

*True Jihad* is the best book I have read explaining Islam to the western mind. Mark has tactfully researched, chosen, and presented the most useful material that a Christian needs to understand Islam and be an effective witness to Muslims. Being a Muslim Background Believer (MBB) myself, I encourage you to read this book and put into practice what you learn.

Dr. Hormoz Shariat, “The Billy Graham of Iran,” Iran Alive Ministries

Since 9/11, Islam has continued to appear at the forefront of the news almost on a daily basis. Every Christian who is serious about sharing the greatest news ever to come to humankind, the gospel, needs to familiarize themselves with Islam and how to communicate the gospel effectively with Muslims. In *True Jihad*, Mark Pfeiffer guides readers through a brief history of Islam, how to communicate the gospel to Muslims, and how to answer their most common objections to the gospel. Highly recommended.

Michael R. Licona, Associate Professor of Theology  
Houston Baptist University

Mark Pfeiffer has challenged us to recognize that Abraham’s other children are dying of spiritual thirst—and that we are commissioned by Jesus Christ to share Living Water with them. Just as God provided physical water for Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, He still offers it to Muslims today. And we are the means of quenching that thirst. *True Jihad* is practical, passionate and provocative. If we let it, it can give us God’s own heart for Muslims, a heart of love and compassion; a heart for sharing the Truth that underlines “*true*” jihad.

René Maciel, President  
Baptist University of the Americas

We can never learn enough about Islam, but we should also make sure that what we learn is both accurate and relevant. Fortunately, Mark Pfeiffer, no stranger to Islamic culture and beliefs, has written a compact yet helpful introduction to this growing religion in North America. *True Jihad, Winning the Battle for Muslims* offers a history of this 7<sup>th</sup> century religion that is both succinct, yet thorough. More importantly, his challenge to the reader to build loving relationships with Muslims and thus communicate the gospel in the context of a genuine friendship is a call worth heeding. His answers to the theological objections most often raised by Muslims are practical without ever getting lost in the proverbial weeds of theological apologetics. Well done!

Dr. Rudy Gonzalez, Dean, and Professor of New Testament, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, San Antonio, TX; Former Director, Interfaith Evangelism, North American Mission Board, SBC Alpharetta, GA

“True Jihad” is a must read for all who want a good understanding of the Muslim people and their religion. Mark does an excellent job providing the historical background of the religion and the foundations of the Muslim faith. He gives us insights into the contemporary issues we all face in our dealings with Muslims.

This understanding gives us the foundation to fulfill the commandment given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ to love one another. Mark clearly lays out for us how to strengthen our relationship with Muslims and how to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. He closes the book with insights on theological issues that each of us faces when sharing the gospel with our friends.

This book will strengthen your understanding and your ministry to your Muslim friends and neighbors. And it will make you more effective in reaching out with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Steve Branson, Senior Pastor  
Village Parkway Baptist Church, San Antonio, TX

*True Jihad* is concise and yet comprehensive, scholarly and yet very practical. I will recommend it to my students.

Dr. Nabeel Jabbour. Professor and Author of the book *The Crescent Through The Eyes of the Cross*.

Mark Pfeiffer has written a very thoughtful book on the responsibility we have as Christians to take the gospel to all peoples, including Muslims. Pfeiffer reminds us that our fears and our ignorance are not acceptable excuses for ignoring the Great Commission and its mandate to reach all nations and people groups.

I especially commend this book as a very readable introduction to the rise of Islam, the early life of Muhammad, and -- what is not often included with introductions to Islam---practical points of theologically sound insight regarding how we can share the gospel of Christ with Muslims, especially in our own cities and neighborhoods. I am happy to commend this work for its clearly stated desire to reach Muslims for Christ.

Dr. Robert B. Sloan, Jr., President, Houston Baptist University

Dr. Pfeiffer's knowledge and heart for Muslims are immediately evident in *True Jihad*. Without the dryness of a textbook, he quickly gives the reader the fascinating basics of the history of Muhammad and Islam, then helps us see behind the veil to the hearts, hopes and worries of the many Muslims living in our communities in America.

Kirk Freeman, Senior Pastor, Crossbridge Community Church, San Antonio, Texas



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# TRUE JIHAD

*Winning the Battle for Muslims*

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MARK S. PFEIFFER



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Study Guide Available at:  
[tciis.org](http://tciis.org)



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# INTRODUCTION

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JESUS COMMANDED HIS FOLLOWERS to “make disciples of all nations.” The English word “nations” is translated from the Greek *ethne*, which literally means “ethnic group” or “people group.” The command is to make disciples of every people group in the world. The church has failed to obey the Lord’s command to disciple Muslims, who in many instances have little or no access to the gospel. Until recently, the church missionary effort ignored Muslims, instead focusing on “the harvest fields” where large numbers of people come to faith readily.

To be sure, some of the reasons why most Muslim people groups are ignorant of the gospel have nothing to do with attitudes of Christians or priorities of mission-sending agencies. Many Muslims live in countries where verbal Christian witness is illegal and harshly punished. Others live in areas difficult for foreigners, whether due to geography, climate or other factors. But none of these reasons constitutes an excuse for our failure to obey the Great Commission as it regards Muslims.

Fortunately, for Christians in the West, Muslims have migrated in large numbers to Western countries. We now realize that Muslims are not strange, exotic people from faraway lands, but are our friends, neighbors, co-workers, and fellow citizens. It seems God has announced, “If you won’t go to them, I’ll bring them to you.” Millions of Muslims now live in European countries and in all the countries of the western hemisphere, including the United States.

To the extent we ever did, we no longer have any excuse for failing to share the good news of Christ’s life, message, death and resurrection with Muslims. But even with Muslims living and working all around us, most

Christians remain stoic and uninvolved. Apart from lukewarm spiritual lives, there are other factors at work to keep Christians passive or even paralyzed in terms of witnessing to Muslims. These factors largely revolve around two concepts: fear and ignorance.

