

MUHAMMAD

The man who
transformed Arabia

Peter Cotterell



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An Introduction and an Explanation

This book is not written for the academic world. I could have written such a book, adorned with footnotes. But there are few footnotes, because the academics would recognise the sources of most of what I have to say and would have access to them, and for everyone else the footnotes are little more than a distraction from a gentle and enjoyable read.

There is a sense in which the book is a response to Karen Armstrong's book *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, first published in 1991. Her book was meticulously researched, as the 367 footnotes testify. It is, in fact, a book for the academic, but well worth struggling through the wealth of detail to grasp those incidents and events of importance to the more general reader. But for me the book has one irritating feature: the constant references to Christianity and Judaism, and a somewhat ingenuous use of the Old Testament to explain or justify one or other of Muhammad's actions. Despite having been a nun, Armstrong seems to be unaware of the way in which contemporary Christianity regards the Old Testament: it is allowed only its proper task of shedding light on some otherwise abstruse passages of the New Testament. For myself, I have tried to stay with my subject, Muhammad, and the context in which he lived.

It is often believed that Muslims base their faith and practice on the Qur'an alone. That is a major misunderstanding. In fact, Muslims make use of what I have termed the quadrilateral, four elements: the Qur'an; the doctrine of Abrogation (which aids in the interpretation of some passages of the Qur'an); *hadith*, the collected Traditions regarding what Muhammad is reported to have said or done; and the *sunna*, the practice of the Prophet. There is no complete agreement as to how these relate to one another.

For example, whether the *sunna* judges the Qur'an or the Qur'an judges the *sunna* is a major debate within the various schools of thought in Islam.

I have made use of some sources with relative frequency: Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*; Guillaume's *The Life of Muhammad* (a translation of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*); Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*; and Peter Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Context* (annoyingly published in the UK as *Islam in Conflict*). I have, of course, referred occasionally to Karen Armstrong's book, but have done my best to refrain from making what I have written a mere commentary on what she has written. Throughout the book, the discerning reader will note my dependence on the many other seminal works on Muhammad. My own memories of some 30 years of teaching undergraduate students and supervising postgraduate students in the field of Islam are certain to be there, if unacknowledged.

I have tried throughout the book to avoid the Scylla of damning and belittling Muhammad from sheer prejudice, and the Charybdis of sanitising and canonising him from an opposite prejudice. I believe that Muhammad was a remarkable man, with a breathtaking range of gifts. Whether he was a prophet or not is for the reader to judge.

CHAPTER 1

Man of Destiny

Amongst all the objects venerated by the Arabs at the time of Muhammad, the most feared was the Ka'ba, an unpretentious cube-shaped building made of stone. Inside there was a pit or well, into which the people threw their gifts for the gods whose house it was believed to be. When Muhammad was some 30 years old, the building was so dilapidated that it was decided to demolish it, rebuild it and give it a roof. The artisans approached their task with some fear: how would the god react to having pickaxes crashing against the stonework in the necessary destruction work before the rebuilding could start? The man who was to strike the first blow addressed the building: 'O God, do not be afraid, O God we intend only what is best.' So the demolition began and was completed, and the rebuilding work started. But now came a new problem: the Black Stone. This was the most sacred part of the sacred sanctuary. Who dared to handle it?

'Abu Umayya b. al-Mughira b. 'Abdullah b. 'Umar b. Makhzum who was at that time the oldest man of Quraysh, urged them to make the first man to enter the gate of the mosque umpire in the matter of dispute. They did so and the first to come in was the apostle of God. When they saw him they said, 'This is the trustworthy one. We are satisfied. This is Muhammad.' When he came to them and they informed him of the matter he said, 'Give me a cloak,' and when it was brought to him he took the black stone and put it inside it and said that each tribe should take hold of an end of the cloak and they should lift it together. They did this so that when they got it into position he placed it with his own hand, and then building went on above it.¹

¹ Ibn Ishaq, quoted in Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1955, p. 86.

