

The Quest of the Historical Muhammad

Arthur Jeffery

In 1906 there appeared in Germany an epoch-marking work on the life of Christ, entitled "Von Reimarus zu Wrede," by a young and till then almost unknown scholar, Albert Schweitzer, which in 1910 was translated into English by Montgomery under the title "The Quest of the Historical Jesus." Schweitzer's book was a very brilliant survey of the various types of "Lives of Christ," which had been produced by various schools of theological thought in Europe, ranging from the pious, orthodox, uncritical type, to the wildest excesses of eschatological and even mythical interpretation. His aim was to survey the various attempts that had been made to interpret the life of our Lord, and, if one may use the phrase, make an actuarial investigation of the position of scholarship on this question, and assess the value of the years of patient, critical research that had been devoted to its problems.

Quite recently it was suggested that the time was ripe for a similar survey on the life of the Arabian Prophet, that we may take stock of the work that has been done, gather up the assured results that have been won, and note the trends of critical scholarship indicating the lines of investigation that the future will have to follow. We may have long to wait for the rise of an Islamic scholar with the genius and scholarly preparation of a Schweitzer, to undertake this task, but we may endeavor with more or less success to briefly sketch the outlines of such an investigation.

Sources

Our first consideration is that of sources, and naturally we look to the Muslim literature, for Muslims themselves are likely to have been the first to write lives of their own Prophet. Here at first glance the student's heart might almost fail him before the bewildering array of Muslim lives of the Prophet, for there are literally hundreds of them in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Malay, and even in Chinese and lesser Eastern languages. The briefest investigation, however, suffices to reveal that the problem of sources is relatively simple, for all these hundreds of volumes represent but workings over with fabulous and irrelevant additions and modifications of perhaps half a dozen Arabic texts of primary importance.

The earliest Life of Muhammad of which we have any trace was written by Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, who died in 768 C.E. i.e., one hundred and thirty years after the death of the Prophet. The book of Ibn Ishaq, however, has perished, and all we know of it is what is quoted from it (and these quotations are fortunately considerable) in the works of later writers, particularly Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari. This work of Ibn Ishaq, in addition to being the earliest known attempt at biography, has a further importance in that, whether because the writer was somewhat of a free thinker, or because he had not come under the influence of later idealizing tendencies, his work contains very much information of a character that is distinctly unfavorable to the Prophet. To quote Dr. Margoliouth:

The character attributed to Muhammad in the biography of Ibn Ishaq is exceedingly unfavorable. In order to gain his ends he recoils from no expedient, and he approves of similar unscrupulousness on the part of his adherents, when exercised in his interest. He profits to the utmost from the chivalry of the Meccans, but rarely requites it with the like. He organizes assassinations and whole-sale massacres. His career as tyrant of Medina is that of a robber chief, whose political economy consists in

securing and dividing plunder, the distribution of the latter being at times carried out on principles which fail to satisfy his followers's ideas of justice. He is himself an unbridled libertine and encourages the same passion in his followers. For whatever he does he is prepared to plead the express authorization of the deity. It is, however, impossible to find any doctrine which he is not prepared to abandon in order to secure a political end. At different points in his career he abandons the unity of God and his claim to the title of Prophet. This is a disagreeable picture for the founder of a religion, and it cannot be pleaded that it is a picture drawn by an enemy; and though Ibn Ishaq's name was for some reason held in low esteem by the classical traditionalists of the third Islamic century, they make no attempt to discredit those portions of the biography which bear hardest on the character of their Prophet. (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, volume 8, p. 878.)

Margoliouth also makes it a point in favor of this biography that it rarely has recourse to the supernatural, and even when the supernatural is introduced it does not appear to affect the causation.

The first important source that has actually come down to us, therefore, is *Waqidi's Kitab al-Maghazi*, or *Book of the Wars*. Al-Waqidi died 822 C.E. and his book may best be consulted in the translation of the important parts of it given in Wellhausen's *Muhammad in Medina* (Berlin, 1882). Al-Waqidi's work, however, has the serious limitation that it deals only with Muhammad's campaigns. A little later are Ibn Hisham's *Sirat un-Nabi* (ed. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen 1859, and translated into crabbed German by Weil, *Des Leban Mohammeds*, 2 vols., Stuttgart, 1864), and Ibn Sa'd's *Kitab ul-Tabaqat ul-Kabir* (ed. by Edward Sachau, with the assistance of numerous other scholars, in nine volumes published between 1904-1921 at Leiden). Ibn Hisham died in 833 C.E., and Ibn Sa'd in 844 C.E. Later Arabic lives are of very secondary value as compared with these.

These works, however, are not primary sources, and are themselves based on two sources, Tradition and the Koran. The most important collections of Tradition are those of Bukhari (who died in 870 C.E.), and Muslim (who died in 874 C.E.). What value can be placed on Tradition will be seen later; the important thing now to note is the dates of the collections, which are even later than those of the lives. The Koran, which was written down in approximately the form in which we have it within a generation of the death of Muhammad, will thus be seen to be our only primary source for the life of the Prophet. It will, of course, be evident to any one who has read the Koran, how very meager is the material it contains of a biographical nature. The importance of the evidence from this source was first worked out by Nöldeke in the first edition (1860) of his "Geschichte des Qorans," and may be studied in simple form in the summary made of it by Canon Sell in his *Historical Development of the Koran*, (Madras, 1909) from a manuscript translation of Nöldeke's book made for him in India.

