The Historical Muhammad

Irving M. Zeitlin

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Preface

It is entirely coincidental that this effort of mine to understand the Muhammad of history is seeing the light of day at a time when certain political individuals and groups are in the news, presuming to speak for and represent Islam. I need, therefore, to inform the reader that I began this project before the subject-matter might have been considered "topical," and that I had intended it from the beginning as a scholarly affair. It was and continues to be my aim to catch a few relatively reliable glimpses of the birth of Islam and the role played by its extraordinary founder, Muhammad.

Islam, as its Prophet came to conceive it, was a strict and absolute monotheism. And since I am a student of religion and of the monotheistic religions in particular, I felt an inner need to study the origins of Islam carefully from a historical–sociological standpoint. In the course of my academic career, my primary intellectual interests have been in the history of social and political thought and the sociology of religion. I consider it my good fortune, then, that in my previously published studies of the two earlier monotheistic religions, I was able to employ some of the insights and conceptual tools of certain classical social theorists. The first such study I called *Ancient Judaism*, an analysis of key issues in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) as history. The second such study was titled *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time*, the aim of which was to gain an understanding of the man Jesus by situating him in the context of first-century Judaism.

During the last few years, as I began to immerse myself in the scholarly literature on Muhammad and early Islam, it occurred to me that more than thirty years ago, in my studies of the development of social thought, I had discovered Ibn Khaldun, who may be regarded as one of the greatest social thinkers of all time, and whose sociology anticipated the major theoretical contributions of several of the outstanding thinkers who wrote centuries later. One of Ibn Khaldun's chief concerns was with what he termed the

interplay between the desert and the sown, between the denizens of the desert, wherever they happen to be on this planet, and the neighboring sedentary cultures. The more I reflected on the literature on Muhammad and nascent Islam, the more I came to recognize the relevance and analytical power of Ibn Khaldun's theory of that interplay as applied both to the pre-Islamic condition of the Arabian Peninsula, and to the Medinan phase of Muhammad's prophetic career. Hence, it is Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima* that constitutes, in a large measure, the theoretical framework guiding my quest for the historical Muhammad.

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Introduction and Overview of the Life of Muhammad

If consequences – political and cultural – are the criteria by which to assess the role of an individual in history, then it is quite evident that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was an extraordinary historical individual. Indeed, there is a sense in which he made history, for he initiated the process that led to a world empire and a world religion. Muhammad had set the process in motion that made it possible for his first two successors, Abu Bakr (632–4) and Umar (634–44), to conquer Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt in only twelve years after the Prophet's death. And already in the reign of al-Walid (705–15), only 73 years after the Prophet's death, the Islamic Empire reached its greatest extent, embracing all the lands from the Pyrenees through Spain and North Africa to the Indus Valley in the east.

It is probably true that we know little or nothing about the childhood and early youth of any of the great founders of the world religions. The likely reason is that no one took any special interest in them until they grew into adults and became known for their theory and practice. For example, we hear in the Hebrew Bible the story about Moses as an infant in the rushes of the marsh, but we learn nothing more about him until he has reached adulthood. In the New Testament we read about the birth of the man Jesus and his encounter, at age twelve, with wise men in the Temple. But we hear nothing about his youth, meeting him again at age thirty, when he already has begun his mission. The Gospels thus frustrate us with this eighteen-year-long gap, leaving us to speculate concerning Jesus' education, work and general activities during those years. This lack of information appears to be true of Muhammad's childhood and youth as well.

The distinguished contemporary scholar, F. E. Peters, has observed, that with regard to Muhammad's Meccan period, practically nothing is known for sure except his marriage and his preaching. The Quran itself provides no coherent biographical narrative, and as Peters aptly observes, "For Muhammad, unlike Jesus, there is no Josephus to provide a contemporary

political context, no literary apocrypha for a spiritual context and no Qumran scrolls to illuminate a Palestinian 'sectarian milieu.' "[1]

The earliest biographer of Muhammad was Ibn Ishaq who died in 767 CE, which means that he lived and wrote about 145 years after the Hijra, that is, after Muhammad's emigration from Mecca and his move to Medina in 622 CE. The original text of Ibn Ishaq's biography was lost, and no extant copy of the original exists. All we have is the recension by Ibn Hisham who died more than 200 years after the Hijra. These earliest "biographies" were written from a religious–ideological standpoint, and are based on the oral traditions (*hadiths*) that had developed form the time of Muhammad's death. The biographers' narratives concerning the Prophet's childhood and youth are a fusion of legendary and factual elements, obliging the scholar to distinguish between them.

