First Muslim: The Story of Muhammad – Lesley Hazleton (Quotations)

:date: 2015-07-08 04:34:03 +0300

.. :author: Emin Reşah .. :date: Sat May 16 14:39:35 EEST 2015 .. :dp: 13088

[H]e must have had a stiff neck, because people would remember that when he turned to look at you, he turned his whole body instead of just his head. (p. 5)

One thing is certain: by Muhammad's own account, he was completely unprepared for the enormity of what he would experience on this particular night in the year 610. (p. 6)

So the man who fled down Mount Hira trembled not with joy but with a stark, primordial fear. (p. 7)

It sounds fallibly human—too human for some, like conservative Muslim theologians who argue that the account of his trying to kill himself should not even be mentioned despite the fact that it's in the earliest Islamic biographies. (p. 8)

The more you read, the more liable you are to come away with the feeling that while you may know a lot about Muhammad, you still don't know who he was. (p. 8)

[S]tory is an extraordinary confluence of man, time, and culture, and it begs a deceptively simple question: Why him? Why Muhammad, in the seventh century, in Arabia? (p. 9)

[T]he lengthy biography of him written in eighth-century Damascus by ibn-Ishaq, on which every subsequent biography at least claims to be based, (p. 10)

Throughout ibn-Ishaq's work, for instance, there are phrases such as "it is alleged that" and "so I have been told." In fact when several eyewitness accounts seem to contradict one another, he often sums up with "As to which of these is correct, only God knows for sure"—a statement that verges on a helpless "God knows!" (p. 10)

Muhammad's is one of those rare lives that is more dramatic in reality than in legend. In fact the less one invokes the miraculous, the more extraordinary his life becomes. (p. 11)

Indeed, any objective observer might have concluded that Muhammad was a most unlikely candidate for prophethood, since whatever stars he was born under, they seemed anything but auspicious. (p. 12)

Just hours before he was conceived, his grandfather nearly killed his father. And as though the father had been spared only long enough to fulfill his singular role, he would then die far from home, unaware that he even had a son. (p. 13)

Wasn't that why the sole thing in the forbidden interior of the Kaaba was rumored to be the horns of the ram that had taken Ishmael's place in that foundational act of sacrifice? (p. 14)

"There were none more prominent and stately than they, nor of more noble profile, with noses so long that the nose drank before the lips," he would write, celebrating the feature so admired in a society that scorned snub noses, considering them as effeminate as the pale skin of Byzantine Greeks, referred to derisively as "yellow men." (p. 14)

Surely there could be nothing lost by consulting a kahin, one of the handful of priest-like seers—their title the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew cohen—who could enter spirit trances and understand the mystery of their signs. (p. 16)

[T]he focus on male heirs meant that female infanticide was as high in Mecca as in Constantinople, Athens, and Rome—a practice the Quran was to address directly and condemn repeatedly. As it was, Muhammad seemed destined to be what his Meccan opponents would later call him: "a nobody." (p. 18)

If the specific reasons weren't understood, the concept of fresh air was. (p. 22)

The story reverberates with echoes of the Christian nativity story. Halima and her husband are the humble shepherds, and if there are no tales of wise men bringing gifts or of comets streaking across the night sky or of paranoid retaliation by a vicious king, popular belief demands its share of omens nonetheless. (p. 22)

(the sakina being the Arabic counterpart of the Kabbalistic shekhina); (p. 31)

[O]n Buddhist tradition (the mysterious seal of prophecy between the shoulder blades). (p. 31)

If he were in fact subject to epileptic fits, his many opponents in Mecca would certainly have made much of his condition, yet even though they would use every argument they could muster against his preaching—he was a fabulist, they'd say, a dreamer, a liar, a sorcerer—they would never use this one. (p. 32)