The elusive messenger

Looking back over history from the viewpoint of our twenty-first century, the great figures of history stand out from the millions who have lived and died – the great, the good and the bad. Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, Napoleon Bonaparte, Christopher Wren, Michelangelo, and further back the great Caesars, and beyond them to Judas Maccabeus, Aristotle and Pythagoras. However, towering far above them all are just two figures, a Jew and an Arab: Jesus of Nazareth and Muhammad of Mecca. The lives, teachings and actions of these two have left their mark on century after century of human history and still make their mark today.

Jesus and Muhammad. Not to be compared with each other, but rather to be contrasted with each other. Jesus the man of peace, whose life ended on a cross but whose followers are today counted in their millions and found on every continent. Muhammad the man of war, who in his own lifetime brought a people out of idolatry and political obscurity and marched them onto the centre stage of human history. He lived a life that was often violent, and yet he died peacefully in Medina in the arms of his much-loved wife, Aisha.

The Arab people, once despised and ignored by the two great empires of the day, Christian Byzantine and Zoroastrian Persian, inexplicably challenged them both and ultimately eclipsed them both. An Arab people, revitalised and energised by one man, Muhammad.

Interpret history however we will, these two figures, Jesus and Muhammad, write themselves into our story at every turn of events and in every century. From our twenty-first-century viewpoint, we are forced to recognise that we shall never understand our present until we understand their past.

Many lives of Jesus of Nazareth have been written, though almost all of the material for them is contained frustratingly in four small volumes, the Christian Gospels. For Muhammad the situation is very different: many biographies of him have been written, by

Muslims and by Western scholars, fascinated by the meteoric rise of this man. But it has proved difficult for Westerners to treat their subject with that scholarly impartiality that it demands. On the one hand there are those biographies which insist that Muhammad could do nothing right, while on the other hand there are those which insist that he did nothing wrong.

Karen Armstrong, for example, writes that

After Muhammad's death, Jews and Christians were never required to convert to Islam but were allowed to practice their religion freely in the Islamic empire ... It has never been a problem for Muslims to coexist with people of other religions.²

In today's world such an assertion is simply preposterous, and looking back into history the example of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, or Muhammad the Left-Handed as he was known, and his invasion of Ethiopia paints a different picture. The stark choice given to thousands of Ethiopians was 'Convert to Islam, or death'. Some were allowed the alternative of submission to Islamic rule; most were not.

On the other hand, Armstrong herself quotes Humphry Prideaux who, back in 1697, published *Mahomet: The True Nature of Imposture*. In it he said:

For the first Part of his Life he led a very wicked and licentious Course, much delighting in Rapine, Plunder, and Bloodshed ... His two predominant passions were Ambition and Lust.³

Coming forward to the twentieth century, Margaret Deanesly, Professor of History at the University of London, dismissed both Muhammad and the Qur'an using the following ill-chosen words:

Islam, the religion of surrender to God, had been founded by Mahomet, an Arab shepherd and prophet, who died in 632.

2 Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, Phoenix, London, 1991, p. 87.

3 Prideaux, p. 80, quoted in Armstrong, *Muhammad*, p. 36.

His religion ... was derived from the 'religion of Abraham' a monotheistic system practiced by certain Arabs, from Judaism; and from a confused knowledge of Christianity gained orally by Mahomet ... The Koran is a collection of short sayings, the inspired utterances of the Prophet, strung together in no particular order: but while the earlier sayings are comparable in their exalted fervor to those of the Hebrew prophets, the later are a miscellaneous collection of Mahomet's borrowings from Judaism and Christianity, the 'orders of the day' of a chieftain on a campaign, moral regulations for his followers, and even dispensations to Mahomet to evade his own earlier commands.⁴

Nevertheless, this can be balanced by the assessment offered by Syed Ameer Ali, who asserts that Muhammad's

purity of heart, austerity of conduct, refinement and delicacy of feeling, and stern devotion to duty which had won him the title of el-Amin ['Faithful one'], combined with a severe sense of self-examination are ever the distinguishing traits of his character.

A nature so pure, so tender, and yet so heroic, inspires not only reverence, but love ... his countenance reflected the benevolence of his heart.