An excellent summary on the question of sources will be found in an article by Sachau given as Introduction to the third volume of the Leiden edition of Ibn Sa'd, or the older summary in the Introduction to Sir William Muir's *Life of Mahomet*.

EARLY CHRISTIAN ACCOUNTS

The earliest reference to Muhammad in Christian literature is apparently that in the Armenian "Chronicle of Sebeos," written in the seventh century, and which says little more than that he

was an Ishmaelite, who claimed to be a Prophet and taught his fellow countrymen to return to the religion of Abraham. In the Byzantine writers we have little of any value, though it must be admitted that this source has not been thoroughly examined by Islamic scholars. Nicetas, of Byzantium, wrote a "Refutatio Mohammadis" (Migne *P.G.* cv), and Bartholomew, of Edessa, a treatise "Contra Mohamadem" (Migne *P.G.* civ), which may be taken as samples of this work, which grew out of the contact with Islamic power in the wars that robbed the Byzantine Empire of one after another of its fair Eastern Provinces.

The Latin writers of the Middle Ages got their information from two sources, from the Byzantine accounts and from the personal contact with Islam during the Crusades. It would be an interesting study to follow the development of the wild fables that spread abroad in Europe during this period in which Muhammad comes to be one of the three great idols, Apollin, Tergavan and Mahon, popularly supposed to be worshipped by Muslims. These legends crossed to England, and in the language of our forefathers the name Muhammad, in its corrupt form "mawmet," became the regular word for "idol." Thus in the "Legend of St. Andrew," we read:

Wharlo cums thou unto me
Bot thou wald trow in Jesu fre.
And leve thi *mawmetes* more and les
And pray to Jesu of forgifnes.

And again in the "Life of Saint Juliana," written about 1200 C.E., we are told of the Emperor Maximinius of Rome that he was "heinde and heriende hedhene mawmets with unmedh muchel hird and unduhti duhedhe." Among the ecclesiastical writers of the period, however, Muhammad was looked on as the arch heretic, a second Arius, worse than the first, and his legend was molded on that of the great legendary heretics, Simon Magus and the Deacon Nicholas. Renan points to the reason in his article in the *Atti della Accademia dei Lincei*, for 1889, where he writes: "Dans les écrits populaires, il s'y joint d'atroces calomnies, destinées à couvrir d'ignominie l'auteur du grand mal que la chrétienté voulait à tout prix supprimer" ["In popular writings, there have been added atrocious calumnies designed to cover with ignominy the author of the great evil that Christianity wished to suppress at all price"]. That there were noble exceptions, however to this almost universal ignorance and misrepresentation can be seen from the cases of such men as Petrus Venerabilis, who died in 1157, and the fragments of whose polemic have been published by Thoma ("Zwei Bücher gegen den Muhammedanismus" [Two Books Against Muhammadanism], Leipzig, 1896), and the Dominican monk Ricoldus, who died in 1320, and whose "Confutatio Alcorani," which so impressed Martin Luther, shows an unusually accurate acquaintance with the subject.

PRE-CRITICAL PERIOD

After the Renaissance we find the question again attracting attention. Such works as Raleigh's "Life and Death of Mohamet" (London, 1637), and Prideaux's "Vie de Mahomet, ou l'on découvre amplement la verité de l'imposture" The Life of Mahomet, or Where One Abundantly Discovers the Truth of the Imposture (Amsterdam, 1698), are based on the Arabic material now being made available in Latin translation but Hottinger's account of Muhammad's teaching in his "Historia Orientalis" (Zurich, 1651), and Marraccio's strictures which run through his "Refutation" (Padua, 1698) commence the tradition of relying on the original sources themselves. Most of this early work is bitterly hostile and prejudiced, though Hottinger had endeavored to give an impartial judgment. It is with the Dutch scholar

Reyland, however, that we enter on a new treatment of the subject. In his "de Religione Mahommedica" (Utrecht, 1704), he seeks to break away from the hostile attitude to Muhammad, and strive for a just appreciation of his historical significance. His work, however, had the misfortune to be followed by H. de Boulainvilliers' "Vie de Mahomed" (London, 1739), which was a bombastic laudation of Muhammad in the interests of belittling Christianity. Hurgronje calls it "an anticlerical romance, the material of which was supplied by a superficial knowledge of Islam drawn from secondary sources." A little of the tar from Boulainvilliers' brush can be detected in Gibbon's account of Muhammad in his "Decline and Fall" (London, 1776). It was in order to combat the distinctly wrong impression produced by Boulainvilliers' work that Gagnier wrote his "Vie de Mahomet" (Amsterdam, 1748), which strove to take the middle course between Boulainvilliers on the one hand and Prideaux on the other. It was not possible, however, to make further progress until more work was done at the Arabic sources.

