, and He has power over all things.

He who created death and life to test which one of you is best in deeds, and He is the Eminent, the All-Forgiving.

(Mulk; 67:1–2)

Perhaps these were the words God spoke to the Prophet in his solitary moments, as he stood praying deep into the night. Other passages in the Qur’an are clearly directed to the Prophet individually, commanding him to rise and warn his people or to listen carefully to the revelation (74:1–7). Many passages of the Qur’an narrate incidents in the lives of pre-Islamic Hebrew and Arabian prophets and show how the resistance and hardship Muhammad faced in his mission to guide others to God is mirrored in the righteous struggles of his ancestors in faith:

We sent messengers before you to the communities of old; and we never sent a messenger but that they mocked him.

(Hijr; 15:10–11)

Together, these legal judgments, prayers, and narrative passages form a unity by virtue of their status as God’s words, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.
In later chapters, we will explore these themes in more depth and we will describe how the Qur’an became a textual unity that encompassed numerous discrete revelations addressing diverse issues. In this chapter, we will describe the historical context of the revelation, show how Muhammad received God’s message, and consider how the Qur’an describes itself in relation to other forms of God’s speech and guidance to humanity.

**Ancient Origins of the Meccan Sanctuary**

The story of the Qur’anic revelation begins in Mecca, a desert town located in the Hijaz, the northwestern region of the Arabian Peninsula. In the sixth century CE, Mecca was poor in natural resources and comforts; it was not a pleasant oasis, rich in date palm groves, like Yathrib, a city almost 300 miles to the north where Muhammad would eventually establish his community of believers. Mecca was sparse and dry, made habitable only because mountain springs provided enough water to sustain a town of merchants and tradespeople.

According to the history of the pre-Islamic Arabs, Mecca was founded as a settlement by Abraham, his concubine-wife Hajar, and their son Isma’il. It was Abraham and his son who built a simple structure, the Ka’ba (literally, “the cube”), as a center for the worship of God. Other traditions traced the founding of Mecca as the primordial and most holy of sacred sites to Adam, the father of humanity, but credited Abraham and his family with establishing a permanent settlement there.

In an early Islamic report, rich in symbolism and detail, the Prophet Muhammad tells the story of how the unwavering faith and determined effort of Abraham and Hajar opened the way for divine intervention to secure the establishment of this sacred site:

The first woman to use a belt was the mother of Isma’il. She used a belt so that she might hide her tracks from Sarah. Abraham brought her and her son Isma’il while she was suckling him, to a place near the Ka’ba under a tree on the spot of Zamzam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Mecca, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small skin containing some water, and set out homeward. Isma’il’s mother followed him saying, “O Abraham! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there
anything here?” She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, “Has God ordered you to do so?” He said, “Yes.” She said, “Then He will not neglect us,” and returned while Abraham proceeded onwards, and on reaching the Thaniya where they could not see him, he faced the Ka’ba, and raising both hands, invoked God saying the following prayers: “O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House in order, O our Lord, that they may offer prayer perfectly. So fill the hearts of people with love towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks.” (Ibrahim; 14:37)

Isma’il’s mother went on suckling Isma’il and drinking from the water she had. When the water in the water skin had all been used up, she became thirsty and her child also became thirsty. She watched him tossing in agony and she left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found that the mountain of Safa was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from Safa and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley like a person making a great effort (majhud), until she crossed the valley and reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and kept looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not see anybody. She repeated that (running between Safa and Marwa) seven times.

The Prophet Muhammad said: This is the source of the tradition of the running of people between (the mountains of Safa and Marwa). When she reached Marwa (for the last time) she heard a voice and she said “Shush” to herself and listened attentively. She heard the voice again and said, “O, whoever you may be! You have made me hear your voice; have you got something to help me?” And behold! She saw an angel at the place of Zamzam, digging the earth with his heel (or his wing), till water flowed from that place. She started to make something like a basin around it, using her hand in this way, and started filling her water skin with water with her hands, and the water was flowing out after she had scooped some of it.