His singular elevation of mind, his extreme delicacy and refinement of feeling, his purity and truth, form the constant theme of traditions.

He visited the sick, followed every bier he met, accepted the invitation of a slave to dinner ... his hand was the most generous, his breast the most courageous, his tongue the most truthful: he was the most faithful protector of those he protected, the sweetest ...⁵

4 Margaret Deanesly, *A History of the Medieval Church 590–1500*, Methuen, London, 1925, pp. 106–7.

5 Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1984, pp. 117–22.

In fact, even in the Traditions relating to his life we simply do not have enough information to enable anyone to make such sweeping claims about Muhammad's character and conduct.

There is a further problem with many of the available biographies: they claim to know the motives behind the decisions and actions of those whose lives they describe. The fact is that we often do not know our own motivation for what we decide to do. Still less can we know the motives of others. What was done is one thing; just why it was done may never be known.

Somewhere between the two assessments, that Muhammad did nothing right or that Muhammad did nothing wrong, lies the truth. However, as Donner has said, 'The historian, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, who wishes to write about the life of the Prophet Muhammad faces grave problems both of documentation and interpretation.'⁶

It was probably in the year 610 that Muhammad claimed that he had received a divine revelation, a message that would restore true religion to the Arab peoples and immediately put an end to the oppression of the poor by the wealthy of Mecca. Just 22 years later, Muhammad died. In those years he had succeeded in beating down the opposition of the Meccans and uniting the Arab peoples into one nation, a nation worshipping one God in place of the plethora of gods they had acknowledged before. Already his message was reaching out beyond the Arabian Peninsula: northwards into Syria, eastwards across North Africa. Before long a book would emerge, embodying a new literary genre, devoted exclusively to words spoken by one man, Muhammad. Spoken by him, but, in a tradition that soon emerged, words that came directly and literally from God. Transmitted through an intermediary, an angel, passed on by Muhammad who, according to Muslim theology, contributed to the message only a willing tongue.

Any one of his achievements would command respect from the historian; put together, they represent a sea change that was

⁶ F. M. Donner, 'Muhammad and the Caliphate', in John L. Esposito (ed), *The Oxford History of Islam*, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 1999, p. 5.

arguably unparalleled in history, affecting not only Arabia but transforming all expectations for the unfolding human history.

Writing an account of the life of such a man is no easy task. Fortunately, we have several sources to which reference can be made. There are four that might be termed crucial sources:

- the Qur'an itself
- the collected Traditions (*hadith*), which embody the recollections of those who were nearest to him of what Muhammad said and did on various occasions
- the earliest biography of Muhammad that is available to us, written by Ibn Ishaq and translated from the Arabic by Alfred Guillaume
- the *sunna* – the practice, the pathway, of Muhammad – distilled from the Qur'an and Traditions.

Four sources for a biography of Muhammad

The Qur'an

Although some parts of the Qur'an were written down during Muhammad's lifetime, the general consensus seems to be that it was Uthman, the third of the four who led Islam after Muhammad's death (the 'Rightly Guided Caliphs'), who first brought the Qur'an together as a single book. Some parts were recovered from the memories of those who had first heard them; some were crudely recorded on whatever material came to hand – for example, palm leaves and even stones. Some Muslims may have had collections of their own, and it seems certain that Aisha had such a collection.

The Qur'an is certainly a very difficult book to read for anyone who is familiar with Western literature, whether sacred or profane, with its usual coherence of subject and chronology. The obvious incoherence – especially of the later and longer suras – is understandable. These suras were not given out as a single revelation and on a single occasion, but piecemeal. As Malise Ruthven comments:

The subject matter, including stories of the earlier prophets, punishment stories about those who failed to heed them, psalm-like lyric passages celebrating the manifestation of God's glory in nature, and the Leviticus-like legal prescriptions, appear to be jumbled and diffused throughout the text.