The truth, then, is that the quest for the historical Muhammad is beset with difficulties and problems, the chief of which is the nature of the sources. One of the most recent and enlightening discussions of the sources is found in Fred M. Donner's *Narratives of Islamic Origins*.[2] It is the first half-century of Islamic history, from about 610 to about 660 CE, that is most problematic despite its importance. According to Islamic tradition, it was during those years that the formative events in the life of the Islamic community occurred: the preaching of Islam's Prophet, Muhammad; the creation under his leadership of the first community of believers in Arabia; the rapid military expansion of that community throughout Western Asia following Muhammad's death; the emergence of the first Islamic Empire; and the codification of Islam's holy book, the Quran. Muslims of all eras have looked upon this period of Islamic origins as a "golden age," from which to seek guidance in how to live their lives.

From the standpoint, however, of modern, intellectually rigorous historical research – carried out, ideally, in an objective attitude – the sources are highly problematic. Indeed, uncertainty about the reliability of the Islamic sources has tended to undermine historians' confidence in almost every aspect of the traditional view of Islamic origins. Some sources, touching upon the rise of Islam, were produced outside the Islamic tradition, and scholars justifiably have tried to use them. But those sources too, are, for the most part, neither contemporary with the events they purport to describe, nor consistent in what they say. So Donner begins his critical analysis by turning our attention first to the copious literary sources in Arabic that purport to inform us about the earliest phase of Islamic history. These include, among other items, collections of *hadiths*, or sayings, attributed to the Prophet and his companions, in addition to the text of the Quran itself. The *hadiths* are also not contemporary sources, some having been written

centuries after the events they discuss. Moreover, one finds in these collections chronological discrepancies, implausibilities, and contradictions. Many accounts are anachronistic; others show evidence not only of embellishment, but outright invention to serve some sort of political or religious purpose.

The first approach taken by Western scholars toward early Islamic history was to accept the traditional picture of Islamic origins presented by the Muslim sources. This was, of course, a decisive advance in historical method over the anti-Islamic polemic that dominated Western writing about Islam from the Middle Ages until the eighteenth century, and which had ignored Muslim sources. When Western scholars began to try to be more objective, they worked with three main assumptions about the Muslim sources: (1) that the text of the Quran contained documentary value for the life and teaching of the Prophet Muhammad; (2) that the *akhbar*, or copious reports making up the narratives about Islamic origins found in Muslim chronicles were reliable for reconstructing "what actually happened"; and (3) that the many *hadiths* attributed to the Prophet were a *religious* literature distinct from the *akhbar* and, therefore, not directly relevant to the task of historical reconstruction of the early Islamic period.

Donner reminds us that this approach has resulted in the fact that the majority of Western surveys of Islamic history have presented the story of Islamic origins along lines remarkably similar to those laid down in the traditional Islamic sources. He cites as examples a long list of such studies, including some on which I rely in my own re-examination of issues in the present work. Donner illustrates the reliance on traditional Islamic sources by showing that it applies not only to early works like those of William Muir and Philip K. Hitti, but also to recent works by G. E. von Grunebaum, M. A. Shaban, M. G. S. Hodgson, Hugh Kennedy, Albert Hourani, and many others. This comfortable replication of the Islamic tradition's own view, Donner remarks, would be perfectly acceptable if it could withstand critical scrutiny. But it became more and more evident in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that the Islamic texts contained contradictions among different sources, logical and chronological absurdities, implausibilities, and, on top of it all, patent sectarian political bias.

