

WAS MUHAMMAD A PROPHET FROM HIS INFANCY?

Arthur Jeffery

(In this and the following article, the spelling used by the authors has been purposely retained. — *Ed.*)

The point has recently been once more raised in controversy that while other prophets were called to their mission and before their call followed the religion of their people, Muhammad was a prophet from his infancy, was by special grace preserved from all taint of idolatry, and never at any time followed any other faith than that which he preached in his manhood.¹

The whole question is, of course, an exceedingly foolish one, for one would have thought it sufficiently obvious to any instructed intelligence that every prophet before his call has followed the religion of his people, and that an infant prophet would be psychologically a monstrosity. The question, however, is one that is continually coming up when one is in discussion with Muslim students, and it may not be uninteresting to readers of THE MOSLEM WORLD to consider a few facts that are relevant in this connection.

The Qur'an itself mentions only two prophets who, it claims, were prophets from infancy, viz., John the Baptist and Jesus. Of John we read in xix.13 "Oh John, take the book with strength, and we gave him *al-hukm* as a child." Where *al-hukm*, as Baidawi tells us, was generally taken to mean the prophetic office (*an-nubuwwa*). Of Jesus we read in xix.31 that while still an infant in his mother's arms He said, "I am a servant of God: He has given me the book and made me a prophet." Neither of these statements is, of course, historically true, the latter being based on the apocryphal legends of the *Gospel of the Infancy*,² and the former, in all probability, going back to the Judeo-Christian Gnostic teaching which we find still preserved among the Mandæans. As for Muhammad himself, we read in xciii.6 and 7 of God saying to him, "Did He (i. e., thy Lord) not find thee an orphan and give thee shelter, find thee erring and guide thee," where the technical words *dallan* and *hada* make it obvious that the reference is to his being found by Allah in a false religion and guided to the true, as the older exegetes recognized,³ though at a later time an effort was made to refer this passage to his being taken into his grandfather's home.⁴

Apart from specific passages, however, the whole attitude of Muhammad in the Qur'an is that of a man who has forsaken the old religion of his people, and is pressing on them the necessity of embracing a new and better religion, which he has been called to proclaim, and the acceptance of which will be for their eternal benefit. This, of course, is only what we should, from the nature of the case, expect, and is the only reasonable basis from which we can attempt to interpret the significance of Muhammad's mission to his people, and it is interesting to note that as we get back to the early *sira* material we find that there is evidence that till the call to what he regarded as the prophetic office, Muhammad did follow the pagan religion of his pagan Meccan contemporaries.

The present writer has not attempted to comb through the traditions in search of such evidence, but would here draw attention to certain fairly well known facts, the significance of which in this connection is not always grasped, yet which certainly deserve consideration. Let it be said at the outset that these are all facts which will bear the test of the searching light of our modern criticism of tradition. Muslim criticism of tradition has as a rule concerned itself solely with the examination of the *isnad*, i. e., with the chain of witnesses from whom the

tradition has been handed down, and has paid very little attention to the *matn* or substance of tradition itself, so that it is as a rule only among the more scholarly and independent Muslim writers such as al-Ghazzali, that we find traditions quoted for the *matn* without any consideration for the *isnad*.

For the purposes of modern scholarship, of course, criticism which confines its investigations to the *isnad* is worthless, and so the critical work of Goldziher, Caetani, Lammens and others of our modern investigators, has been directed to the *matn* with astonishingly fruitful results. Now it is well known that one of the strongest tendencies in tradition-formation is the idealization of the character about which the traditions are growing. Examples of this will occur to everyone in connection with the Apocryphal Lives of Jesus, in the growth of the Buddha legend, or even in the Alexander Saga. It is thus precisely those traditions which are furthest from this idealizing tendency which are *a priori* the most likely to be genuine. It is for this reason that the traditions we are about to quote are so valuable, for it is impossible to imagine their having been invented after the idealizing process had started. Indeed there was every reason for suppressing them at that time, and it is difficult to believe that they would have survived had they not been old and unquestionably authentic.