BEGINNINGS OF CRITICISM

It was the awakening of interest in oriental studies at the beginning of the nineteenth century that made possible a new departure in an attempt to do justice to the problem. The new period may be said to have begun with the work of Gustav Weil, whose "Muhammad der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre" (Stuttgart, 1843) first applied in any real sense the historico-critical method to the problem of the life of Muhammad. Weil may not have got very far in this investigation, for his resources were still limited, but he found and applied the method, and in his translation of Ibn Hisham, in 1864, made yet a further great advance. Caussin de Perceval's "Essai sur l'Histoire des Arabes," 71 (3 vols., Paris, 1847), was apparently written quite independently of Weil, and contains an account of the life and work of Muhammad, which while not of any great value in itself, yet is of real importance for the mass of material from Arabic sources that it brings together. Wüstenfeld is another scholar in this period whose great contribution was not in his "Das Leben Muhammad's" (3 vols., Göttingen, 1857-1859), but in his excellent editions of early Arabic texts, and his masterly studies, such as his "Genealogische Tabellen der Arabischen Stämme und Familien" (Göttingen, 1852-1853), "Chroniken der Stadt Mekka" (4 vols., Leipzig 1861), "Das Gebiet von Medina" (Göttingen, 1873), "Die Geschichtsschreiber der Araber und Ihre Werke" (Göttingen, 1882), which have illuminated so much of the early history. Much more important, however, is the work of Sprenger, Nöldeke, and Muir.

Sprenger's work will come under consideration in another section, we need only mention here that in addition to his very important "Leben Muhammads," he also, like Wüstenfeld, made important contributions to the study of the background of the Prophet's life in his two studies "Die Post und Reiserouten des Orients" (Leipzig, 1864), and "Die Alte Geographic Arabiens" (Bern, 1875). Nöldeke's great contribution was his essay "Geschichte des Qorans" (Göttingen, 1860), which really falls outside the scope of this essay, but which was the first critical attempt to evaluate the most important source for our reconstruction of the life of Muhammad. Nöldeke is by far the keenest and most cautious critic of this early period, and in general is very careful in his historical judgment. His "Das Leben Muhammads nach den Quellen populär dargestellt" (Hanover, 1863), is a much slighter and more popular work, which has now become almost forgotten. Muir's *Life of Mahomet*, which appeared in London in four volumes, between the years 1856-1861, is the crowning work of this first period of criticism. Sir William Muir had been long in the civil service in India, had in extensive acquaintance with Muhammadan literature in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, and possessed a magnificent Oriental library. His work is based on a careful study of the best material

available at the time, and is a very full and lucidly written account, remarkably free from prejudice on either side. In his introduction he gives a statement of the principles of criticism of the sources, which still repays reading, a subject which he again elaborates in an essay on "The Value of Early Mahometan Historical Sources," printed in his book [*The Mohammedan Controversy*](#) (London, 1897). Muir's work has been through many editions, the latest and most convenient being the one volume edition, entitled by T. H. Weir (Edinburgh, 1912).

A number of smaller, popular works are largely based on the work of this period of the beginnings of criticism. Best known among such are Johnstone, "Muhammad and His Power" (Edinburgh 1901), Sell, "Life of Mohammed" (Madras 1913). Wollaston, [*Mohammed, His Life and Doctrines*](#) (London, 1904); St. Hilaire, "Mohamet et le Coran" (Paris, 1865); Scholl, "L'Islam et son Fondateur: étude morale" (Paris, 1874): Delaporte. "Vie de Mahomet" (Paris, 1874); Albert Fua, "La Vie et la Morale de Mahomet" (Paris, 1912); Reiner, "Muhammad und der Islam" (Leipzig, 1905); Reckendorf, "Mohammed und die Seinen" (Leipzig, 1907); Krehl, "Das Leben des Muhammad" (Leipzig, 1884).

THE PATHOLOGICAL LIVES

European investigators could not fail to be struck with the statements found in the sources about the strange fits to which Muhammad was subject, especially at the time of his revelations.

The notion ... that he was subject to epilepsy finds curious confirmation in the notices recorded of his experiences during the poem of revelation - the importance of which is not lessened by the probability that the symptoms were often artificially produced. That process was attended by a fit of unconsciousness, accompanied (or preceded) at times by the sound of bells in the ears or the belief that someone was present: by a sense of fright, such as to make the patient burst out into perspiration: by the turning of the head to one side: by foaming at the mouth: by the reddening or whitening of the face: by a sense of headache. (Margoliouth. *Mohammed*, p. 46)

Not much has been made of these facts by Oriental writers, but Sprenger, who was a Doctor of Medicine of sorts, fastened on these evidences of epilepsy as the key to the solution of Muhammad's personality. He worked it this first in his Indian book, "Life of Muhammad from Original Sources" (Allahabad, 1851), which is a meager sketch, stopping short at the Flight from Mecca, later in his monumental treatise, "Das Leben und die Lehre des Muhammads" (3 vols., Berlin, 1861-1865), and finally in "Mohammed und der Koran: eine Psychologische Studie" (Hamburg, 1889).