The Prophet added: May God bestow Mercy on Isma’il’s mother! Had she left Zamzam (to flow freely), Zamzam would have been a stream flowing on the surface of the earth. The Prophet further added: Then she drank and suckled her child. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid of being neglected, for this is the house of God which will be built by this boy and his father, and God never neglects His people.” The house at that time was on a high place resembling a hillock, and when torrents came, they flowed to its right and left.

She lived in that way till some people from the tribe of Jurhum or a family from Jurhum passed by her and her child, as they were coming through the way of Kada. They landed in the lower part of Mecca where they saw a bird
that had the habit of flying around water and not leaving it. They said, “This bird must be flying around water, though we know that there is no water in this valley.” They sent one or two messengers who discovered the source of water, and returned to inform them of the water. So, they all approached. The Prophet added: Isma’îl’s mother was sitting near the water. They asked her, “Do you allow us to stay with you?” She replied, “Yes, but you will have no right to possess the water.” They agreed to that. The Prophet further said: Isma’îl’s mother was pleased with the situation as she used to love to share the company of the people. So, they settled there, and later on they sent for their families who came and settled with them so that some families became permanent residents there. The child (i.e., Isma’il) grew up and learned Arabic from them and (his virtues) caused them to love and admire him as he grew up, and when he reached the age of puberty they had him marry a woman from amongst them. …

Then Abraham stayed away from them for a period as long as God wished, and called on them afterwards. He saw Isma’il under a tree near Zamzam, sharpening his arrows. When he saw Abraham, he rose up to welcome him (and they greeted each other as a father does with his son or a son does with his father). Abraham said, “O Isma’il! God has given me an order.” Isma’il said, “Do what your Lord has ordered you to do.” Abraham asked, “Will you help me?” Isma’il said, “I will help you.” Abraham said, “God has ordered me to build a house here,” pointing to a hillock higher than the land surrounding it. The Prophet added: Then they raised the foundations of the House (i.e., the Ka’ba). Isma’il brought the stones and Abraham was building, and when the walls became high, Isma’il brought this stone and put it for Abraham who stood over it and carried on building, while Isma’il was handing him the stones, and both of them were saying, “O our Lord! Accept (this service) from us, Verily, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing” (Baqarah; 2:127)

The Prophet added: Then both of them went on building and going round the Ka’ba saying: O our Lord! Accept (this service) from us, Verily, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.

With this narrative of the founding of Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad reaffirms the ancient sanctity of the site for his contemporaries. At the same time, Muhammad’s message is that Islam is not a renunciation of the traditions of the Arabs. He shows that their revered ancestors, Abraham, Hajar, and Isma’il, did not worship the idols with whom the Arabs had since populated the Ka’ba; rather, they had worshipped the One true God. Thus it is Islam, not idol worship, that is the original belief and most authentic carrier of Arab tradition. We shall see in a later chapter that this idea, that
Islam is a revival of their original beliefs, is a message that the Qur’an will also direct to Christians and Jews.

The Arabian Context

In the late sixth century CE, Mecca was ruled by the tribe of Quraysh, the tribe into which Muhammad was born. Tribes across Arabia, both settled and nomadic, were not united in any political body nor were they ruled by a common authority. For centuries, various powers, including the Byzantines, the Persians, and the Ethiopians, had ventured into the Peninsula to secure their interests. The Byzantine and Persian empires, at war with each other, at times engaged the services of nomadic tribesmen living in the northern regions of the Peninsula to protect and expand their borders. Money, honorary titles, and other incentives were bestowed upon tribes that, in spite of the best hegemonic efforts of the empires, remained fickle and were inclined to switch sides whenever they felt it served their interests. In Yemen, the southernmost part of the Peninsula, the sixth century witnessed struggles for power in the wake of the collapse of centralized authority. A Jewish ruler who persecuted Christians, whom Muslim scholars later identified as the martyrs memorialized in Sura 84 of the Qur’an, was overthrown by armies sent by the Christian ruler (the “Negus”) of Abyssinia. East African hegemony over South Arabia continued for half a century until the Persian Sassanians took control (Figure 1.1).