Psychologists have pointed to the remarkably long list of "high-achievement" figures orphaned young. They include Confucius, Marcus Aurelius, William the Conqueror, Cardinal Richelieu, the metaphysical poet John Donne, Lord Byron, Isaac Newton, and Friedrich Nietzsche, to name just a few, and possibly also Jesus, since Joseph disappears from the Gospel narratives almost the moment he is born. (p. 33)

As one researcher puts it, the awareness of vulnerability can have a paradoxical strengthening effect: "The question of morality and conscience, a hallmark of creativity, enters with the sense of injustice that the orphaned child feels and continues to feel into adulthood," and eventually develops into "a thirst for identity, a need to imprint oneself on the world." (p. 34)

If Abd al-Muttalib even registered the boy's existence, it was doubtless as just another child scurrying around. (p. 36)

Mecca was not the backward, isolated enclave most modern Westerners seem to imagine. It was a thriving capitalist hub, a central point on the north–south trade route that ran the length of western Arabia from the ports of Yemen up to the Mediterranean, and to Damascus and beyond. The (p. 37)

A northward exodus began, including several clans led by the legendary Qusayy, Abd al-Muttalib's great-grandfather. (p. 37)

When Muhammad first laid eyes on it, it was a relatively modest affair, at least by modern standards. Its stone and clay walls were still only the height of a man, and its roof was merely palm fronds draped with cloth. (p. 38)

And La sharika laka illa sharikun huaw laka, “Thou hast no partner except such partner as thou hast”—a mysteriously ambiguous formulation that seemed to include and acknowledge all the other tribal divinities while still keeping them, as it were, in their place. (p. 39)

In reality there can have been no more than a dozen such idols, and they acted not as gods per se but as tribal totems. The fact that they were arrayed around the Kaaba, not inside it, made it clear that they were subordinate to the one god whose shrine this was. (p. 39)

The whole point was that they were not statues. The Hebrew bible had been insistent that the twelve stones for the altar were to be “unhewn,” not shaped in any way by human hand. (p. 40)

Some other, greater force had shaped them: the power of wind and time on sandstone, or the volcanic power behind quartz and feldspar and mica, or the other-worldly power of meteorites falling in fire from the heavens. (p. 40)

But the most haunting possibility, as well as the most likely, is that as in the holy of holies of the Jewish temple that had once stood far to the north in Jerusalem, the Kaaba was empty. No physical object could possibly contain the essence of the one god, so that the emptiness constituted a much greater mystery than any number of idols or piles of treasure. (p. 41)

The last way any of the great Greek philosophers would have described themselves was pagan. Then as now, the word was used derogatively. It came from the same root as the English word “peasant” (pagus in Latin, meaning a rural district); to the Roman aristocrat, a peasant was by definition a pagan, and vice versa. (p. 41)

The irony is that the early Islamic historians, like the Hebrew prophets before them, thus proved themselves as Orientalist as any of the nineteenth-century scholars and writers so effectively dissected by Edward Said in his classic critique Orientalism. (p. 42)

Fees for the right to set up a tent, for entry to the Kaaba precinct, for the officials who cast arrows in front of Hubal or cut the throats of sacrificial animals and divided up the meat—all these and more were predetermined, and to the sole profit of the Quraysh. Their business was faith, and their faith was in business. (p. 43)

[W]hile wishful accounts would have it that the uncle took special care of his nephew from the beginning, the record is clear that Muhammad was put to work as a lowly camel boy, and that within two years he was working in that capacity on the Meccan trade caravans. (p. 46)

The conflict between the Byzantine and the Persian empires was in effect an eight-hundred-year war that had gone on since the time of Alexander the Great, and by now it had thoroughly depleted the resources of both sides. (p. 48)

Bahira insisted that the boy be brought in, then had him stand still while he examined his torso, searching for the "seal of prophethood" foretold in that mysterious tome of his—in varying accounts either a third nipple, as some say is found in each reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, or a birthmark between the shoulder blades "like the imprint of a cupping glass." (p. 50)

But another, still current in today's Middle East, had him physically protecting the woman by shielding her with his body and adding two crucial words: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone at me." (p. 55)