Sprenger's work in this direction is interesting rather than convincing, and has come in for much sharp criticism. Sir William Muir in an essay in the *Calcutta Review* for 1868 characterizes his work as "marked by a love of paradox and a tendency to strike out theories based on but slender grounds." Hirschfeld remarks, "he is surely mistaken in attributing a larger share in the creation of Islam to the state of his [Muhammad's] nerves than was really due to them. Hallucinations and hysterical frenzy are not factors strong enough to produce so general an upheaval as was caused by this new faith" ("New Researches," p.20). and Hurgronje characterizes it as "an exaggerated display of certainty based upon his former medical studies" ("Mohammadenism," p.42). He found followers, however, chief among whom is the veteran Semitic scholar of Copenhagen, Dr. Franz Buhl, who in his "Muhammed's Liv" (Copenhagen. 1903) puts forward a modified form of the same theory.

Buhl makes much of the fact that it has been observed that hysterical natures find unusual difficulty and often complete inability to distinguish the false from the true. Such people, governed by compelling ideas, find it impossible to view things in their true light, and this he thinks is the safest way to interpret the strange inconsistencies in the life of the Prophet. A curious statement of this pathological view may also be found in the essay "On the Hallucination of Mohammed," in a little work by one William Ireland, "The Clot on the Brain: Studies in History and Psychology" (New York, 1886).

A further development of this particular viewpoint is the psychoanalytic advocated by Dr. Macdonald, of Hartford, in his "Aspects of Islam" (New York, 1911), where he tells us that he looks for the future fruitful investigation of the Prophet's life to proceed upon the assumption that he was fundamentally a pathological case, and that "how he passed over at last into that turpitude is a problem again for those who have made a study of how the most honest trance-mediums may at any time begin to cheat" (op. cit., p.74)

A word further, before leaving this section, should be said about Sprenger's work, the "Leben Mohammeds." Impatience with the theory should not lead the student to neglect this work, for it is one of the most stimulating of all the works we have on the life of Muhammad, and is a mine of material, gathered with great diligence and excellency set forth.

THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LIVES

Quite a different starting point has been suggested to other scholars by the political and social conditions of Arabia in Muhammad's day. The social and political conditions of Arabia at the time of Muhammad's early manhood were bad. Arabia is none too fertile at the best of times, and just at this period practically all its fertile fringe was under domination of foreign powers - Byzantine, Persian, and Abyssinian - who were ever driving the Arab tribes further into their deserts. The contact with the civilization of these more progressive peoples had not been without its effect in making the needy Arabs turn longing eyes to the better things they had hitherto hardly dreamed of. The tribes themselves were restless and discontented, economic conditions were bad, and they were ready to rally round any banner that would give them the hope of national deliverance. It was Muhammad who held out the banner, and labored to weld them into a mighty national force that would secure Arabia for the Arabs.

Dr. Margoliouth's *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (London, 1905), probably the most brilliant study of the life of Muhammad that has yet appeared, is representative of this view, which may also be seen in the same author's articles on "Mohammed" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.) and the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, volume 8. According to this interpretation, Muhammad was a patriot, keenly alive to the opportunities of the time, who evolved a method of uniting the Arabs to face the common danger and utilize the golden opportunities of the age.

A man who can organize an armed force and lead it to victory may rise from obscurity to autocracy anywhere. Probably every century of Islam had its tale of such personages. The 'Abbasid, Fatimid, Buwaihid, Seljuk, and Ottoman dynasties all arose in this way; and in most of these the religious appeal played an important part. The success of the founders was clearly due not to the objective truth of the doctrines with which they were associated but to their skill as organizers and military leaders.... His (Muhammad's) ability to gauge the capacities of others was abnormal: hence in the choice of subordinates he seems to have made no mistakes. In the second place, he

was thoroughly familiar with the foibles of the Arabs, and utilized them to the utmost advantage. The stories of his successes, as told by Ibn Ishaq, indicate a complete absence of moral scruple; but they also show a combination of patience, courage and caution; ability to seize opportunities, and distrust of loyalty when not backed by interest, which fully explain the certainty with which results were won. (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 7, p. 873.

At Medina he was what one might justly call a robber chief just as David, King of Israel, was in his early days. When he entered Mecca he entered it as a political leader rather than as a religious prophet, and was recognized by the Meccans as such. His dealings with Jews and Christians were largely dictated by political considerations: he dealt with the pagan tribes as a sovereign and his whole attitude to the surrounding empires was that of a statesman. "The fact of primary importance in the rise of Islam is that the movement became considerable only when its originator was able to draw the sword and handle it successfully." So in endeavoring to estimate the significance of Muhammad, we must not judge him as a mystic or religious reformer though he may have had elements of both but rather as a statesman faced with peculiar pressing political problems among a somewhat barbarous people and at a critical moment in history.