Within the Peninsula, alliances among tribes were always shifting, but they brought a measure of stability and predictability. Alliances were made for mutual protection and to facilitate trade and travel. Weak and depopulated clans could easily be forced into concessions, for the alternative was a life of constant insecurity, death, and captivity by stronger groups. In the late sixth century, the Quraysh seemed to have been able to develop enough lasting alliances to allow them to engage in caravan trade across the Peninsula, especially between Yemen and Syria. That Mecca was held sacred by many tribes throughout Arabia gave the Quraysh a distinct advantage.

Mecca was seldom directly affected by the political and military struggles occurring along the periphery of the Arabian Peninsula. However, around the year 570 CE, the year in which Muhammad was reported to have been born, Mecca’s sanctuary was almost destroyed. According to early Muslim
Figure 1.1  The Arabian Peninsula was surrounded by empires, yet controlled by none at the beginning of the seventh century.
historians, the incident was precipitated by the building of a magnificent church in Sana’a, which the Meccans interpreted as an attempt to rival the Ka’ba and divert the Arab pilgrimage to South Arabia. One or more Meccans reacted by defiling the church, making the Abyssinian general Abraha determined to destroy the Ka’ba. Abraha’s army prepared for war, and marched toward Mecca with an elephant who would help them reap destruction upon the temple. According to Islamic sources, the elephant refused to march upon the Ka’ba, despite being beaten, and the army was miraculously destroyed by a flock of birds that filled the sky and pelted them with stones.

The Meccans understood the outcome of the “Battle of the Elephant” to be a clear indication that God protected and blessed the Ka’ba. This was confirmed in the Islamic period with a Qur’anic revelation about the incident:

> Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the Elephant?
> Did We not disrupt their plans?
> And send against them flock of birds?
> Hitting them with hard clay stones;
> Leaving them like a field of grazed crops.

(Fil; 105)

The pre-Islamic Arabians were not surprised that supernatural forces could disrupt the normal course of human affairs. They were aware that certain places and particular times had special significance to unseen forces. In their journeys they passed through haunted valleys, they rested by blessed trees, and they sought advice from soothsayers. Scattered throughout the desert were oasis sanctuaries (harams), where local holy families maintained shrines and mediated disputes. But the greatest and most widely honored sanctuary in Arabia was the Ka’ba of Mecca.

By the time Muhammad was born, it seems that the Quraysh and other local tribes had for generations deemed the Ka’ba and the hills of Safa and Marwa to be sacred. Historical sources indicate, however, that the Quraysh developed Mecca as the premier pilgrimage site for the Arabs just a few decades before the birth of Muhammad. It was Muhammad’s grandfather, ‘Abd al-Muttalib, who is credited with rediscovering the well of Zamzam. By the end of the sixth century, tribes from across the Arabian Peninsula made annual pilgrimage to Mecca, where they engaged in a diverse set of rituals. The use of stone and wooden idols in worship is said to have been
common, and the veneration of ancestors and animal sacrifices made in their names widespread. Pilgrimage was conducted during certain months deemed sacred and, during these times, strangers and even enemies could mix in Mecca without fear. No weapons were allowed in the Meccan sanctuary and violent actions were prohibited. The Quraysh hosted the pilgrims, providing water and other amenities to the guests of “the House of God,” as the Ka’ba was known.