This gave rise to a second approach that Donner calls the *Source-Critical Approach*. It was a central premise of this "school" that the existing narrative sources contained much accurate, early historical material, but that it was intermixed with unreliable material, presumably also of early date. The aim, therefore, was somehow to distinguish between the trustworthy, less trustworthy and untrustworthy accounts. A second premise was, that non-Muslim sources (particularly Christian sources in Syriac and Greek) provided an independent source of evidence against which one could

compare specific accounts in the Muslim narratives, to determine whether they were reliable. The third and fourth assumptions of this school were that the *hadith* material was of marginal importance because of its non-historical and religious concerns. Famous scholars like Julius Wellhausen sought to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources, thus establishing tentative criteria for fairly comprehensive syntheses of early Islamic history; he addressed, in particular, the *ridda* wars (the revolt of certain Arabian tribes after the death of Muhammad), the early Islamic conquests, and the history of the Umayyads, subject-matter for which the evidence seemed to be more sound. He refrained, however, from tackling directly the life of the Prophet Muhammad, perhaps, Donner surmises, "because of uncertainty over how to use the *hadith* material" (11). This source-critical approach, Donner avers, contributed some sound insights that continue to be of value, such as the role of later interpolation for dogmatic or political reasons, the misplacement of individual accounts, and the question of the interdependence of different written sources. This method marked a definite advance over the approach of simply relying on and repeating the traditional Muslim narratives.

However, although this source-critical method was an advance, it was most useful only as applied to cases where one could safely assume that the texts in question were transmitted in written form. As it became evident, however, that in the earliest period of Islamic writing first and second centuries AH, i.e., After the *Hijra*, material was often if not usually transmitted orally or in only partially written form, a new methodological approach emerged, which Donner dubs the *traditional-critical approach*, inaugurated by the publication in 1890 of Ignaz Goldziher's epochal study of *hadith*. Donner describes this study as

> the first by a Western scholar to view the *hadith* in the context of conflicting political, religious, and social interests in the Islamic community during its first several centuries, and thus to see it [the *hadith*] as of central importance to an understanding of the whole of early Islamic civilization. Goldziher demonstrated convincingly that many of the *hadiths*, far from being authentic sayings of the Prophet, could only be understood as reflections of those later interests, despite the fact that each *hadith* was equipped with an *isnad*, or chain of informants, who were supposedly the ones through whom the saying had been handed down from the Prophet to later generations of *hadith* collectors. (13–14)

What made Goldziher's findings especially significant is that he had analyzed the supposedly sound *hadiths*, many of which turned out to be forgeries. His

work therefore called into question the whole corpus of *hadiths* and the presumed authenticity of *isnads* as records of a *hadith's* origins and transmission.

Goldziher, however, despite his deep skepticism regarding the transmission of the *hadiths*, remained quite positive where the reliability of the Islamic historiographical tradition was concerned. He and some of the later critical scholars continued to maintain that there was a valid "historical kernel" in the traditional material, even if uncovering it in the mass of accretions was an extraordinarily difficult task. But there were also scholars who contended that the application of the source-critical and tradition-critical methods to reports about Islamic origins seemed to reduce the "historical kernel" to the vanishing point. "It was pointed out," Donner writes,

> That *isnads* were found not only in the *hadiths*, but also in many historical accounts, and that it had been on the basis of such *isnads* that source-critics like de Goeje and Wellhausen had relied to identify their different historiographic "schools." If some *hadiths* could be shown by various means to be not the words of the Prophet, but inventions of the second, or third, or fourth centuries A. H., despite an apparently flawless chain of transmitters, how could we be sure that other *hadiths* were not also forgeries which had simply escaped detection? And if forgeries were rife among even the most apparently trustworthy *hadiths*, how could we be sure that other kinds of accounts, including apparently early historical ones relying on similar chains of authorities for their warrant of authenticity, were not also merely later fabrications made for political, religious, or other ends? (19–20)