This book is designed to address these factors. In “True Jihad: Winning the Battle for Muslims,” the author hopes to educate the Christian public on the basics of Islamic history, belief and practice, and address a few of the questions most commonly on the minds of non-Muslims. This is important because to be the most effective disciples of Jesus we can be, we must love others. A large part of loving others is understanding them – their worldview, a bit of their culture, and their view of God and the spirit world. Part one of this book addresses these issues.

In part two, the book provides a simple, step-by-step guide to relationships with Muslims, ministry to Muslims and communicating the gospel to Muslims. One presumption of the book is that there is only one way, Jesus, and his gospel never changes. But there are multiple ways to communicate the gospel and we should tailor the presentation to best impact the recipient. Muslims are no different than other groups in having certain ways of viewing the world. They have specific doctrinal positions and misunderstandings that we must take into account if we wish to *effectively* share the gospel with them. Yet one need not be an expert. Anyone with a little information, equipping and the compassionate heart of Jesus, can be an effective gospel witness to Muslims.

Much of what the book addresses in part two, although written with Muslims in mind, can be translated into use with almost any other group. It should come as no surprise that the most important ingredient for a Christian witness is a passionate love for people. In the end, it is love that compels us to understand people, enter their “world,” meet them where they are, and minister to the deepest places of their hearts. May we not only learn about Muslims and learn to minister the gospel to them but renew our love for all people so that all may know him.

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PART ONE

**ISLAM AND MUSLIMS**

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# CHAPTER 1

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## The History of Islam

### *Pre-Islamic Arabia*

THE YEMENITE ARMY MARCHED northward toward the city of Mecca. Leading the way was a behemoth – an elephant of enormous size. The goal was the destruction of the House of God, known as the Kabah, at the center of Mecca. The Kabah was the most prominent of many shrines in the western region of Arabia. Pilgrims flocked to it each year, paying tribute to their tribe's particular gods or goddesses. The pilgrim trade provided Mecca a continual stream of income, as pilgrims needed lodging, food, water, and fodder for their flocks. The tribes also came to this commercial center for trade of all sorts.

The Yemenites constructed a magnificent new church, hoping to divert the lucrative pilgrim trade southward. Initially, the Yemenites had been unsuccessful in persuading the tribes of the region to switch their allegiance and worship to the new site. But their peaceful efforts at persuasion fell to the wayside when a man from Mecca, threatened by the possible loss of trade to his hometown, snuck into the magnificent church and urinated inside it. Infuriated, the Christian king set out northward to destroy the Kabah.

The army was formidable. Its success was all but certain. Several times, armies were amassed to defend Mecca and the Kabah, but each time these defenders were routed. Yet God intervened to protect his house. He sent

a flock of birds high over the army, carrying small pebbles in their beaks and claws. At God's command, the birds dropped their pebbles upon the army, completely destroying it. The pebbles hit the soldiers in their heads, passed through them and came out the other end. Limbs were torn from bodies. The elephant became frightened and refused to continue. This miraculous event occurred during what became known as the "Year of the Elephant." The events are memorialized in the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, as follows -

Do you [Prophet] not see how your Lord dealt with the army of the elephant? Did He not utterly confound their plans? He sent ranks of birds against them, pelting them with pellets of hard-baked clay: He made them [like] cropped stubble.<sup>1</sup>

Modern commentators on the Qur'an attribute this "destruction" of the army to an outbreak of smallpox or measles that struck Mecca that year. Regardless, the event is memorable to Muslims because, in this year, around 570 AD, a baby boy was born in Mecca. His birth was without fanfare. There were no miraculous events, no prophecies fulfilled, and no angelic appearances. The circumstances of his birth were completely unremarkable. His mother named him Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah.

The society into which Muhammad was born was backward and primitive. Society was organized around tribes and clans within those tribes. Tribes were formed from extended families. Sometimes smaller and weaker tribes would join themselves to larger and more powerful tribes, and sometimes larger tribes would divide. Tribes were constantly at war with each other, whether to obtain food, livestock, grazing lands or women. Every male member of a tribe was expected to fight for the tribe, and the tribe was always there to protect every member. "One for all and all for one" was never truer than with these tribes.

Without government, police, or military, membership in a tribe was the only means of safety and survival. There was no moral or ethic that served to control human passion. The law of retaliation, *lex talionis*, or "an eye for

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1 Qur'an sura 105, verses 1-5 (cited 105:1-5, and so throughout). All citations to the Qur'an are from *The Qur'an*, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), unless otherwise noted.



an eye” was the law of the land, and the only force that restrained human lusts. An attack on a member of one tribe guaranteed a commensurate attack on the offender’s tribe. Nevertheless, raiding other tribes, as well as caravans or any vulnerable target, was a way of life for the nomadic tribes of Arabia.

Each tribe had its own god, gods or goddesses, although each may have recognized one supreme god. The Meccan tribes recognized one supreme god, Al-lah, but also worshipped subsidiary gods and goddesses. These included the three female daughters of Allah who went by the names Manat, al-Lat, and al-Uzza. The tribes made pilgrimages to shrines honoring each of these gods, the Kabah being the largest and most prominent of these. Given the war-like nature of tribal society, custom provided for several months per year when fighting was strictly prohibited. Thereby, people could travel in safety to make their pilgrimages. Fighting within the confines of a shrine was also prohibited, which allowed vendors to safely conduct business year around. The Kabah created the context for a thriving commercial environment.

Although highly pagan and polytheistic, the Arabs were familiar with various monotheistic peoples. Tribes of Jews lived in the area. These Jews were probably sectarian, recognizing only the Torah and the Psalms as their scripture because when the Qur’an mentions the holy books of the Jews, it only mentions these books. The Arabs knew the Ebionites, a Christian sect with a presence in Mecca itself. Arab monotheists were known as *Hanifs* who were thought to be related to the Jews and Christians as descendants of Abraham.