(i) We read in the *Kitabu'l-Bad'i wa't-Tarzkh* of al-Maqdisi,⁵ that according to the ancient authority al-Qatada, the first son whom Khadija bore to Muhammad in the Jahiliyya was named by him 'Abd Manaf, i. e., Servant of Manaf. Now Manaf was an ancient idol venerated by the Quraish, and at one time seems to have been the most important divinity at Mecca (*a'zam asn am Makka*).⁶ We know little about the idol save that it was Hudhail, and had some sexual significance.⁷

It might of course be argued that in naming the child 'Abd Manaf Muhammad was only following family custom, for his own great-great-grandfather was named 'Abd Manaf.⁸ This, however, is really begging the question, for Muhammad after his assumption of the prophetic office showed considerable anxiety about the necessity of changing the names of those of his followers which were reminiscent of the old Paganism.⁹ It was undoubtedly this tendency to remove all traces of the old heathen theology which suppressed the name 'Abd Manaf from the lists of the children of Muhammad given in Tabari and Ibn Hisham. It is thus not reasonable to suppose that he would have named his own first-born 'Abd Manaf had he been at that time following the "religion of Abraham" which he later professed, and which was characterized by such uncompromising hostility to all forms of idolatry. It is at least interesting to note in this connection that his only child of whose birth we are absolutely certain, came after the assumption of the prophetic office, and he named it Ibrahim.

(ii) We learn from the *sira* that Muhammad married three of his daughters to idolatrous husbands in Mecca. There is some confusion as to details in the early literature, but the facts seem to be that Ruqayya was married to 'Utba, the son of Abu Lahab, and Umm Kulthum to his brother 'Utaiba. They separated from their husbands (al-Khudari bluntly says they were divorced),¹⁰ to join their father after the proclamation of his mission, and were later given, first Ruqayya and then Umm Kulthum, as wives to 'Uthman b. 'Affan, who later became the third caliph.¹¹ In the case of Zainab, his eldest daughter, we have a touching little story of the parting between her and her husband Abu'l-'As b. Rabi', he being taken prisoner at Badr and granted his life on condition of allowing his wife to come over to her father's party, though he was given her back again when at last he became a Muslim.¹² The whole account in the early literature makes it very clear that at the time of the marriage of these daughters to idolatrous

Meccans there was no consciousness on the part of anyone of any difference between the religion of Muhammad and that of his Meccan contemporaries.

(iii) A very pretty story enshrined in the *sira* is that which tells how in his early manhood Muhammad assisted in the rebuilding of the Ka'ba. As it has come down to us the story has been considerably embellished, and coloured to emphasize the importance of Muhammad and the signal position of honour and esteem in which he was held by his fellow citizens. The story, however, occurs in three sources, Ibn Hisham, Tabari, and Ibn Sa'd,¹³ and would seem to be based on an actual occurrence.

Stripped of its embellishments the story is as follows. An unusually violent and prolonged flood had seriously injured the fabric of the Ka'ba, the roof was damaged, serious cracks had appeared in the walls, and thieves had taken advantage of this condition to rob the treasury therein. While the leaders of the Quraish were still deliberating as to how the necessary repairs were to be effected, news reached them of a Greek ship which had been wrecked by the same storm on the coast. Al-Walid, the chieftain of the city, proceeded to the coast, along with some of the notables of Mecca, bargained for the timber of the wreck, and engaged from among the crew a Coptic carpenter named Baqum (Pachomius), who knew something of architecture, to supervise the operations of restoration. When the time came to build in the Black Stone there was some friction among the Meccan notables, each one wishing to have the honour of placing in position this sacred cult object. To settle the quarrel they agreed that the stone should be set up by the first person who chanced to enter the Ka'ba court. This happened to be Muhammad, who was summoned to the task and performed it.

The Ka'ba at this time, as is well known, was in some sort the Pantheon of the Arab tribes and was full of idols. It was the House of that al-Lat, al-'Uzza and Manat against whom Muhammad later fulminated in the Qur'an, and the fact that we see him assisting in the rebuilding of the idol house, and evidently proud of being called in to assist, would seem clear evidence that at that time he had not taken that attitude toward idolatry which was perhaps his most outstanding characteristic in the early years of his Mission. In other words, we can assume that at that time he was following peacefully in the religion of his people.