This gave rise to what Donner calls the s*keptical approach*. Like the tradition-critics, the skeptics view the traditions about Islamic origins as the products of long and partly oral development, but unlike the tradition-critics, "they deny that there is any recoverable kernel of historical fact that might tell us 'what actually happened'" (20). Donner cites as a precursor of the radically skeptical position the works of the Jesuit scholar Henri Lammens who around the beginning of the twentieth century published a series of detailed studies of the background and rise of early Islam. It was his conviction that the *Sira* material, the traditional biography of the Prophet, was not an independent set of recollections of the Prophet's life, but rather an outgrowth of earlier works of Quran commentary (*tafsir*) and *hadith*, or sayings, attributed to the Prophet, most of the latter of which were, in Lammens' view, false. Donner applies the term "skeptical" to this school because "they exhibit a radical skepticism toward the whole received picture of Islamic origins" (20, fn. 47). Among contemporary scholars, it is Patricia Crone whom Donner regards as the most articulate of the recent

wave of skeptical writers. In her study, *Slaves on Horses*, she contends that "whether one approaches Islamic historiography from the angle of the religious or the tribal tradition, its overall character remains the same: the bulk of it is debris of an obliterated past" (Crone, p. 10).

Donner cites in addition to Crone, several other skeptics whose names one runs across in the specialist literature: John Wansbrough, Michael Cook, Suliman Bashear, Gerald Hawting, Moshe Sharon, Judith Koren and Yehuda D. Nevo, and Norman Calder. Underlying the work of these radical skeptics are three propositions: (1) the Quran was codified as a closed canon of sacred text much later than assumed by the Muslim tradition – during the second or even the third century A. H., not in the first century as Muslims and most Western scholars have assumed. The Quran itself, therefore, cannot be used as evidence for the origins of Islam, but only for its later development. (2) The narratives of Islamic origins are idealized or polemicized visions of the past that originated in a later period; they contain no "kernel" of historical information, for such information "either was never conveyed, or was completely suppressed, or if it did survive is inextricably entangled with later interpolations" (23). (3) The narratives about the life of the Prophet contain no evidence about Islamic origins independent of the Quran text itself or of later legal traditions. Of these three revisionist propositions, the notion that the Quranic text crystallized generations or perhaps even centuries after Islam's beginnings is the most radical. What the radical, skeptical position implies, in effect, is either that one should look elsewhere for evidence or give up trying altogether.

Donner's Reply to the Skeptics

Donner counters the extreme methodological pessimism of these skeptics by reminding them and us that it is quite unlikely, a priori, that the whole tradition has been totally reshaped. For such a notion implies that certain unnamed "authorities," "whoever they were, could have tracked down every book and tradition contained in every manuscript in the whole Islamic community, from India to Spain, so that no view dissenting from the standard orthodox position was allowed to survive" (27). For Donner, the traditional material, taken as a whole, and notwithstanding extensive redaction of particular portions of it, contains within it enough material to enable us to catch at least a few reliable glimpses of the early Islamic period. For, as Donner convincingly observes, there are many accounts in the Islamic tradition that seem to contain vestigial evidence of very early historical matters relevant to our quest for the historical Muhammad. We can,

for example, glimpse in the sources some of the very early tensions in the community of believers: the rivalry between the *Muhajirun*, Muhammad's emigrants from Mecca, and the *Ansar*, his helpers in Medina; concerns over the proliferation of wealth among the believers during the conquest period, and more.

One of Donner's most persuasive arguments against the radical skeptics is based on his comparative analysis of the Quran and the *hadiths*. He calls attention to their radically different content in order to defend the Quran text as a literary product of the earliest community of believers in Arabia. One of the most striking aspects of the corpus of the *hadith* is the degree to which it reflects the salient *political* issues of the first and second centuries A. H. Donner remarks on a humorous anachronism: that in the *hadith* literature the Prophet even has a considerable amount to say about the Caliphate, even though the office of the Caliph (Khalifa) did not arise until after his death. In sharp contrast, however, to the deep concerns in the *hadith* literature over questions of political leadership, the Quran text has almost nothing to say about political or religious leadership except as it relates to Muhammad himself. The discrepancy between the Quran and *hadith*, where political leadership is concerned, suggests strongly that the two bodies of material came not from a so-called common "sectarian milieu," but from different historical contexts. Moreover, Donner avers, a "much more natural way to explain the Quran's virtual silence on the question of political leadership is to assume that the Quran text, as we now have it, *antedates* the political concerns enshrined so prominently in the *hadith* literature" (45). Donner notes, in addition, the frequent references in the *hadith* to such figures as Muhammad's cousin Ali, his uncles Abu Talib and al-Abbas, the Meccan clan chief, Abu Sufyan, and more; while the Quran, in contrast, makes absolutely no mention of these figures, even in the most innocuous way. And the most telling of Donner's critical responses to the radical skeptics is his recognition of the most obvious and fundamental discrepancy between the Quran and *hadith*: "the fact that the Quran itself is totally devoid of obviously anachronistic references to people, groups, or events dating to periods long after the life of Muhammad" (47–8).