In addition to the pilgrimage trade, Meccans were also skilled traders. Caravans carrying trade goods traveled south to Yemen, northwest to the region of Syria and Jordan, and northeast to Iraq. The Meccans and others paid pre-arranged protection fees to pass through various territories controlled by the local tribes. These payments were cheaper than carrying along a force of fighting men sufficient in strength to protect the caravans from raids. These arrangements resulted in alliances among the Meccans and various tribes of the area.

The Arab people were generally uneducated and highly superstitious. Yet those who worked the caravans were familiar with more advanced civilizations. The Byzantines to the northwest and the Persians to the northeast controlled the territories to which the Meccan caravans traveled, meaning the Arabs were exposed to the cultures and religions of these

empires. In fact, since caravans were particularly vulnerable at night, traders from throughout the region spent the nights at caravanserais. They gathered around campfires and traded stories of their homelands, people, folklore, prophets and religions.

Although generally uneducated, the Arabs enjoyed the arts, especially poetry. They used poetry to extol the virtues of their ancestors, ridicule their enemies, and express to the public whatever messages they desired. Gifted poets were said to be *majnun*, either possessed by or aided by spiritual beings known as *jinn* (from which we get the English word “genie”). Poets would pin their works to the outer walls of buildings, including the Kabah.

### *Muhammad's Early Life*

Muhammad's upbringing was unfortunate. Before he was born, his father died while working on a caravan. When he was only a few years old his mother Aminah died. Muhammad was shuffled off to a grandfather and then to an uncle, Abu Talib, who ultimately reared him. Abu Talib was the clan leader for the Banu Hashim clan of the Quraysh tribe of Mecca.

Muhammad worked the caravans as his father had done. He was able to travel and interact with those from other lands, cultures, and religions. In addition to various Christian and Jewish groups, he also encountered Zoroastrians from the Persian Empire. Muhammad became troubled by the more advanced and civilized state of these monotheistic religions and peoples compared to the backward polytheism and superstition of his Arab brethren. These foreigners told many stories of prophets and their exploits, often in slightly corrupted form relative to the accounts recorded in the various holy books. But Muhammad undoubtedly noted the Arabs had not a single prophet, nor a holy book, and thus suffered from pervasive superstition and polytheism.

In his work on the caravans, Muhammad developed a reputation for honesty and trustworthiness. He caught the eye of a wealthy widow, Khadijah, who had inherited a caravan business from her late husband. She hired Muhammad to lead her caravans. Eventually, when Muhammad was twenty-five years old and Khadijah was forty, they married. Khadijah's

cousin Waraqa bin Nawfal, the Ebionite Christian priest of Mecca,<sup>2</sup> performed the ceremony.

Khadijah's wealth meant Muhammad was freed from the requirements of labor. He often retreated to a cave outside Mecca to pray and contemplate the societal problems he had observed among Arabs relative to the more advanced monotheistic societies he had encountered on his caravan trips. He sometimes spent days at a time in the cave. His fervent prayer finally paid off.

## *The First Revelation*

One day while Muhammad was meditating in the cave, a spiritual being appeared to him a very strange way. The being pressed him against the ground, squeezing his chest so hard that Muhammad thought he would die. The being released the pressure and ordered him to "read." Muhammad replied, "What shall I read?" The being again pressed him to the point of death, released him, and ordered him to "read." Muhammad replied as he had the first time, and then the sequence repeated again. After this third time, upon releasing him, the being ordered Muhammad as follows -

Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by [means of] the pen, who taught man what he did not know. (96:1-5)

Muhammad recounts that he recited these words, and the being left him. He was terrified, believing he was possessed by the *jinn*, or had gone mad. He feared what the Meccans would say of him. He determined that he would commit suicide, throwing himself off a mountain cliff. However, the being intervened, assuring him he had been chosen as the Messenger

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2 The Ebionites were a heretical sect of Christianity, and accepted only *The Gospel According to the Hebrews* as their scripture, rejecting the canonical gospels and the works of Paul. The early church universally condemned this gospel. It is lost to us now but is quoted by the early church fathers. It taught that Mary was the Holy Spirit (cf. Qur'an 5:116) and that Jesus was never crucified (cf. Qur'an 4:157). For an analysis of the Ebionites, *The Gospel According to the Hebrews*, Waraqa bin Nawfal and his influence on Muhammad and the Qur'an, see Joseph Azzi, *The Priest and the Prophet* (Los Angeles: The Pen Publishers, 2005).

of God for the Arab peoples. Muhammad relented but was still distraught. He returned home and told Khadijah to cover him. When he returned to his senses, he explained to Khadijah what had happened. She assured him he was a righteous man, and Allah would not dishonor him. Still unsure, Muhammad and Khadijah went to visit Waraqa bin Nawfal, her cousin, and the Ebionite Christian priest of Mecca. Waraqa identified the spiritual being as an angel of Allah, the same spirit that appeared to Moses. Much later, Muslim scholars came to view the being as the angel Gabriel. Gradually, Muhammad accepted that rather than being insane or possessed by the *jinn*, he was Allah's messenger to the Arab people.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Meccan Period*

For a period of time, Muhammad only shared his experiences with his family, who were the first to accept him as a prophet, and accept the divine nature of his message. But eventually, Gabriel ordered Muhammad to begin delivering the revealed messages to the people of Mecca.