A similar view is held by the Italian scholar Leone Caetani, though we are unfortunate in not having in our hands his complete picture of the Prophet. In the first and second volumes of his monumental "Annali dell' Islam" (Milan, 1905-1907), and in the third volume of his "Studi di Storia Orientale" (Milan, 1914), we have, however the outlines of his treatment. Caetani holds that the great outburst, which sent Arab armies out in conquest of the surrounding fertile lands, is only the latest of a series of similar outbursts of Semitic peoples which in historical times have been disgorged by Arabia, due to the economic stress consequent on the gradual desiccation of Arabia. Muhammad thus becomes the leader of this movement, religious, if you will. according to the ideas of religion in Arabia at that time, but above all a politician and an opportunist.

Si fatto carattere impulsivo associato con esimie qualita politiche di uomo di stato e di pasiore di popoli rese Maometto uomo eminentemente opportunist, il quale animato da una cieca, immensa fiducia in se, si getto alla cieca nelle piu ardite imprese e si trascino appresso tutti i seguaci, inebbriati e sodotti dalla superiorita morale del Maestro. ("Annali." I.205)

[His impulsive character, combined with a rare political quality of a man of state and a guide of people, had made of Muhammad a supreme opportunist, animated by enormous self-confidence, enabling him to throw himself blindly and with rashness into an adventure in which he embroiled those who followed him, intoxicated and seduced by the superior morality of the Master.]

This view is also that of another great scholar Dr. C. H. Becker, sometime editor of *Der Islam*, who writes in his "Islam and Christianity" (London. 1909, p. 29):

The Muhammadan fanatics of the wars of conquest, whose reputation was famous among later generations, felt but a very scanty interest in religion, and occasionally displayed an ignorance of its fundamental tenets which we can hardly exaggerate. The fact is fully consistent with the impulses to which the Arab migrations were due. These impulses were economic, and the new religion was nothing more than a party

cry of unifying power, through there is no reason to suppose that it was not a real moral force in the life of Muhammad and his immediate contemporaries.

A curious development under this section is the economic theory of Professor Hubert Grimme. This writer has produced two interesting works on Muhammad. The first is his "Mohammad" (Münster 1892) in which he seeks to explain the development of Islam as a socialistic phenomenon. After considering and rejecting Sprenger's theory that Hanifism was the original source of Islam, he points out that Islam can be more simply explained as a socialistic than as a religious system.

The conditions under which we are accustomed, in history to see socialistic movements appear, were existent in Mecca at the time of Muhammad. Conditions of opposition in the social organism had matured to that point where a rupture was imminent. A wealthy class who had all the power in their hands, stood over against a numerous propertyless class who were suffering the pressure of a merciless usurious administration. Against the former class the Kuran hurls its richly deserved accusations of the unhealthiness of their great possessions, their deceit, use of false weights and measures, foolish waste of their substance on the one hand, and continuous niggardly accumulation on the other, and lastly their discontent even in the face of their abundance. On the other hand, it is painfully evident how the needy hunger, the beggar is refused alms, orphans are kept out of their inheritance, and slaves strive in vain for liberty and manumission. It was in order to put an end to such adverse conditions that, under the aspect of compensatory justice, Muhammad, who in his youth had himself tasted the bitter loss of poor orphans (though later he became one of the propertied class), laid down strict legislation that every man should pay a settled assessment for the support of the needy. In this way an equality would be established in a peaceful way, wholly different from all other socialistic endeavors of antiquity, which always manifested a strong tendency to forcible alterations of social relationships.

Such a venturesome thesis was hardly likely to find acceptance, and on its appearance was keenly criticized, particularly by in Snouck Hurgronje in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, volume 30, pp. 48 ff. who remarks both on the inaccuracy of Grimme's work, showing the limitations of his scholarship, and also on the uncertainty of the foundations on which his theory is built. Professor Grimme, unfortunately, has a reputation for wild theories, as witness his recent identification of certain weather markings (as Petrie calls them) on some stones from Sinai, as the very handwriting of Moses, and even if his theory had a sounder basis, it is hardly likely that the socialistic motive could be an explanation of all the facts to be considered.

ADVANCED CRITICISM

We have already had occasion to notice that besides the Koran and the early "Lives" of Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, etc., an important source for the life of Muhammad is Tradition. In fact we find that the early "Lives" are themselves largely based on Tradition, and in the period from Weil to Muir European writers went on the assumption that if a certain amount of careful sifting were done, a considerable body of reliable Tradition could be found on which reliance could be placed for biographical purposes. It was Ignaz Goldziher in his "Muhammedanische Studien" (Halle, 1889, 1890), especially the second volume, who gave the first rude shock to this assumption. Even after the most careful sifting we find that the

oldest traditions only take us back to the first century after Muhammad, and very much of this oldest tradition is of very uncertain character, having been colored by theological bias, mixed with legendary material, and warped to favor the interests of certain families and political parties.