Ruthven gives the example of the juxtaposition of the mystical imagery of the Light in verse 35 of Sura 24, a passage worthy of the later Muslim Sufi mystics, and the preceding verses which detail the punishment of adulterers (100 lashes) and slanderers (80 lashes).⁷

The Qur'an can be divided into two parts: those sayings believed to have been given while Muhammad was at Mecca, and those sayings attributed to him in the later period, when he was at Yathrib (or Medina, as it was later named). At Mecca he was 'setting out his stall'; he was proclaiming his message, laying the foundations for Islam. At Yathrib, however, Muhammad was a political figure, a governor, charged with the responsibility of uniting the various clans which had settled somewhat uncomfortably in Yathrib. He was forced to fight against the Meccans, who continued to harry him and his followers, and to threaten his new political and religious revolution. And there were not inconsiderable numbers of Jews and Christians scattered throughout the peninsula, some even in Yathrib itself, whose attitude to the new regime was by no means always favourable. Muhammad was forging a new nation. For the time being Yathrib must be its capital, but Muhammad must have known that ultimately the capital must be Mecca, with its Ka'ba.

Not surprisingly, this second part of the Qur'an finds Muhammad weighed down with all the responsibilities of a political leader, with imminent conflict, with social issues. Theology is notably lacking in the second part; rather, it offers a mixture of comment and legislation on military, social and political affairs. It has been plausibly argued that Islam's theology should be drawn from the Meccan suras alone. That would certainly relieve Muslims of many

⁷ Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, 2nd edn, Penguin, London, 2000, p. 83.

of the more radical pronouncements of the later Yathrib suras – for example, the punishment of the amputation of the hands of a thief and the crucifixion of a rebel, both laid down in Sura 5, verses 33 and 38. This Sura is a late Medinan Sura, possibly as late as 632 AD.

Of course, the Qur'an is not a biography of Muhammad, even if many of the suras can be related to events in his life. Nevertheless, it is probably the earliest source we have for the life of Muhammad, and even if the information it gives is sparse, it must be taken seriously. It is, in fact, possible to construct a very basic outline of his life from the Qur'an alone:

- Muhammad's father died before he was born, and his mother died when he was only six years old, leaving him not merely orphaned but, in Meccan terms, insignificant:

*Did He [Allah] not find thee an orphan and give thee
shelter (and care)?
And He found thee wandering, and He gave thee guidance.
And He found thee in need, and made thee independent
(Sura 93:6).*

- Suras 73 and 74 describe Muhammad's experiences in the cave outside Mecca, where he claimed to have received a revelation from Allah:

*O thou wrapped up (in a mantle)!
Arise and deliver thy warning! (Sura 74:1).*

*O thou folded in garments!
Stand (to prayer) by night, but not all night –
Half of it – or a little less,
Or a little more; and recite the Qur'an in slow, measured
rhythmic tones (Sura 73:1–4).*

- While still in Mecca, Muhammad was trying to explain the Qur'an to some Qurayshi leaders when he was interrupted by a poor blind man who also wanted to learn about the Qur'an. But Muhammad was annoyed at the interruption

and turned his back on him. Sura 80 actually carries the title 'He Frowned':

*(The Prophet) frowned and turned away,
Because there came to him the blind man (interrupting).
But what could tell thee but that perchance he might grow
(in spiritual understanding)?
Or that he might receive admonition, and the teaching
might profit him?*

- Muhammad's words would eventually become enshrined in the Qur'an, but it seems that early in his Medinan period there developed some conflicts between messages. This was explained by the doctrine of abrogation, whereby a later pronouncement could abrogate, or cancel out, an earlier one. Some of the Jewish clans snatched at the inconsistencies between the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible when they appeared to be dealing with the same event. They denied that his information came by revelation from God, suggesting instead that it came from some informant who happened to be better informed than Muhammad:

*When We substitute one revelation for another – and
Allah knows best what He reveals (in stages) – they say,
'Thou art but a forger' ...
We know indeed that they say, 'It is a man that teaches
him' (Sura 16:101–3).*

Yusuf Ali assigns this passage to the late Meccan period, but Bell, surely rightly, says it is

almost certainly early Medinan; it was in Medina where circumstances were different and the political situation changed rapidly owing to the opposition of the Jews, that the necessity to alter verses arose.⁸

8 Richard Bell, 'A Commentary on the Qur'an', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Monograph 14, vol. 1, Manchester University, 1991, p. 453. Cf. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 8th edn, Amana Publications, Beltsville MD, 1996, p. 636.