During these initial stages, the message revealed by Gabriel to Muhammad, and delivered by Muhammad to the Meccans, was unobjectionable. Muhammad emphasized the unity of God, moral behavior, and regard for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. He taught that he was a messenger in the lineage of Abraham, Moses, and others in the monotheistic faith of the Jews and Christians. He attempted to attract people by reciting revelations containing familiar stories about these prophets and other biblical stories. He taught that Jews and Christians who followed their religions faithfully would find favor with Allah in the

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3 Waraqa was highly influential in Muhammad's mission. When Waraqa died, the revelations Muhammad received mysteriously ceased for some period of time. See *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 1, *hadith* 3; book 60, *hadith* 478; book 87, *hadith* 111 (cited 1:3, 60:478, and 87:111 hereafter).

afterlife. He taught that religion was a matter of free choice, and no one could be compelled to believe anything against their will.<sup>4</sup>

Other than his family, few believed him. His message was unattractive to the Meccans. Strict monotheism meant the Arabian pantheon did not exist. If the gods and goddesses of the tribes did not exist, there would be no need to make the pilgrimage to the Kabah. Without the pilgrimage, the business interests of the Meccans would be severely compromised. However, with the protection of his uncle and clan leader Abu Talib, he met little opposition.

Muhammad began preaching strict monotheism and that Allah only loves those who believe in him alone. It was at this point that resistance to Muhammad began to grow. He also taught that Allah hates all polytheists, whose destiny was the hellfire. The Meccans heard the obvious implication that their ancestors, whose righteousness, bravery, and honor they venerated in their lore and poetry, were all in hell. This message was intolerable. Further, the Arabs were quite familiar with various men claiming to be prophets, and along with that claim came the natural right to political power among the faithful. Muhammad's insistence that Allah had sent him as prophet to the Arabs meant he could claim political leadership of the entire city and tribal confederation.

Eventually, the Meccans began to actively resist Muhammad and his slowly increasing number of followers. The Banu Hashim clan under the leadership of Abu Talib continued to protect Muhammad, but his followers, who were often members of other tribes and clans, suffered abuse at the hands of their own tribesmen. Some of his followers began to recant their new faith and return to their old tribal belief system. Worried both about the loss of followers and the abuse the faithful endured, Muhammad sent many of his followers to Abyssinia, modern day Ethiopia, where they could live under the protection of Abyssinia's Christian king.

The environment Muhammad faced in Mecca was difficult. He was rejected by his kinsmen and his followers suffered abuse and exile. He

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4 Qur'an 2:256. The verse, which says "there is no compulsion in religion," is now highly controversial. Most Islamic authorities contend the verse has been abrogated, or cancelled, by the "verse of the sword," Qur'an 9:5, which reads, "When the [four] forbidden months are over, wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post; but if they turn [to God], maintain the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, let them go on their way, for God is most forgiving and merciful."

desperately desired reconciliation with the Meccans and an opportunity presented itself. Some of the Meccan leaders suggested a bargain. They would bestow upon Muhammad wealth, a good marriage, and a position of importance in the tribe if he would only mention their three goddesses in his revelations. Shortly, the following was revealed to Muhammad -

Have you thought about al-Lat and al-Uzza and Manat, the third? These are the high flying swans whose intercession is accepted with approval. (53:19-20 in its original form)

The Meccans were happy to hear Muhammad affirm the reality of their goddesses and the efficacy of prayers offered to them. Muhammad prostrated himself in prayer and the Meccans joined him. The Muslims in Abyssinia received word of this reconciliation and began their return home. But the peace did not last long. Gabriel appeared once again to Muhammad, scolding him for allowing Satan to reveal a message through him. Gabriel revealed to Muhammad the correct version of the passage, which now appears in the Qur'an as follows -

[Disbelievers], consider al-Lat and al-Uzza, and the third one, Manat - are you to have the male and He the female? That would be a most unjust distribution! - these are nothing but names you have invented yourselves, you and your forefathers. God has sent no authority for them. These people merely follow guesswork and the whims of their souls ... (53:19-23 as it appears now)

The Meccans were furious and withdrew their offer. The verbal assaults on Muhammad increased. Muhammad was distraught and depressed at having been duped by Satan. The Muslims, who were returning to Mecca from Abyssinia, did not know whether to continue or turn back. But Allah comforted Muhammad in his travails with another revelation -

We have never sent any messenger or prophet before you [Muhammad] into whose wishes Satan did not insinuate something, but God removes what Satan insinuates and then God affirms His message. God is all knowing and wise: ... (22:52)

This account has been called “The Satanic Verses.” It appears in authoritative Islamic texts during the first four centuries of Islam. During these early centuries, no one questioned the veracity of the account and it was universally accepted. Eventually, Muslim scholars realized the implications of the “Satanic Verses” account to the legitimacy of Islam. Questions arose such as how it was that Muhammad could not distinguish between Gabriel and Satan. If he could not distinguish between them how do we know that other verses of the Qur’an, even most or all of them, did not come from Satan? Muhammad must have been able to distinguish between them if Islam is truly the religion of Allah. But then the question arises, if he could distinguish between Gabriel and Satan, such that Muhammad would instantly reject any words from Satan, what was the source of the Satanic Verses? If it was not Allah or Satan, would it not have been Muhammad himself? If so, how do we know which verses of the Qur’an are from Allah and which are from Muhammad? In short, the theological implications became clear. If Islam was to remain a legitimate religion the entire account had to be rejected. In fact, Islamic orthodoxy today completely rejects the account of the Satanic Verses. This aversion to the account is so thorough and so visceral that the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a *fatwa*, or legal judgment, authorizing the murder of British author Salman Rushdie. What did Rushdie do? He had the audacity to title one of his novels *The Satanic Verses*.

Non-Muslim scholars almost universally accept the historical accuracy of the account. They cite the widespread and uncritical rendition of the account in all the early and authoritative Islamic sources. They also cite the universal acceptance of it by Muslims for the first several centuries of Islam. Finally, they rely on the extreme unlikelihood that Muslims would have invented the account or had it foisted upon them by critics of Islam. They also cite the Qur’an *sura* 22, verse 52, comforting and reassuring Muhammad that Satan inserts something into the message of every prophet, but God is faithful to remove whatever Satan inserts. After all, from what did Muhammad need such comfort and reassurance if not from the incident of the Satanic Verses?