It might have been thought that careful criticism could still manage to find some sure basis, but the development of Goldziher's work at the hands of Caetani, and Henri Lammens would seem to force us to the conclusion that:

Even the data which had been pretty generally regarded as objective, rest chiefly upon tendentious fiction. The generations that worked it the biography of the Prophet were too far removed from his time to have true data or notions; and, moreover, it was not their aim to know the past as it was, but to construct a picture of it as it ought to have been, according to their opinion. Upon the bare canvass of verses of the Koran that need explanation, the traditionists have embroidered with great boldness scenes suitable to the desires or ideals; of their particular group: or to use a favorite metaphor of Lammens, they fill the empty spaces by a process of stereotyping which permits the critical observer to recognize the origin of each picture. (Hurgronje, "Muhammadanism," pp. 23, 24)

Caetani's work we have already referred to. Lammens has not yet given us his "Life," which should be epoch-making when it appears. He has contented himself so far with publishing a number of preliminary studies, which he calls "Sira-studies," working out his method, sifting his material, and as one might say, clearing the ground on which he is to build. "Notre procédé," he writes, "sera donc plus monographique que biographique. L'ensemble - si nous devons en voir la fin - formera une nouvelle Vie de Mahomet" ["Our method will be more monographic than biographic. The whole - if we ever see the end of it - will form a new life of Muhammad"] ("Le Berceau de l'Islam," p. vi). Perhaps the best introduction to his work is his essay "Koran et Tradition: comment fut composée la vie de Mahomet" [Koran and Tradition: How the Life of Muhammad was Composed] (Paris, 1910), where he shows how over and over again the traditions are simply elaborations of some phrase or word in the Koran and have no independent authority, and, of course, can not be used as independent sources for biographical purposes. In 1911 appeared a further study, "L' Age de Mahomet et la Chronologie de la Sira" [The Age of Muhammad and the Chronology of the Sira], in the *Journal Asiatique*, and the following year the very important study, "Fatima et les Filles de Mahomet" (Rome, 1912). In this work he takes up the legend of Fatima in the Muslim writings, and shows in detail how out of the family conflicts and jealousies and the conflicting movements of opinions in early Islam there gradually evolved this detailed biography of Fatima, which is a conglomeration of heterogeneous elements mostly apocryphal and frequently contradictory. But this is only the stepping stone to a further conclusion:

The same method and analogous principles governed the secular elaboration of the Sira. Around a nucleus, provided by interpretation of the Koran, have come to be superimposed inconsistent political theories with theocratic dreams, opinions of schools of theology and law, with the tendencies of ascetic circles and the aspirations of Sufiism.

So that as Goldziher observed ("Vorlesungen." p. 20): "It is not the historical picture whose influence the Faithful feel. In its place was early substituted pious legend, with its ideal Muhammad."

Further important studies of Lammens are "Mahomet fut il sincere?" [Was Muhammad sincere?] (Paris, 1914); "La République marchandise de la Mecque envers l'an 600 de notre ère" [The Merchant Republic of Mecca around the Year 600 C.E.] (Alexandria, 1910); "Le Triumvirat Abou Bakr, Omar et Abou Obaida" [The Triumvirate of Abou Bakr, 'Umar, and Abu Ubayda] (Beirut, 1909); "Le Califat de Yezid I" [The Caliphate of Yezid I] (Beirut 1921); and "La cité arabe de Taif" [The Arab City of Taif] (Beirut, 1922). The student should also consult an article by Dr. Becker in *Der Islam*, vol. 4, 263-69 on "Prinzipielles zu Lammens' Sirastudien."

The dominant note in this advanced criticism is "back to the Koran." As a basis for critical biography the Traditions are practically worthless (Hurgronje, op cit, pp. 25, 26; Goldziher in "Kultur der Gegenwart" I. iiiii, p. 100 seq; and ZDMG. 1907; Caetani, I, 197, Lammens, "Berceau, 17 p. vi; "Fatima", 97 p. 139; Nöldeke, ZDMG, vol. lii, WZKM, xxi, p.298); in the Koran alone can we be said to have firm ground under our feet. As Snouck Hurgronje, who takes his stand with these advanced critics, puts it ("Mohammedanism," p.24):

While it may be true that the latest judges have here and there examined the Muhammadan traditions too skeptically and too suspiciously; nevertheless it remains certain that in the light of their research, the method of examination cannot remain unchanged. We must endeavor to make our explanations of the Koran independent of tradition, and in respect to portions where this is impossible, we must be suspicious of explanations, however plausible.

If the Koran is to be our primary foundation, the next question is to ascertain how firm ground it provides. It has usually been assumed that we were safe here at least, but recent work, such as that of Casanova and Mingana, has raised serious doubts as to the trustworthiness of even this source, but that is too big a question to enter upon at present.