- Before the withdrawal from Mecca to Medina, Muhammad is said to have undertaken a miraculous journey in a single night, taking him from Mecca to Jerusalem, and from there through the heavens to God himself.

*Glory to (Allah) Who did take His servant for a Journey
by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Mecca] to the
Farthest Mosque [in Jerusalem], whose precincts We did
bless (Sura 17:1).*

Of course, Tradition adds much detail to this brief account.

- There is reference to the *Hijra*, the withdrawal from Mecca, when he and Abu Bakr hid in a cave to avoid their Meccan pursuers. Sura 9:40 is addressed to the Meccans who failed to help him at that time:

*If ye help not (your leader), (it is no matter): for Allah
did indeed help him, when the Unbelievers drove him out:
he had no more than one companion; the two were in
the cave, and he said to his companion, 'Have no fear for
Allah is with us.'*

- There is a brief direct reference to the Battle of Badr, when a relatively small force of Muslims defeated a much larger force of Meccans. Legend had it that the Muslims were aided by the appearance of angels at the battle:

*Allah had helped you at Badr, when ye were a
contemptible little force ...
Remember thou saidst to the Faithful: 'Is it not enough
for you that Allah should help you with three thousand
angels (Specially) sent down?' (Sura 3:123-4).*

- There is also reference to the defeat of the Muslims at the Battle of Uhud. Muhammad had instructed his followers on how the battle was to be conducted, but the lure of booty proved too much for the Muslims, who abandoned their

positions and opened the way for a Meccan victory. Many Muslims were killed and Muhammad himself wounded.

Allah did indeed fulfil His promise to you when ye with His permission Were about to annihilate your enemy – until ye flinched and fell to disputing about the order, and disobeyed it after He brought you in sight (of the booty) which ye covet (Sura 3:152).

- Sura 33 has a lengthy passage (verses 9–27) analysing the events of the Battle of the Ditch, when the Meccans moved against Medina itself. Their plans were thwarted by a ditch dug around the part of the oasis that was more open to attack. The result was that an attack turned into a siege, for which the Meccans were ill prepared. After two or three weeks, bad weather forced them to abandon the attack altogether. This storm is attributed to divine intervention: *‘there came down on you hosts (to overwhelm you): but We sent against them a hurricane and forces that ye saw not’* (verse 9). During the siege the Jewish Qurayza tribe were secretly in league with the Meccans:

And those of the people of the Book who aided them – Allah did take them down from their strongholds and cast terror into their hearts. (So that) some ye slew, and some ye made prisoners (verse 26).

In fact, all the men of the Qurayza tribe were killed and all their women and children enslaved.

- The same Sura (verse 40) records the fact that Muhammad had no male children: *‘Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but (he is) the Messenger of Allah, and the Seal of the Prophets.’* It may be that even at this point towards the end of Muhammad’s life, with so much already accomplished, some Arabs were still ready to point to this surprising lack of an heir, despite his large harem. Muhammad is content to respond by reminding them of what he is rather than what he admittedly *is not*.

- Sura 3:144 appears to relate to the period immediately preceding his death. Quite naturally the Muslims found the thought of his death profoundly disturbing. There was no son to succeed him and no one of the same charismatic nature who might conceivably take his place. There was most probably a widespread expectation that with the death of Muhammad, the *umma* that he had created would fall apart and the Arab peoples would return to their traditional gods:

Muhammad is no more than a messenger: many Were the messenger that passed away before him. If he died or were slain, will ye then Turn back on your heels? If any did turn back on his heels, not the least harm will he do to Allah.

The above passages are presented in a chronology that is generally accepted by conservative scholars, and they certainly give credibility to the account of Muhammad's life as it is presented below.