In any event, the persecution of Muslims continued. As long as the clan leader, Abu Talib, was around to assert his authority and insist on Muhammad’s protection, Muhammad’s own situation, as opposed to that of his followers, was bearable. But the persecution reached a critical point when Abu Talib died and was replaced by Abu Lahab. Abu Lahab

had been an opponent of Muhammad and now as clan leader had an unrestrained hand. He removed the clan's protection from Muhammad, in essence declaring "open season" to Muhammad's opponents. Allah pronounced a particularly harsh curse upon Abu Lahab for his ill-treatment of Muhammad. The Qur'an says of him:

May the hands of Abu Lahab be ruined! May he be ruined too! Neither his wealth nor his gains will help him: he will burn in the Flaming Fire – and so will his wife, the firewood-carrier, with a palm-fibre rope around her neck. (111)

### *The Hijra*

Muhammad realized his life was threatened. He and his followers migrated to Medina, a city north of Mecca. This migration is known as the *hijra*. From this migration in AD 622 the fortunes of Muhammad and his small band of followers began to change and the "Islamic era" began. Medina had been torn apart by tribal conflict for decades. These conflicts had become so bad that people were afraid to go outside their homes for fear of ambush by other tribes. The Medinese realized that a neutral third-party mediator was necessary to negotiate a truce. Muhammad was the perfect candidate. Muhammad agreed to serve such a role but insisted the citizens of Medina recognize him as their leader, affirm his prophetic role, and become Muslims. Many did so. Those from the three tribes of Jews in the city were particularly absent from the group of converts.

### *Muhammad's Years in Medina*

Muhammad transformed the fractured Medinese society into a new identity. The Muslims were no longer members of their historic tribes but were members of a new tribe. Tribal loyalties and oaths of protection now flowed to other Muslims, who formed a new communal identity. This new identity, which in Muslim conception was one of equality and the complete absence of class or status, was not quite the utopia imagined today. Those Muslims who migrated from Mecca with Muhammad were called *muhajirun* and were entitled to special privileges. Those among



the Medinese who converted were called the *ansar*, or “helpers.” The distinction between the groups, and the disparate treatment among them, was a source of conflict in the early Muslim community. The *ansar* had opened their homes to the *muhajirun*, supported them financially, and did not appreciate being treated as second class citizens.

The murmuring among the *ansar* concerning special privileges of the *muhajirun* was a situation that needed a resolution. The answer was not long in coming. Non-Muslims were now characterized as outsiders whose lives and property were fair game. Led by their new chief Muhammad, Muslim bands began venturing out to raid passing caravans. During the first eighteen months after the *hijra*, Muhammad led seven campaigns against Meccan caravans. The campaigns were seen as a source of wealth for the new Muslim community, a chance to repay the Meccans for their ill-treatment of the Muslims, and a chance for Muhammad to assert his new authority.

Nothing much became of these first seven campaigns. There was little fighting, no bloodshed, and no spoils taken. The only real result was to irritate the Meccans and provide a warning of what was possible in the future. But this was to change. Muhammad sent out a force with instructions to ambush a Meccan caravan at Nakhlah. This expedition, known as the Expedition of Nakhlah, resulted in one Meccan caravan attendant's death, the taking of several prisoners, and the theft of the caravan's goods.<sup>5</sup>

The event stirred up much controversy among the Muslims, as well as anger among the Meccans. The attack and murder of the caravan attendant occurred during the holy month of Rajab, during which raiding and killing were prohibited. Muhammad began taking criticism for his violation of this sacred tradition. However, Allah was quick to extricate Muhammad from this uncomfortable situation, revealing the following verse -

They ask you [Prophet] about fighting in the prohibited month. Say, ‘Fighting in that month is a great offence, but to bar others from God’s path, to disbelieve in Him,

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5 Later edits to the historical accounts change the import of Muhammad's instructions to the raiders from “ambush” to “keep a watch and report back” in order to remove from Muhammad the responsibility for the bloodshed and violation of the holy month.

prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and expel its people,  
are still greater offences in God's eyes: persecution is worse  
than killing.' (2:217)

Thus Muhammad was justified, because in the eyes of Allah, what the Meccans did in running the Muslims out of town was worse than what the Muslims did in killing them during the holy month.

The Meccans realized their caravan trade was in jeopardy, as the Muslims were now a very real threat to the northern routes. This bubbling conflict came to a head in what is known as the Battle of Badr. The Meccans had a huge caravan returning from Syria, which would need to pass through the strip of land between Medina and the Red Sea. The Meccans got word the Muslims had amassed an army of a little over 300 men intending to ambush the caravan at a well called Badr. The Meccans responded by sending out their own army of around 950 men to protect the caravan and divert it to an alternate route in hopes of eluding the ambush. The caravan did escape. This left the Meccans with a decision. Some argued the reason for their force was eliminated as the caravan had made it past Medina in safety. Others argued that this was the perfect opportunity to teach Muhammad and the Muslims a lesson. The Meccans proceeded, but when the battle turned in favor of the Muslims, the Meccans fled.

The Muslim victory was a boon for Muhammad. Lots of spoils were taken, relieving some of the economic distress in Medina. Included in the spoils were a number of Meccan soldiers, who could be ransomed for money. At least two of the prisoners were executed. A man named 'Uqbah b. Abi Mu'ayt had been particularly hostile to Muhammad back in Mecca and had written poetry critical of him. Muhammad ordered him beheaded, but right before the blade fell, 'Uqbah asked, "Who will take care of my children?" Muhammad replied, "Hell."<sup>6</sup>

The victory also signaled to the surrounding tribes that perhaps the Muslims had become more powerful than the Meccans. The Muslims themselves saw the victory as a vindication of Muhammad as a true prophet and Islam as Allah's favored religion. Hold-outs among the Medinese now submitted, and various tribes in the area shifted their allegiance to Muhammad.