MYTHOLOGY

It has already been noticed how soon the picture of the historical Muhammad was replaced by an ideal and legendary picture. Samples of such exalted pictures of Muhammad can be seen in the "Hyat ul-Qulub" (tr. Merrick, Boston, 1850), and in the "Borda du Cheikh el Bousiri, poème en l'honneur du Mahomet" (tr. by Basset, with Commentary, Paris, 1894). It is curious to note that Christian influence was apparently at the root of this legendary development (Becker "Christianity and Islam," p. 62), and it was natural that scholars should seek to trace the process of the development of this picture, which is the only one known to the vast majority of Muslims at the present day. Koelle, in the second part of his "Mohammed and Mohammedanism" (London, 1889), gave a popular account of the main lines of legendary development, but for a critical study of the problem the student needs to commence with an essay by Mez on "Die Geschichte der Wunder Muhammads" in the *Verhandlungen* of the second Congress on the History of Religion (Basle, 1905), and one by Horowitz "Zur Muhammadlegende," in *Der Islam*, vol. iv. The great work on this phase of the subject, however, is that of Tor Andrae, "Die Person Muhammads in Lehre und Glauben Seiner Gemeinde" (Stockholm, 1918) An outline of his method was given in his essay "Die Legenden von der Berufung Muhammads," in *Le Monde Orientale*, vol. vi, but in the larger

book he works out in detail the development and ramifications of the Prophet-legend, and shows its parallels in the divine man conceptions of Zoroastrian and Hellenistic religious thought.

ESCHATOLOGICAL LIVES

It has frequently been pointed out that eschatology forms perhaps the dominating interest in the Koran. One cannot read many pages without coming upon some thing referring to the future joys of believers in Paradise or the sufferings of unbelievers in Hell, or threats of the awful judgement of God to be meted out to unbelievers. The thing seems to have been an obsession with Muhammad. Dr. Macdonald points out:

The conception haunted Muhammad, that there was coming a Day of Doom when all must be judged, and that at that Day of Doom there would rule and judge - Allah. Few would be saved then.

For Muhammad, then, this sense of evil was overwhelming. The invisible world, the awful thing lying behind this world that we look out upon, which conditions it and works in and through it, was dreadfully near. At every turn he felt what has been so well put as "a sense of the wrath to come." (*Aspects*, pp. 70, 62)

Certain modern writers, e.g., Casanova and Horovitz have seen in this the key to the problem of Muhammad's personality. No actual life of Muhammad has been written from this point of view but it has been used to attack many individual problems, particularly those arising in attempts at Koranic exegesis. The position is set forth by Casanova in his study "Mohammed et la Fin du Monde" (Paris, 1911-1921). The secret of Muhammad's mission he claims is found in the fact that his fundamental doctrine was that "the times announced by Daniel and Jesus had arrived: Muhammad was the last Prophet chosen by God to preside conjointly with the Messiah who was to return to earth for this purpose, at the end of the world and the final judgment" (op. cit., p. 8). He firmly believed and taught that his coming, and the end of the world were causally connected and he must see the final dissolution before he died. When death overtook him, and he felt himself passing away, he was in dreadful distress, and it is well known that his more immediate followers refused at first to believe the news of his death. Casanova thinks that some of the curious phenomena of the Koran can be explained by the fact that the revelations had to be re-edited to square with the fact that he had died, and that many things in early Islamic development theologically and otherwise go back to this same point.

APOLOGETIC LIVES

We have already noticed that quite early in the revival of interest in Oriental studies, Boulainvilliers wrote a laudatory account of Muhammad, which was later used by Gibbon. His work was not based on any accurate first hand study of the sources, and the same is true of two other famous apologies, namely those of Carlyle, in his essay, "The Hero as Prophet," in "Heroes and Hero Worship," and Bosworth Smith, "Mohammed and Mohammedanism" (London, 1873, 3d ed. revised and enlarged, 1889). Carlyle's essay is reprinted and widely circulated by the modern Muslim school in India, as representing England's best thought on Muhammad, but they forget to mention that Carlyle takes back practically all his fine words in the essay on "The Hero as Poet."

It was to be expected that the leaders of the English-educated modernist school in Islam would be diligent in producing such apologies. Both leaders of the Aligarh school in India have written apologetic lives from their peculiar point of view. Syed Ahmad Khan in his "Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto" (Aligarh, 1870), and Syed Ameer Ali in his "Life and Teachings of Muhammad," which was first issued in 1873, and later as the first part of his "Spirit of Islam" (last edition, London, 1923). Dr. Margoliouth's judgment on this school applies with particular aptness to Ameer Ali's work:

These apologists endeavor to discredit the biography of Ibn Ishaq where it shocks the European reader, and where this cannot easily be done, they suggest honorable motives, or suppose the course followed by the Prophet to have been the least objectionable of those that were open to him at the time. Thus his toleration of polygamy is declared to have been a limitation with the view of ultimate suppression, and his attitude toward slavery is regarded as similarly intended to lead to its abolition. He has even been made to set an example of monogamy, but the ingenuity required for this is so great that the result is unconvincing. (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, volume 8, p. 878) An example of an attempt emanating from a different school will be found in M. H. Kidwai's "The Miracle of Mohammed, preceded by an Outline of Mohammed's Life" (London, 1906); but far more interesting is a more recent work from yet another modernist group, in the sumptuous volume produced by the Paris Book Club, limited to one thousand sets, 125 on Imperial Japanese Vellum at £18 per copy, and 875 on handmade paper at £8 per copy. This one is in large quarto with thirty-five magnificent colored plates and numerous ornamental decorations, and is entitled "The Life of Mohammed, the Prophet of Allah" (Paris, 1920). It is the joint production of the French artist, E. Dinet, and one Sliman ben Ibrahim, and is intended as a "counterblast to the many slanderous, vituperative lives of Muhammad that have appeared in European lands during the course of centuries." The same authors have produced also a little brochure "L'Orient vu de l'Occident" (Paris, 1921), indulging in vigorous but quite harmless criticism of the work of Lammens, Casanova, Hurgronje, and other scholars of the advanced critical school.