The doctrine of *tawatur* relates to the contents of both the Qur'an and the Traditions. This doctrine asserts that any text which is attested by multiple documents or is transmitted through multiple trustworthy individuals is consequently protected from error or falsification and is to be taken as reliable. It seems to follow that since we have multiple early manuscripts of both the Old and New Testaments, and the texts have been passed on by trustworthy Jews and Christians, some Muslims would argue that these, too, are subject to *tawatur* and are therefore reliable, at least so far as the actual wording is concerned if not the interpretation of the words.

The Traditions (hadith)

Following the death of Muhammad there were no further revelations, but inevitably further questions arose for which there were no apparent authoritative answers. Very quickly it became clear to Muslims in the expanding Muslim world that any word attributed to Muhammad provided unquestionable authority.

The door was now open not only for the recording of genuine memories of what Muhammad had said or done, but also for the creation of traditions in support of some cherished doctrine or some particular conduct. The record of the life of Muhammad, the *sunna*, was being amplified, sometimes from reliable traditions, sometimes from more doubtful sources. Muslims set out to recover lost traditions. They became known as the Traditionists:

These human vessels of the prophetic sunna, the 'traditionists' (muhaddithun), were soon spread beyond Mecca and Medina, the cities of Muhammad's religious mission. They spread throughout most of the Fertile Crescent [Syria and beyond, in a wide sweep down through the land of the two rivers, Mesopotamia], so seekers of religious knowledge and behavior traveled in search of traditions in order to learn from them. As the demand for traditions among the seekers grew, the supply of traditions grew to meet it, and the huge growth in the number of hadiths is exactly the problem that has come to plague both traditional Muslim and modern Western scholars, although not in the same way, in their reading and use of the Hadith. Different schools of thought and practice authorized their various and sometimes contradictory positions by citing dicta that purported to have originated in the prophet Muhammad himself. When no prophetic traditions (hadiths) could be found to support their positions, they were not infrequently created.⁹

Clearly then the traditions were and still are something of a problem. There are nine authoritative collections of Traditions, which have been divided by Muslims into three categories: the reliable (*sahih*) traditions, which are *tawatur*, the beautiful (*hasan*) traditions and the weak (*da'if*) traditions. This division was made meticulously, by examining the chain of witnesses, the *isnad*, which was claimed to attest each tradition. A short *isnad*, leading back to one of Muhammad's companions, was good, since there were few links in the chain. There would therefore be few opportunities

⁹ Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, Oxford University Press, New York & Oxford, 1999, p. 94.

for the tradition to be altered, and it would be relatively simple to examine the individual links in the chain. It seems that those who collected the traditions did their best to examine each person named in the *isnad*, to see if they were trustworthy and whether, in fact, they could have been in touch with the adjacent persons in the *isnad* chain. The presence of women in the attesting chain of transmitters seems not to have weakened the chain; indeed, some women were well known and respected as transmitters of traditions.

The results of the analysis of the traditions were remarkable. It is said that Ismail al-Bukhari, whose collection of traditions is looked upon as the most reliable, travelled widely, expressly for the purpose of collecting traditions. It is said that he found more than half a million, though this is probably an exaggeration. Some traditions would have been passed along through two or even more chains of witnesses, so would be counted twice or even three times, but still the number of traditions in circulation a hundred or so years after the death of Muhammad was enormous. Out of all these, Bukhari made use of only 2,700 and rejected the rest as unreliable for one reason or another. Bukhari was born in 810, 178 years after the death of Muhammad (and died in 870), so that there is considerable doubt about even his ability to screen out unreliable traditions from his collection. In the event two collections of Traditions are taken by Muslims as particularly authoritative: those by Bukhari and Muslim, which both claim to make use of only the most reliable, *sahih*, traditions. The collections by Abu Dawud and Ibn Majah, though recognised as less reliable than the preceding two, are nonetheless accepted as being generally reliable.