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6 Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955) page 308.

Still troubling to Muhammad were the Jewish tribes of Medina. They made fun of Muhammad and the Muslims not knowing in which direction to face while praying without having been taught by the Jews. Upon Muhammad hearing these jests, a revelation came directing him to change the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to the Kabah in Mecca.

The foolish people will say, 'What has turned them away from the prayer direction they used to face?' Say, 'East and West belong to God. He guides whoever He will to the right way.' ... We only made the direction the one you used to face [Prophet] in order to distinguish those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels: that test was hard, except for those God has guided... Turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque: wherever you [believers] may be, turn your faces to it. Those who were given the Scripture know with certainty that this is the Truth from their Lord: ... (2:142-144)

This break with the Jews over the common direction of prayer was indicative of a changed attitude of Muhammad toward the Jews. The first Jewish tribe to feel his wrath was the Banu Qaynuqa, perhaps the most powerful commercial tribe in Medina. When the Muslims arrived in Medina, the Jewish tribes signed an agreement with Muhammad to support him against anyone who might attack. When the Battle of Badr was over, Muhammad challenged them to accept Islam or God would bring upon them the retribution he visited on the Meccans. Some of the Banu Qaynuqa responded that if Muhammad had faced them in battle, the outcome might have been different. At this point, Gabriel revealed to Muhammad the following verse -

And if you learn of [fear] treachery on the part of any people, throw their treaty back at them, for God does not love the treacherous. (8:58, bracketed word reflects a common alternate translation)

Muhammad's reaction to this revelation was that he feared the Banu Qaynuqa. Based on this justification, Muhammad ordered the Muslims

to lay siege to the area of the city inhabited by the Banu Qaynuqa. No one was allowed in or out for fifteen days, resulting in extreme hunger and exhaustion. The people finally came out of their houses and submitted to Muhammad. They were shackled and Muhammad ordered them all executed. One of the Arabs intervened and insisted that they had fought alongside his tribe in past battles, and should not be wasted in a single morning. Muhammad hesitated until the man grabbed him by the collar, shook him, and insisted that Muhammad let them go. Muhammad was infuriated but relented. He ordered them exiled and all of their belongings distributed between himself and the Muslims.

Muslim scholars defend the action of Muhammad by claiming the Banu Qaynuqa violated the terms of the treaty when they failed to go out with the Muslims to fight the Meccans at Badr. But most of the Muslims likewise stayed home and it is acknowledged that the Muslim force was surprised by the appearance of the Meccan army. One wonders how the Banu Qaynuqa could have known the Meccans would be there, invoking their duty to fight for Muhammad, if Muhammad and the Muslims didn't know it either.

The Muslims continued busying themselves with raids on tribes in the area, on Meccan caravans, and in dealing with the direct danger they faced with a now vigilant Mecca. Certain tribes began arriving in Medina to pledge submission to Muhammad. The Meccans defeated the Muslims in the next battle they fought, the Battle of Uhud, and Muhammad was seriously wounded. This created uncertainty in Muhammad's increasingly powerful position.

Muhammad did not feel completely secure in Medina as long as two Jewish tribes remained who refused to convert and pledge obedience to him. Muhammad first addressed his attention to the Banu al-Nadir. They were the wealthiest of the remaining Jews, owning significant lands containing date palms. Muhammad ordered siege be laid against the Banu al-Nadir until they surrendered and he sent them into exile with only what they could carry. Their remaining possessions were divided among the Muslims. The Banu al-Nadir migrated to Khaybar, a city in the region with a significant Jewish population.

The Meccans launched what they hoped would be one final assault on the Muslims in Medina. The Meccans amassed a large force of soldiers from Mecca itself and from among the still-allied tribes. The Muslims were terrified at the size of the Meccan army but help was readily present. A

Persian in their midst who had been a slave, but freed upon his conversion to Islam, advised Muhammad of a battle tactic used successfully by the Persian Empire. The Muslims followed his advice and built a trench across the boundary of the city that was vulnerable to attack. When the Meccans arrived, neither the men nor their horses and camels had seen such a thing before. The trench completely stalled them. Uncertain what to do, and after a delay of several days with only minor volleying and shouting of insults, the Meccan army melted away. This event is known as the Battle of the Trench.

At last Muhammad was in a position to deal with the final Jewish tribe of Medina, the Banu Qurayzah. The Islamic sources say that prior to the Battle of the Trench, upon seeing the approaching Meccan army, the Banu Qurayzah decided to hedge their bets. They negotiated with the Meccans about their fate should the Meccans defeat the Muslims. The Banu Qurayzah did not assist the Meccans in any way, and actually aided the Muslims by helping dig the trench, but their lack of complete commitment to the Islamic cause was more than Muhammad could take. Upon learning of their negotiations with the Meccans, Muhammad attacked the Banu Qurayzah, who escaped to their homes. The Muslims laid siege on them for a month. Finally exhausted, they pleaded for mercy, asking that Muhammad send them into exile as he had done the prior tribes. Muhammad demanded they surrender unconditionally. They did so. Muhammad ordered that trenches be dug in the middle of the city and ordered that every man and every boy who had reached puberty be beheaded. Historians estimate the number of beheaded at between 600 and 900. The women and children were taken as slaves, with Muhammad having the first choice among the women. The tribe's possessions were divided among the Muslims.