MYSTICISM

A more recent attempt to work out a new principle of interpretation for the life of Muhammad is that of Professor J. C. Archer in a monograph published in the Yale Oriental Series, and entitled, "Mystical Elements in Muhammad" (New Haven, 1924). This writer commences by a vigorous criticism of the pathological theory, and while admitting that there may have been pathological elements in his life, insists that the essential thing in his experience was that he was a mystic, so his book is to prove that "Muhammad the mystic is a greater figure than we had dreamed." "Muhammad," he claims, "was a mystic in the technical sense, and that, too, not merely in mental attitude, but in habitual practice." But when we look for his evidence for this amazing statement, all we find is a very strained interpretation of a very few Koranic texts, most of which are unfortunately suspect, and a very precarious theory of the influence of Christian ascetics on the early life of the Prophet. The theory is based almost entirely on the Koran, and modern research ought surely to have made clear that the Koran can hardly be taken at face value for attempts at psychological interpretation. Moreover, as Massignon has pointed out (*R.M.M.*, lix. 337) - "on peut affirmer que plusieurs des versets qui ont une portée mystique pour certains lecteurs, ont pu n'avoir pour Muhammad que l'academisme d'une citation." ["We can assert that several verses which have a mystical connotation for certain readers can only have had the banality of a quotation for Muhammad".]

The most recent attempt at providing us with a point of view for the interpretation of Muhammad's life and teaching is that in Richard Bell's Gunning Lectures before the University of Edinburgh, "The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment" (London, 1926). Bell's work is only a preliminary study; he bases himself entirely on the Koran, taking no account of tradition or Sira, and he thinks that from the Koran itself we can find the main principles which will later guide us through the maze of Tradition. Bell thinks the problem is in the fact that a little before the coming of Muhammad, Arabia had become permeated with new ideas of religion, partly from Jewish, but mostly Christian sources, working into Arabia from three directions, downward from Syria to the northwest from Mesopotamia to the northeast and upwards from Abyssinia through South Arabia. One proof of this is that almost all his religious vocabulary is borrowed from either Ethiopic or Syriac, even Jewish terms and practically all Persian religious terms coming through the Syriac. Thus Allah, Koran, Furqan, Salawat, Jahannam, Janna, Firdaus, Zakat, Din, etc., are all words of this origin, and the great figures that move through the Koran - Ibrahim, Junus, Musa, 'Isa, Idris are all of Syriac origin.

Muhammad was in contact with this new world of religious ideas, at first only in so far as it had become Arabicised before his time, but later with Jewish and Christian Sources themselves, and Bell claims that in the Koran itself we can see him gradually acquiring more and more information about these religions, particularly about Christianity, and developing his teaching *pari passu* with his increasing knowledge. Thus in the early Suras we find his religious vocabulary confined to that which can be illustrated from the early poets; words, i.e., that had been naturalized in Arabic before he came. In this early period we find very little about the Prophets or the cult of the great religions. Afterwards he learns and uses new religious terms borrowed from Christian and Jewish sources, and begins to talk about the Prophets. At this time he apparently did not know that Jews and Christians were not one people. Later he does find this out and his language changes immediately. So Bell would interpret him not as a mystic, nor an apoplectic, nor a pathological case of any kind. A politician, yes, but of a religious nature, who was grieved at the lack of religion among his people, and conceived his mission to be to give to the Arabs such a message as the Prophets had given to the great nations surrounding them.

This certainly provides us with a promising starting point, one that seems better than any so far suggested to fit the facts that appear from the Koran, and it may be that the application of Bell's suggestion may provide us with the clue for getting back, at least as far as we can expect, in our quest for the historical Muhammad.

The conclusion from this brief survey would seem to be that we have perhaps yet to wait for further research to be done among the early sources and for further discussion to allow a certain crystallizing of opinion as to where sound foundations can be laid, before anything much can be attempted further at biographical reconstruction. It is worthy of note, however, that the scholars who are most familiar with Arabic sources and have got closest to an understanding of the life of the period, scholars such as Margoliotith, Hurgronje, Lammens, Caetani, are the most decisive against the prophetic claims of Muhammad, and one must confess that the further one goes in one's own study of the sources the more difficult it becomes in one's own thinking to escape the conclusions of these scholars.

[Material by Arthur Jeffery](#)
[Answering Islam](#) Home Page