(iv) We have preserved to us but few details of Muhammad's domestic life with his first wife Khadija, but there is an interesting passage in the Musnad of Ahmad b. Hanbal which raises the veil for a moment from their custom of evening prayer.¹⁴ In this tradition a neighbour of theirs tells how he overheard Muhammad saying to his wife, "Oh Khadija: by Allah, I will not worship al-Lat nor al-'Uzza: by Allah I will not perform worship again." But Khadija said, "Leave al-Lat and leave al-'Uzza." The neighbour adds, "These were their idols which they used to worship, and then go to bed."

It would seem obvious from this that it was the family custom in that household to perform their devotions to these "daughters of Allah" before retiring at night, and that the tradition comes from that period in Muhammad's spiritual development when he was beginning to feel the futility of idol worship, and under the influence of the purer religions around him, or maybe of those shadowy persons the Hanifs, who had been enormously influenced by Judaism and Christianity, was seeking after that monotheism which later he preached so successfully in Arabia.

The Muslim authorities, however, who naturally cannot dream of admitting this interpretation, raise two objections to it from the language of the tradition itself. Firstly, they

say we should translate, "By Allah I will not worship *them* ever," the pronoun having been left out. Secondly, they point out that the verbs in the last clause, "which they used to worship and then go to bed," are plural in form and not dual, and so must refer to the pagan Arabs and not to Muhammad and Khadija. The point raised in the first objection is remotely possible, for, in earlier Arabic, writers were not so particular in observing all the minute points of accuracy which became such an obsession after classical Arabic had degenerated into a language of grammars and lexicons. On the other hand it must be pointed out that the translation we have given is the natural sense of the passage, and the other would never have entered anyone's head had it not been for some *a priori* necessity of saving Muhammad from ever saying that he would give up worship. As to the second, the consideration which we have already advanced to admit the possibility of the first objection weighs strongly against the validity of this. A modern writer, mindful of grammar and lexicon, would probably be meticulous in his use of duals and plurals, but anciently it was not so. In any case the whole tradition is pointless if it does not refer to the household of Muhammad and Khadija, and if pressed we could always argue that the plural is used to include the family.

(v) Also in the *Musnad* (i, 189) we have preserved a story of the meeting of Muhammad with Zaid b. 'Amr, perhaps the most famous of those above-mentioned Hanifs, near whose grave at the foot of Mt. Hira, Muhammad used to retire for meditation and solitary reflection during that momentous period which immediately preceded his assumption of the prophetic office.¹⁵ The story reads thus, "While Muhammad and Zaid b. Haritha were at Mecca, there met them Zaid b. 'Amr b. Nufail, so they invited him to their table, but he said, 'Oh son of my brother, I do not eat of what has been sacrificed to idols' (*la akulu mimma dizubiha 'ala'n-nusubi*), so from that time the Prophet never ate of anything sacrificed to idols."

Readers of the New Testament will be familiar with the words of Paul regarding meat offered to idols. It was a common pagan custom and was widely practised among the heathen Arabs.¹⁶ The *nusub* or *ansab* were primitive stone pillars beside which the victims were slain. The blood which was the essence of the offering, was poured out over the stone or at its base, and the flesh distributed to those who took part in the sacrifice, who took it home to feast upon.¹⁷ The conclusion obviously is that Muhammad and Zaid b. Haritha had assisted at a pagan sacrifice, and had brought home with them their share of the flesh of the victim, so that it was Zaid b. 'Amr's rebuke that caused Muhammad to give up the practice.

The only real attempt to avoid this conclusion that the present writer has heard of is that which takes the words *'ala'n-nusubi*, as meaning not "sacrificed to idols" which would be *li'n-nusubi*, but merely "on stones." The linguistic point raised here, however, is inconclusive, for the preposition *'ala* is quite as valid as *li* in this connection, and the objection also misses the point that the *nusub* are not ordinary stones such as might be used for a butchers block, but cult objects, the equivalent of the Greek *stelai*, and a common pagan oath was "by the *ansab*" or "by the blood which on the *ansab* flows."¹⁸

(vi) Finally we may draw attention to a still more conclusive instance of Muhammad's association with the ancient pagan worship, where we are actually given the words of a confession from his own lips, that in his younger days he had sacrificed a white ewe to al-'Uzza. The passage is given by Yaqt al-Hamawi in the article on al-'Uzza in his Geographical Dictionary.¹⁹ It runs as follows, "Said Abu'l-Mundhir. It has reached us that the prophet made mention of her (i.e., al-'Uzza) one day and said, 'Why, I made an offering of a reddish white ewe to al-'Uzza when I was following the religion of my people.'" Al-'Uzza is one of the three idols of the Ka'ba mentioned by name in the Qur'an (lii.19) and whose name

was used by the Quraish in their battle-cry,²⁰ so that she seems to have been the most important of the many deities worshipped at Mecca if not indeed the original goddess of the place.²¹ It is not wonderful, therefore, that Muhammad should have made an offering to her in the days when he followed the religion of his people.