The Muslims were now completely united and had obtained through raids or voluntary submission the allegiance of many of the area tribes. They proceeded to Mecca to make the annual pilgrimage. They were stopped at the gates by the Meccans and negotiations resulted in the Treaty of Hudaiba. The treaty provided, among other things, that there would be peace between the Meccans and Muslims for ten years, and that the Meccans would vacate the city each succeeding year to allow the Muslims to make the pilgrimage unmolested. The Muslims were furious at Muhammad having allowed to pass an excellent opportunity to attack and defeat the Meccans. A revelation came down addressing the situation -

Truly We have opened up a path to clear triumph for you [Prophet] ... God was pleased with the believers ... and rewarded them with a speedy triumph and many future gains. God is mighty and wise. He has promised you [people] many future gains: He has hastened this gain for you. He has held back the hands of hostile people from you as a sign for the faithful and He will guide you to a straight path. There are many other gains [to come], over which you have no power. God has full control over them: God has power over all things. (48:1, 18-19, 20-21)

The promised gain was not long in coming. Muhammad led the Muslims on a raid of the largely Jewish city of Khaybar. Muslim scholars note that Muhammad believed the Jews of Khaybar were conspiring against the Muslims, which justified the following events. The Muslim troops began attacking fortresses in a piecemeal fashion, taking captives and spoils along the way. As the Muslim forces neared the final fortresses in the city they brought to Muhammad a man named Kinanah. Kinanah was the custodian of the treasure of the city. Muhammad demanded he reveal the location of the treasure. Kinanah refused. Muhammad ordered “torture him until you root out what he has.”<sup>7</sup> The soldiers kindled a fire on Kinanah’s chest until he almost died, and then he was beheaded.

That night a woman of Khaybar, who had been widowed that day, offered to cook dinner for Muhammad. Muhammad accepted the offer but discovered after taking a bite that the meat had been poisoned. He spit out the bite saying, “This bone informs me that it has been poisoned.”<sup>8</sup> Islamic orthodoxy says, however, that Muhammad died from this poisoning close to five years later.

The Muslims continued to increase in strength as more tribes acquiesced in the face of attacks or voluntarily submitted to Muhammad. In the process they became Muslims. In the eighth year after the *hijra*, the Muslims gathered a massive army and marched to Mecca. The Meccans saw the inevitable outcome and surrendered. No one was killed except those who were particularly harsh in their earlier criticism of Muhammad.

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7 *The History of al-Tabari*, volume VIII, “The Victory of Islam,” translated by Michael Fishbein (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1997), page 123.

8 *Id.*, page 124.

Muhammad was now not only prophet of Arabia but political ruler of most of it. His final sermon in Mecca is worth reproducing in full.

O people, listen to my words. I do not know whether I shall ever meet you again in this place after this year. O people, your blood and your property are sacrosanct until you meet your Lord, just as this day and this month of yours are sacred. Surely you will meet your Lord and He will question you about your deeds. I have [already] made this known. "Let he who has a pledge return it to the one who entrusted him with it;" (2:283; 4:58) all usury is abolished, but 'your capital' belongs to you. Wrong not and you shall not be wronged.' God has decreed that there will be no usury, and the usury of Abbas b. 'Abd al-Muttalib is abolished, all of it. All bloodshed in the pre-Islamic days is to be left unavenged... Time has completed its cycle [and is] as it was on the day that God created the heavens and the earth. 'The number of the months with God is twelve: [they were] in the Book of God on the day He created the heavens and the earth. Four of them are sacred, (9:36) the three consecutive [months] and the Rajab, [which is called the month of] Mudar, which is between Jumada [II] and Sha'ban."

"Now then, O people, you have a right over your wives and they have a right over you. You have [the right] that they should not cause any one of whom you dislike to tread your beds; and that they should not commit any open indecency. If they do, then God permits you to shut them in separate rooms and to beat them, but not severely. If they abstain from [evil], they have the right to their food and clothing in accordance with custom. **Treat women well, for they are [like] domestic animals ('awan) with you and do not possess anything for themselves.** You have taken them only as a trust from God, and you have made the enjoyment of their persons lawful by the word of God, so understand and listen to my words, O people. I have conveyed the Message, and have left you with something which, if you hold fast to it, you will never go astray: that

is, the Book of God and the sunnah of the Prophet. Listen to my words, O people, for I have conveyed the Message and understand [it]. Know for certain that every Muslim is a brother of another Muslim, and that all Muslims are brethren. It is not lawful for a person [to take] from his brother except that which he has given him willingly, so do not wrong yourselves. O God, have I not conveyed the message?' It was reported [to me] that the people said, 'O God, yes' and the Messenger of God said, 'O God, bear witness.'"<sup>9</sup>

## *Succession to Muhammad*

While on his death bed, Muhammad asked that he be brought writing materials so he could write something which, if followed, would never lead the people astray. For reasons not identified in the Muslim literature, the people wrangled and delayed over this request. Muhammad died before he could write anything. Most theorize he intended to name his successor. Before he died, his last command to those around his bed was to drive out all polytheists from the Arabian Peninsula.

Two groups vied for the right to name the successor to Muhammad. One group believed the successor would not only become the new political leader of the Islamic community but also the spiritual successor. They saw a special spiritual blessing or character in Muhammad himself so that only a descendant could claim rule. This group proposed Ali, from Muhammad's household, as the natural candidate. Others, most notably those recent converts to Islam from Mecca, desired to regain their positions of prominence in the new community. They desired only a political leader, one from among their own. They proposed Abu Bakr, the elderly and very close friend of Muhammad.

The decision was based on political maneuvering rather than on any sort of well-deliberated consensus. This created a rift within the Islamic

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9 *The History of al-Tabari*, volume IX, "The Last Years of the Prophet," translated by Ismail K. Poonawala (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), page 88 (bold text by the author). The reader will note the reference to treating women as domestic animals has been edited from later renditions of the sermon, probably to rehabilitate Muhammad's attitude toward women and remove the source of offense.



community that exists until today. Those who supported Ali became known as the Shi'ites. Those that supported Abu Bakr are known as Sunnis. These groups fought and feuded throughout the early period of Islam and still to this day do not regard the other as true Muslims.