Still another indisputable contrast between the Quran and *hadith*, is their fundamentally different treatments of Muhammad. The overwhelming majority of Quranic passages involving prophets and prophethood are devoted to the many prophets who preceded Muhammad, not to Muhammad himself. In the Quran Muhammad's mortality is affirmed; and although he is the recipient and vehicle of God's revelations, he is in all other respects an ordinary mortal. Indeed, as Donner observes, "the Quran presents Muhammad as suffering indignities from those who, in view of

Muhammad's ordinariness and the absence of miracles, could not believe he was truly a prophet: they say: 'what is with this apostle? He eats food and walks in the market. Why has no angel been sent down to be a warner (*nadhir*) with him?'" (Sura 25; Donner, 51). In the *hadith*, in contrast, Muhammad is no ordinary mortal. There he is frequently portrayed as a miracle-worker who, in Donner's words,

> is able to feed multitudes, heal the sick with his spittle, procure water by pressing the ground with his heel, see behind himself, predict the future, or divine hidden knowledge such as the names of people whom he has not yet met or the origins of a piece of stolen meat served to him. This vision of Muhammad . . . does not coincide with the Quranic image of Muhammad as a normal man, and once again casts doubt on Wansbrough's [and other radical skeptics'] proposition that the Quran originated in the same cultural environment that produced the countless miracle-stories related in the *hadith* literature and origins narratives. (51–2)

In Donner's superb analysis of the issues concerning the narratives of Islamic origins, he makes a strong case for not giving up the quest for the historical Muhammad. A historical–sociological method can, perhaps, help us in this quest – a method derived from the great Ibn Khaldun, whose substantive and methodological insights will be presented in chapter 1 to illustrate their fruitfulness. But first we need a brief overview of the life of Muhammad, basing it on traditional sources while trying to take into account their problematic character.

Enter Muhammad: An Overview

Fortunately, the biographical narratives regarding the Prophet's Medinan period are largely reliable; for as F. E. Peters explains, the biographies by Ibn Ishaq and the others, were little more than accounts of the " . . . raids conducted by or under Muhammad; and they took the watershed battle of Badr as their starting point and anchor, and dated major events in Muhammad's life from it. But for the years from Badr (624 CE) back to the migration to Medina (622 CE) there is great uncertainty and, for the entire span of the Prophet's life at Mecca, hardly any chronological data at all (264)." In what follows, then, we shall rely not only on Ibn Hisham, Tabari, and other Muslim historians, but also on outstanding Western scholars.

According to tradition, a child was born to the Quraysh at Mecca in or about 570 or 571 CE, and called by his tribe al-Amin, "the faithful,"

apparently an honorific title. In the Quran (3: 138; 33: 40; 48: 29; 47: 2) his name is Muhammad (highly praised), a quite common name, and he is referred to once as Ahmad. The baby's father, Abdullah, died before the child's birth, and the mother, Aminah, when he was about six years of age. It therefore became the responsibility of the grandfather, Abd-al-Muttalib, to raise the boy and, after the grandfather's death, the duty fell upon Muhammad's uncle, Abu-Talib.

The tradition tells us that when Muhammad was twelve years old, he accompanied his uncle on a caravan journey to Syria where he met a Christian monk to whom legend has given the name Bahira. We use words like "tradition" and "legend" because there is no way to confirm the reliability of stories about the Prophet's early life. There are no non-Arabic, non-Muslim sources for the early period of nascent Islam. The first Byzantine chronicle to record some events of Muhammad's career was Theophanis who wrote in the ninth century.