[T]hose wishing to visit the cave of the seven sleepers still have a choice: near Ephesus in Turkey, a few miles north of Damascus in Syria, or just outside Amman in Jordan. (p. 55)

He saw how his uncle was always the first to reach out and clasp the other's hands in his own: a politician's handshake, making the other feel honored, drawn in, special. (p. 57)

If Bahira had indeed foreseen a great future for Muhammad, abu-Talib had clearly not taken him seriously. And if Muhammad had imagined that he had overcome the limitations of his childhood, he was now harshly reminded that they still applied. Abu-Talib's denial of his request carried a clear message. "This far and no further," he was saying in effect. "Good but not good enough." In his uncle's mind, Muhammad was still "one of us, yet not one of us." (p. 59)

The most cogent explanation for their long, monogamous marriage is also the simplest: they had a real bond of deep love and affection, one that lasted twenty-four years. (p. 60)

How could he when he was already the leader of a burgeoning new faith—the revered prophet, the messenger of God, the one whom people vied to be close to, to have his ear? (p. 60)

Instead of haggling endlessly, offering lower prices and demanding higher ones than he knew he would get, he offered fair prices from the start—and because he was known to be fair, was given better-quality merchandise in return. (p. 62)

What commissions he earned, he gave away in alms to the poor. Other merchants undoubtedly thought him foolish for this. How did such a man expect to marry at all, let alone marry well? (p. 62)

The whole point, after all, was that the hanifs resisted categorization. Their search was for a purer form of monotheism, untainted by the sectarian divisiveness rife in the Middle East of the time. (p. 65)

[I]n Mecca as in any modern society, the fact that something needed to be tolerated implied that it was still somehow distasteful. (p. 66)

Known as "the monk," he found solitary refuge in a stone hut at the foot of Mount Hira before leaving to pursue the life of a wandering dervish, seeking out the great spiritual masters of the day throughout the Middle East. (p. 66)

Did he practice breathing exercises on these night vigils, the kind of exercises only now being rediscovered in the West but widely used by mystics throughout history? (p. 67)

Did Muhammad stand in simple gratitude for the ordinary human happiness that had been granted him against all expectation, or was there a certain watchfulness about him, as though he were waiting for something about to happen? (p. 73)

"I recited it, and the angel desisted and departed. I woke up, and it was as though these words had been engraved on my heart. There was none of God's creation more hateful to me than a poet or a madman; I could not bear to look at either of them, yet I thought, "I must be either a poet or a madman. But if so, Quraysh will never say this of me. I shall take myself to a mountain cliff, hurl myself down from it, and find respite in death." (p. 73)

There is nothing remotely blissful about such an experience, Otto emphasized, throwing in a sly dig at those who cling to the idea of revelation as ecstatic by concluding that "the singularly daunting and awe-inspiring character of such a moment must be gravely disturbing to those who will recognize nothing in the divine nature but goodness, gentleness, love, and a sort of confidential intimacy." (p. 75)

The fact that an altered state of consciousness has a physical correlate should come as no surprise, since brain chemistry parallels experiential input. But to then imagine that everything is explained by chemistry is to fall into the reductive trap of what William James called “medical materialism,” which dismisses experience in favor of mechanics. (p. 76)

But while this may sound wonderful in principle, consider that a human being is not water. Imagine being breathed into—inspired—with such force that your body can hardly bear it. No gentle breath from heaven here, but air being impelled into your lungs under immense pressure, as though a giant were giving you mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. (p. 77)

Because if she was right, and Waraqa too, then the respect that Muhammad had worked so long and hard for was now in jeopardy. He would be the outsider again, even the outcast. Not merely ignored but actively despised and derided, his honor impugned, his dignity transgressed. The small, modest peace he had achieved over the years would be torn away from him, and there was no knowing if he would ever find it again. (p. 80)

Especially the doubt, which is in many ways essential to real faith. If this seems a startling idea at first blush, consider that religion risks becoming fanatically inhuman without it. (p. 81)