## *Sunnis and Shi'ites*

Sunnis are by far the majority of Muslims in the world and predominate everywhere but Iran. Shi'ites are the majority in Iran and Iraq. Shi'ites believe in the perpetual succession of Muhammad in the form of a human on earth who is filled with a special spiritual blessing from Allah, and is thus the righteous and worthy guide for all of mankind. Ali became the fourth caliph, or successor, following Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthman. Shi'ites believe he was the first true successor to Muhammad. They identify eleven other caliphs after Ali. They say this twelfth caliph, also called the twelfth imam, never died but became hidden in the spiritual realms. He exists in the spiritual world to communicate with and guide the temporal leader of the faithful. The most well-known of these temporal imams was Ayatollah Khomeini, who led the revolution in Iran to overthrow the Shah, and later became the supreme ruler himself. He was succeeded by Ayatollah Khamenei, the current supreme leader in Iran.

According to the Shi'ites, humanity will always have divine guidance through the temporal imam who operates similarly to the Catholic Pope. Due to communication with the invisible twelfth imam the temporal leader is infallible in his pronouncements on Islamic belief and practice. This also means he holds extraordinary political power as well, which is not surprising given his role as political, as well as spiritual, successor to Muhammad.

Sunnis see all of this as heretical. They view the caliphate as only political succession to Muhammad so that Shi'ite imams have no special status whatsoever. They do not regard any intermediaries between Allah and his creation, and clergy fill no role other than guides and teachers. Sunnis of the Wahabi variety, such as those in Saudi Arabia, see the Shi'ite beliefs as sacrilege, as diverting to men some of the honor and authority that belong to Allah alone. They believe such constitutes polytheism, the gravest sin of Islam, and an offense that takes one outside the community of faith.

Conflict and violence in the Middle East have many causes. But looking beneath the surface one can usually identify animosity between Sunnis and Shi'ites as a factor.

## *The Wars of Apostasy*

After the death of Muhammad many of the tribes that had associated themselves with the Muslims fell away. Some rejected Islam altogether, apparently believing their oaths of loyalty were personal to Muhammad, and not to Islam as a religion. Some tribes maintained their Islamic religion, to whatever extent they understood it, but refused to continue paying taxes to Medina in accordance with their prior oaths of loyalty. Other tribes, Christian, Jew and pagan, had never submitted to Muhammad and the Muslims. These tribes became targets of aggression in accordance with Muhammad's deathbed command to rid the peninsula of all polytheists.

Under the leadership of the first caliph, Abu Bakr, the Muslim armies set out to reconvert those tribes that had fallen away, force those that had stopped paying taxes to begin doing so again, and to destroy any tribe that was not Muslim.<sup>10</sup> Rather than lose one's life in these battles, one could convert or reconvert to Islam, and pay the taxes to Medina that the Muslims required. Some of the threats used to subdue the tribes and reconvert them were less than noble. In one instance, the emissary sent by Abu Bakr to warn a tribe of the consequences of their failure to convert, told the tribe, "There is coming to you a man who will violate your womenfolk. Indeed, you will nickname him 'the Greatest Stud.' So it is your business."<sup>11</sup> Over the next couple of years, the entire Arabian Peninsula was subdued for Islam through these often brutal and bloody military campaigns.

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10 These wars are known as the "Wars of Apostasy" or by their Arabic name, the *Ridda* wars. In addition to Muhammad's deathbed command to rid the peninsula of all but Muslims, the wars are also justified by Muhammad's command to kill anyone who leaves Islam. See *Sahih Bukhari* 83:17 and *Sahih Muslim* 16:4152.

11 *The History of al-Tabari*, volume X, "The Conquest of the Arabs," translated by Fred McGraw Donner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), page 61.

## *The Expansion of Islam*

Once the Arabian Peninsula was conquered, the Muslim armies turned their sights on Arab tribes loyal to either the Christian Byzantine Empire to the northwest or to the Zoroastrian Persian Empire to the northeast. These tribes served as buffers between the wild and warlike nomadic tribes in the Arabian Peninsula and the settled towns and villages of these two great empires.

The Byzantine and Persian armies had fought each other for many decades, moving the boundary between their empires back and forth as the armies took turns with the upper hand. By all accounts, both armies were exhausted and had lost the will to continue fighting. Further, during the sixth and early seventh centuries, bubonic plague ravaged the cities and towns of the region, killing thirty percent or more of the population. The plague was carried by fleas living on rats. The desert regions were immune since there were no hiding places for the rats or forage on which they could feed. Finally, a great theological divide had stricken the Byzantine Empire over the nature of the person of Christ. Did he have two natures, both divine and human in one person, as the ecclesiastic authorities and Greek-speaking cities believed, or did he have only one, divine nature, as the towns, villages and countryside believed? The central authorities forced their view on the towns and countryside with an oppressive hand.

These historical factors made the Byzantine and Persian armies easy work for the Muslim forces after they had finished off the Arab tribes of the border. After defeating an army, one purpose of which was to protect a region of settled towns and villages, the Muslims established garrisons from which they ruled the surrounding countryside. With some glaring and horrifying exceptions, the general populace was unharmed. In some instances, the Muslim armies were seen as liberators from the oppressive ecclesiastical authorities. The common people were not forcibly converted to Islam. Rather, the non-Muslim population was forced to pay the *jizya*, a tax designed to humiliate and subdue them. The non-Muslims were also treated as clearly second-class citizens. Over time, the non-Muslims converted to Islam. They desired to avoid the heavy tax burden and the discrimination they suffered. They also desired to gain a share of the spoils of war from distant conquests which were divided among Muslims.

These wars allowed Islam to spread very rapidly through the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, establishing what we now recognize

as the heart of the Muslim world. Muslim forces crossed at Gibraltar into Spain and their northward march was eventually stopped in Tours, France by the forces of Charles Martel in October 732. The Muslims were content to occupy Spain for nearly 800 years. The eastward march was stopped not so much by military defeat as by internal political conflicts.