Figure 1.2 Mary and Child from Saint Catherine’s Monastery, Egypt. (Wikipedia/K. Weitzmann: “Die Ikone”). Early Muslims seem to have identified more closely with Christians than they did later when Islamic and Christian empires conflicted. An early biographer of Muhammad said that he left untouched a depiction of Jesus and Mary when he removed the idols from the Ka’ba; this report was rejected by later Muslim scholars. (Ibn Hisham, p. 552)
The major religions of Africa and Western Asia – Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism – were certainly not unknown to the residents of Mecca. There were at least a few Christians living in and around Mecca and Christianity had a significant presence in Yemen, particularly in the southern city of Najran. A number of Jewish tribes lived in the city of Yathrib, with which Muhammad had ancestral ties. Yathrib would later become “Medina,” the “City of the Prophet,” when Muhammad established his Islamic community there in the thirteenth year of his mission.

In their travels and trade, the Quraysh were exposed to Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities from Syria, Persia, Yemen, and Abyssinia. The Quraysh, perhaps because they were so deeply attached to the Ka’ba, did not adopt any of these religions. It would be the mission of Muhammad to reconcile the particular sanctity of the Ka’ba with a universal monotheism through the Abrahamic model. Muhammad would criticize the use of these idols and their presence inside the Ka’ba as a violation of the monotheistic principles established by their ancestor Abraham. Until that time, those few Meccans who were troubled by idol veneration were said to have sought the true religion of Abraham (al-hanifīyya), some eventually adopting Christianity, others remaining independent, unaffiliated monotheists (Figure 1.2). These individuals are reported to have abstained from eating meat sacrificed to idols and to have shunned rituals they deemed idolatrous.

The Arabic Language

Although the pre-Islamic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula were not united under a common political or religious authority, they did share many important aspects of culture. By the seventh century, the Arabic language especially had emerged as a vehicle for the transmission of values and identity that distinguished the Arabian tribes from other groups. At this time, the written language was incipient and little used, but oral communication was highly sophisticated.

Poetry was the greatest cultural production of the pre-Islamic Arabs, who developed multiple genres and regional variations of poetic forms. Poems were recited orally, and their rhyming verses and internal meters gave them a musical feel – sometimes they were even accompanied by music or at least the beat of a staff. Poets boasted of romantic liaisons and military conquests, and lamented departed lovers and fallen comrades. In the qasida, a form of epic poetry held in the highest esteem by the pre-Islamic Arabs, group
solidarity was emphasized and reinforced by poets who praised loyalty to kinsmen and lambasted the enemy. Great warriors and tribal chiefs were praised for showing kindness to widows and orphans in acts of *noblesse oblige*. That the wealth they distributed among themselves came from raiding and plunder was not problematic. Labid, one of the great pre-Islamic poets, represents this view in the following selection from one of his poems:

Every indigent woman seeks the refuge
of my tent ropes,
Emaciated, rag-clad, like a starved she-camel hobbled
at her master's grave.
When winter's winds wail back and forth
her orphans plunge
Into streams of flowing gravy which
my clan crowns with meat.
When tribal councils gather,
there is always one of us
Who contends in grave affairs
and shoulders them,
A divider of spoils who gives
each clan its due,
Demanding their rights for the worthy,
the rights of the worthless refusing
Out of superior might; a man munificent,
who with his bounty succors,
Openhanded; a winner and plunderer of all
that he desires –25

Among the pre-Islamic Arabs, mercy and forgiveness toward enemies were disdained. Manliness (*muruwwa*) was proven by boldly pursuing revenge for fallen kin. Only bloodshed could restore the integrity of a group attacked by an outsider. Even women had their own genre of poetry in which they encouraged their men to seek revenge for fallen kin, and belittled any man willing to accept compensation or reconciliation. In lines typical of this genre, one pre-Islamic woman challenges the virility of the men of her tribe if they do not seek retribution for their slain kinsman:

If you will not seek vengeance for your brother
Take off your weapons
And fling them on the flinty ground
Take up the eye pencil, don the camisole
Dress yourselves in women's bodices
What wretched kin you are to a kinsman oppressed!