To walk out on the limb of a tall tree believing that it won’t break requires only a certain foolhardy credulity; to walk out on that same limb fully aware that it might indeed break requires placing one’s faith or one’s trust in God or fate or the law of averages. (p. 81)

Could he even endure such pain again? “Never once did I receive a revelation without thinking that my soul had been torn away from me,” he’d say toward the end of his life. (p. 83)

The verses laid out an almost environmentalist approach to the natural world still unparalleled in any other holy book, (p. 85)

[T]he unpredictability of the timing was itself part of the process. If revelation had come on a regular basis, the words piling up like those of a writer determined to fulfill a daily quota, one might suspect too much neatness for credibility, as though a direct line had been established between human and divine, one that could be dialed into on demand. (p. 86)

They had all eaten with appetite, and had leaned back satiated against their pillows when their host calmly began to recite in the heightened rhyming prose known as *saj,* which was the accepted form for poetry and oracular utterance. The word literally means "cooing," (p. 87)

[T]he new verses he'd recite there would go far beyond mystical praise. They would constitute a stinging critique of the greed and cynicism that had turned Mecca into a kind of seventh-century equivalent of a Wall Street bull market, (p. 91)

"We desire to show favor to those oppressed on earth, to make them the leaders and the inheritors."15 (p. 92)

The call for justice was a protest as fierce as those of the biblical prophets and of Jesus, and the similarity of the call was no coincidence. As with early Judaism and early Christianity, early Islam would be rooted in opposition to a corrupt status quo. (p. 93)

No matter how far they might have strayed from their origins as they became institutionalized over time, the historical record clearly indicates that what we now call the drive for social justice was the idealistic underpinning of monotheistic faith. But (p. 94)

[S]ince there was no possibility of the dead accepting monotheism, Muhammad's opponents took this to mean that their fathers and forefathers were condemned, ipso facto, to be companions of the fire. They took it, that is, as the ultimate insult: literally, "Go to hell." (p. 98)

That "eye for an eye" is of course from the Hebrew bible, where it appears first in the book of Exodus, and is then repeated for good measure in Leviticus. But it was never uniquely biblical. It had been the basis of law throughout the ancient world, and had been encoded under the Latin name of lex talionis—a phrase that means "law of retaliation" and is associated in English, however incorrectly, with the sharp talon of a predatory bird: nature red in tooth and claw. (p. 101)

Indeed if a man's slaying went unavenged, it was believed that an owl would emerge from his grave calling "Give me drink! Give me drink!" in demand for blood to slake its thirst. (p. 101)

"Take Umara as your own, and you will have the benefit of his intelligence and support. Adopt him as your own son and in return give us this nephew of yours, the one who has opposed your tradition and the tradition of your fathers, who has severed the unity of our people and mocked our way of life, so that we may kill him." (p. 105)

They intended to give Muhammad neither money nor power, hoping instead to tempt him into agreeing so that they could then claim that he was nothing but a hypocrite, a man who said one thing in public while accepting quite another under the table. (p. 106)

What had been intended as a smear campaign turned out as such campaigns often do: it backfired on its authors. “The Arabs went away from the Ukaz fair that year knowing about Muhammad,” ibn-Ishaq would write, “and he was talked about in the whole of Arabia.” (p. 107)

It’s said that he wept at the injustice of the boycott, summoned his bishops to confirm that Muhammad’s message was also that of Jesus, and indignantly refused offers of gold from a Meccan delegation demanding that the refugees be sent back. But all of this errs on the side of too good to be true. More likely, any official protection was accorded the believers simply as foreign merchants, with permission to do business as temporary residents. Certainly, the Negus remained resolutely Christian. (p. 111)

Taking their cue from Muhammad himself, they met violence with non-violence, a tactic that began to impress others with the injustice of the whole situation. In fact it was this sense of manifest injustice that now brought two famed warriors into the early Muslim fold. (p. 114)