The above quotations are sufficient for our purpose. It is clear from them that in the early strata of the *sira* it was recognized that before Muhammad went through that religious experience which he regarded as a call to assume the prophetic office, he followed the religion commonly practised by his contemporaries. This is only what we should expect. Just as pious legend wove the apocryphal Gospel legends around the figure of Jesus, and created the Jataka for the Buddha, later Muslim legend would have it that Muhammad was never other than a worshipper of that God of Abraham whom he proclaimed in his later years. It is not an attack on the character of the Prophet to point out these facts that still survive to us as to his early faith, but an attempt to rescue him from the mists of mythology, and set him forth in his true significance in religious history.

Cairo, Egypt.

A. JEFFERY.

Footnotes

¹ This is a commonplace of orthodox theology. The interested student will find in Abu Na'im's *Dala'il an-Nubuwwa*, pp. 58-60 a chapter devoted to Traditions as to how God preserved Muhammad from following the religious rites and customs of the Jahiliyya.

² See also Sura iii.41, 43, and Tisdall *Original Sources of the Qur'an*, p. 169.

³ Cf. as-Suddi in Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, I. i. 126.

⁴ Vide Baidawi on the passage for both interpretations.

⁵ Ed. Huart, vol. iv. p. 139 of the Arabic text.

⁶ Tabari, *Annales*, i. 1092.

⁷ *Kitabu'l-Asnam* (ed. Zaki Pasha) p. 32.

⁸ Ibn Hisham, p. 68; Tabari, i. 1091; and al-Khushani's Gloss on the *Sira* of Ibn Hisham, ed. Brønne, p. 3.

⁹ Margoliouth *Mohammed*, p. 454 - "Many of the visitors' names which were redolent of paganism, or were otherwise displeasing to the Prophet's delicate ear, were altered by him to something better." Vide also the *Sunan* of Abu Da'ud, ii, 199.

¹⁰ *Nur al-Yaqin*, p. 127.

¹¹ See Muir *Life of Mohammed*, pp. 34 and 172, and Ibn Hisham 465; Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat* viii, 24, 25.

¹² *Nur al-Yaqin*, p. 127.

¹³ Ibn Hsham, p. 122 ff: Tabari, I, 1138 ff. Ibn Sad, I, i, 93.

¹⁴ *Musnad*, iv, 222.

¹⁵ Muir, *Life*, p. 37; Ibn Hisham, p. 152.

¹⁶ They are mentioned as early as Herodotus, iii, 8.

¹⁷ Wellhausen, *Reste Arabischen Heidenthums*, pp. 117, 118; Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, p. 201; Noldeke in *ERE*, I. 665; Ibn al-Kalbi, *Kitab-l-Asnam*, p. 34.

¹⁸ Wellhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 129; Ibn al-Kalbi, p. 42, quoting a verse of 'Amr b. Jabir; Noldeke, *op. cit.*.

¹⁹ *Mu'jamu'l Buldan*, ed. Wüstenfeld, III, 664.

²⁰ Waqidi, *Kitabu't-Maghazi* ed. von Kremer, p. 237.

²¹ Ibn Hisham, pp. 93, 94; Ibn al-Kalbi, *Asnam*, p. 18; Wellhausen, *Reste*, p. 36; Robertson Smith, *Kinship*, p. 294.

The Muslim World, Volume 20 (1930), pp. 226-234.

For further articles on the idolatry of Muhammad, including some discussion of Muslim reactions to the above, see [\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#), [\[3\]](#).

[Books and articles by Arthur Jeffery](#)

[Evaluating Muhammad](#)

[Answering Islam](#) Home Page