Upholding martial virtues did not prevent pre-Islamic Arabs from expressing a range of emotions, and poets of this period described their natural environment with great sensitivity and beauty. However, whereas the Qur’anic revelation would draw attention to natural elements as signifiers of the Creator, and proof that God would recreate life after death, the pre-Islamic poet had no such basis for hope. Separated from his kin, the mood of the poet was nostalgic and melancholic. For him, the landscape was scattered with traces of an irretrievable past and with portents of a certain and final departure. Before becoming a Muslim, Khansa‘, a celebrated poet, describes how after the death of her beloved brother Sakhr, the world signified to her only loss and despair:

The rising sun reminds me of Sakhr
and I remember him each time the sun sets.

Mecca was a prime location to hear the best Arab poets recite their verses. In the decades before the birth of Muhammad, as increased trade enabled the Quraysh to establish a more secure position for themselves in the Arabian Peninsula, Mecca’s importance as a cultural center also increased. It was here in the ‘Ukaz market that the finest poets gathered every year to recite their epics in a lively competition. It was said that over the years, some poems were deemed so extraordinary that they were hung (mu‘allaq – hence they were known collectively as the “Mu‘allaqat”) with honor on the Ka‘ba. Muhammad grew up in a sanctuary in which the House of God was literally draped in eloquent language.

The Jahiliyya: A Time of Lawlessness and Immorality

Conversion narratives are important in most religious traditions. These narratives show the way faith transforms individuals by taking them out of the darkness of disbelief to the light of truth. These narratives also show the way that faith can dramatically transform a society mired in immorality and corruption to become a moral and just community of believers.
Early Muslims called the pre-Islamic period the *Jahiliyya*, a word signifying immaturity, immorality, and ignorance. In a speech that Muhammad’s cousin Ja’far ibn Abi Talib is said to have made to the Negus of Abyssinia when a group of early Muslims sought his protection from the religious persecution of the Quraysh, Ja’far describes the *Jahiliyya* and the change brought about by Islam thus:

O King, we were an uncivilized people, worshipping idols, eating corpses, committing abominations, breaking natural ties, treating guests badly, and our strong devoured our weak. Thus we were until God sent us an apostle whose lineage, truth, trustworthiness, and clemency we know. He summoned us to acknowledge God’s unity and to worship him and to renounce the stones and images which we and our fathers formerly worshipped. He commanded us to speak the truth, be faithful to our engagements, mindful of the ties of kinship and kindly hospitality, and to refrain from crimes and bloodshed. He forbade us to commit abominations, to speak lies, to devour the property of orphans, to vilify chaste women. He commanded us to worship God alone and not to associate anything with Him, and he gave us orders about prayer, almsgiving, and fasting …

Early Muslims did recognize that before Islam, the Arabs had some laudable qualities, such as generosity and nobility; however, group partisanship mostly prevented the development of a commitment to moral responsibility beyond the tribe. Similarly, although the Quraysh had established some valuable agreements for furthering the economic and political stability of Mecca, a commitment to individual rights was absent. For example, early Muslim sources mention the Treaty (*hilf*) of Fudul as an important achievement of the pre-Islamic Quraysh. The treaty was devised after a visiting merchant to Mecca had been robbed, and a group of the city’s notables gathered to bind themselves “by a solemn agreement that if they found anyone, either a native of Mecca or an outsider, had been wronged they would take part against the aggressor and see that the stolen property was returned to him.” The Prophet Muhammad would later praise this treaty and say that he would sign it even if it were compacted in Islamic times, showing that Muslims should embrace justice wherever it was found. The Treaty of Fudul demonstrated that it was possible to develop a rule of law that transcended tribal loyalties. At the same time, the treaty benefited the Quraysh above anyone else, since it ensured that their city would be secure for trade. The security of poor free and slaves, on the other hand, was clearly not one of