What does seem to be a fact, however, is Muhammad's marriage at the age of twenty-five to a wealthy widow named Khadijah, fifteen years his senior. She was a member of the Quraysh tribe and a well-to-do merchant's widow – now conducting the business herself and independently – who employed Muhammad and gave him considerable responsibility. Thus lifted out of the relative poverty of his childhood, Muhammad now had the leisure to follow his inclinations, and was often noticed secluding himself and meditating in a small cave on a hillside called Hira, outside of Mecca. Sura 93 seems to confirm that before marrying Khadijah he had been poor, and that until the age of forty or thereabouts, he followed the religion of his tribe and countrymen: "Did He [the Lord] not find thee an orphan and gave thee a home? And found thee erring and guided thee, and found thee needy and enriched thee."

It was during one of those periods of seclusion that he is said to have heard a voice commanding him to "recite" in the name of the Lord. The word *qaraa*, which is the root of the word Quran, parallel to the rabbinic *mikra*, means to recite or address, and its etymology and use in related dialects means *to call*, *cry aloud*, *proclaim*. The speaker in this as in most of the Suras, is Gabriel of whom Muhammad had, as he believed, a vision on the hill, Hira. After a brief interval, the second vision came, and Muhammad, feeling the chill of great emotional stress, rushed home to Khadijah, asking her to enwrap him in his mantle. The call and the message he was told to recite was this: God is one, all-powerful and the creator of the universe. There is a judgment day at which great rewards in paradise await those who obey God's commandments; and terrible punishments in hell await those who ignore or disobey them.

Now regarding himself as the messenger (*rasul*) of Allah, Muhammad began to go among his own people, preaching, teaching, and bringing his new message. But they failed to take him seriously, and even laughed at his pretension, which turned him into a *nadhir*, a "warner" (Quran 67: 26; 51: 50, 51) aiming to win over converts by means of vivid descriptions of the joys of paradise and the terrors of hell. That is the impression we get from the early revelations, the Meccan Suras. However, he gained few converts, and it was his wife Khadija, influenced by her *hanif* or Christian cousin Waraqa-ibn-Nawfal, who became the first of the few who responded to his call. Muhammad's cousin Ali and his kinsman Abu-Bakr followed; but Abu-Sufyan, representing the privileged and influential Umayyad branch of Quraysh, continued to oppose the Prophet. For them, Muhammad's views not only flouted the sacred principles of their polytheism, but also threatened the economic interests of the Quraysh as custodians of the center for Arabian pilgrimages. It seems to be highly probable that Muhammad's few other converts came primarily from the slave and lower strata, and were even what Ibn Hisham calls a "despised minority."[2] The reaction of the Quraysh leaders to Muhammad's success with these recruits was to switch from sarcasm and ridicule, which had become less-than-effective weapons, to active persecution. This, in turn, prompted the new converts to flee to Abyssinia and to seek refuge there.

In the year 615, eleven Meccan families followed by 83 other men, found asylum in the domain of the Christian Negus, who adamantly refused to deliver them into the hands of their oppressors (Ibn Hisham, pp. 146–51). The beliefs of these fugitives were so close in some ways to those of the Christians, that the Negus might have viewed them as Christians. Meanwhile, revelations continued to descend upon Muhammad.

Soon Umar ibn-al-Khattab (also transliterated as Omar), who would later play a key role in establishing the Islamic state, became a follower of the Prophet's new view of Allah. It was in this period too, about three years before the Hijra, that the Prophet's beloved Khadija died, followed soon afterward by Abu-Talib, who though he never professed Islam, never ceased to defend his nephew, his protégé. Abu-Talib's defense and protection of Muhammad explains why he had no need to flee with the other persecuted Muslims to Abyssinia. In reality it was the Prophet's clan and not merely his uncle who protected him in accordance with the powerful Arabian custom. The fact that Muhammad's followers had to flee from persecution suggests strongly that they were, as Ibn Hisham stated, a "despised minority" recruited from slaves and the lowest strata of Meccan society. In this pre-Hijra period there also occurs the dramatic *isra*, the night journey in which the Prophet is said to have been carried from the