The Traditions have a further importance for Muslims: they form the basis of *Shari'a* Law. The process of creating *Shari'a* began well before the classification of traditions was completed, and it proved to be progressive as each phase of the process threw up its own problems. Very quickly the question of the relationship between Qur'an and Tradition arose: might a Tradition actually correct or modify some passage of the Qur'an? And how might

answers to important questions of law be found if those answers were missing from both Qur'an and Tradition?

Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad

The invaluable biography of Muhammad ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, 'The Life of the Messenger of Allah', written some 150 years after the death of Muhammad, was amongst the earliest of a literary biographical genre. The authors of such biographies were confronted with a mass of traditions together with the occasional historical references in the Qur'an, and their task was to knit these together so as to produce a consistent chronologically sound account of Muhammad's life. As we have seen, however, ample time had elapsed since Muhammad's death for legends to emerge and myths about his life to be created. Today it is by no means universally agreed that the scheme that the authors ultimately produced is the right one. This is important, because the chronological scheme necessarily anchors certain crucial texts in specific contexts which in turn influence their interpretation. More importantly, perhaps, since Qur'anic verses produced later in Muhammad's life might abrogate, or cancel, those produced earlier, the 'war' texts which now support a trajectory of violence might themselves, given a different chronology, be abrogated by texts advocating peace.

A further problem lies in the uncritical use of traditions by these authors. For example, the conversion of Umar ibn al-Khattab is recorded twice by Ibn Ishaq although the two accounts are mutually contradictory. In one account, Umar is converted to Islam through his sister Fatima and the reading of Sura 20 (*Ta Ha*). In the second account he is converted to Islam at the Ka'ba itself, where he had found Muhammad reciting the Qur'an. Both accounts are taken from the Traditions and both have 'reliable' attestation.¹⁰

The sunna, the practice of Muhammad

The Qur'an itself establishes the importance of the example of

¹⁰ Ibn Ishaq, pp. 155–9.

Muhammad. Sura 33:21 states: '*Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day*', and the later Sura 4:59 exhorts Muslims to '*Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger*'. To many Muslims the example of Muhammad is more important even than the Qur'an itself, because to be a Muslim is to live as Muhammad lived, since he is believed to be Allah's inspired prophet. Distilled out of Qur'an and Tradition, the *sunna* provides a detailed way of life for serious Muslims. Clearly it is of less value to Muslims who live in the urban West, since the life demonstrated in an Arab of the sixth century living in Arabia has few parallels to the lifestyle of twenty-first-century Westernised Muslims.

The significance of the *sunna* for Muslims has been questioned by Muslims even from the earliest days. Is not the Qur'an the only authoritative guide to right conduct for Muslims? It is not immediately clear that Tradition plus *sunna* should be an additional guide. Inevitably, there are many practices observed within Islam for which there is no obvious authority in the Qur'an. For example, it seems that early in the history of Islam a ban was put on tattooing and being tattooed. A woman of the Banu Usad tribe questioned this ban: 'I have read what is between the covers [of the Qur'an] and I have not found what you say.' The reply was taken from the Qur'an (Sura 59:7), '*take what the Messenger assigns to you, and deny yourselves that which he withholds from you.*' The *sunna*, then, is the repository of what Muhammad approved or disapproved and therefore carries the authority of the Qur'an.¹¹

The same writer takes up the assertion that Muhammad had commanded that anything that was ascribed to him should be referred to the Qur'an and 'if it agrees with the book of God, I said it. If it opposes the book of God, I did not say it.' In other words, *sunna* and Tradition are subordinate to the Qur'an. Al-Barr responds

¹¹ Ibn Abd al-Barr, quoted in Norman Calder, Jawid Mojaddedi & Andrew Rippin, *Classical Islam*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 179.

These words are not recognized by the people of knowledge as soundly transmitted from him [Muhammad] ... they did not find in the book of God that a hadith should only be accepted when it agrees with the book of God. Indeed they found the book of God absolute in setting up the prophet as a model ...¹²

It is from these four inter-related strands of evidence that somehow a more-or-less coherent biography of Muhammad must be woven. Not surprisingly the consequent tapestries have proved to be remarkably diverse.

¹² Ibid.