Muhammad sitting absolutely still as abu-Jahl stood over him, ranting and cursing, all while “Muhammad answered not a word.” (p. 114)

Omar, whose height alone made him fearsome: he was said to “tower above everyone else as though he were on horseback.” (p. 115)

If there was one man abu-Jahl could rely on to tolerate no monotheistic nonsense, it was his nephew. (p. 115)

Omar was a nephew of abu-Jahl’s, after all, and it was his father who years earlier had hounded his own half-brother Zayd the hanif out of Mecca. (p. 115)

The need for patience and fortitude became a constant drumbeat throughout the revelations from this period, creating an almost Gandhian stance of non-violent resistance. (p. 117)

This was hard to do, the revelations acknowledged, but “do not waste away your soul with regret for them.” (p. 117)

“Leave to themselves those who take their religion merely as a sport and a pastime.” (p. 118)

Here, in the foundation text of Islam, is the source of the modern Muslim sensitivity to insult that has taken so many by surprise. Where satire may be thought relatively harmless in the non-Muslim West, a matter more of entertainment than injury, the memory of the constant Meccan taunting of Muhammad and the harassment of his early followers would lie behind the worldwide outbreak of anger at the well-informed satire of Salman Rushdie’s 1988 novel The Satanic Verses and at the 2005 publication in a Danish newspaper of crude cartoons of Muhammad. (p. 118)

Since the wiser course in both instances would have been precisely the one advocated by the Quran—to pay no attention to such provocations—the fact that it was ignored has to be yet another of the many indelible ironies of history and faith. (p. 118)

They did not deny God; the Kaaba was the divine sanctuary, and they took their role as its custodians in good faith as much as good profit. (p. 119)

"What have you done? You have recited something I did not bring you from God, and you have said what he did not say to you." In that moment, Muhammad realized that he had been misled by his own desire for reconciliation; he had taken the easier path rather than the hard one laid down for him. (p. 120)

Such clerics deem the whole thing impossible, since it runs counter to the tenet that Muhammad was divinely protected from error. Yet this idea appears nowhere in the Quran. To the contrary, human fallibility seems to be explicitly acknowledged in that verse stating that every messenger and prophet had had words "cast into his mouth" by Satan. (p. 121)

To an outside eye, however, the story of the Satanic Verses seems if anything to reinforce Muhammad's credibility. It casts light on the process of revelation, showing it less as a miraculous coup de foudre and more as a kind of collaboration between human and divine—an ongoing conversation, as it were, in which one side speaks for both. It allows us to see the depth of Muhammad's pain and of his desire for reconciliation. It reveals him as movingly vulnerable, given to the very human habit of projecting his own deepest desire onto divine will. And it shows him succumbing to a moment of weakness, imagining he heard what he wanted to hear. (p. 121)

It has to have taken a great deal of courage for Muhammad to acknowledge his mistake so publicly, all the more since it was clear how it would be used against him. (p. 122)

As Kathryn Schulz writes in Being Wrong, the "idea of error . . . is our meta-mistake: we are wrong about what it means to be wrong. Far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority, the capacity to err is crucial to human cognition. Far from being a moral flaw, it is inextricable from some of our most humane and honorable qualities: empathy, optimism, imagination, conviction, and courage."14 (p. 122)

It was the means of making it clear that no matter how painful, Muhammad needed to be true to himself, to his voice and to that of God. (p. 123)

"I was never jealous of any of the prophet's wives except for Khadija, even though I came after her death." (p. 124)

"Indeed no, God has not replaced her with a better," he'd say. And the man who though multiply married would never have any children after Khadija then drove the point home: "God granted me her children while withholding those of other women." (p. 124)

In honor of the dead man's memory, abu-Lahab assured his nephew that he would protect him as abu-Talib had done, but his assurance was short-lived. (p. 127)

Within a few days, stone-throwing thugs had hounded him out of Taif, but since it was unsafe for him to return to Mecca without official protection, he stopped a few miles short of the city and sent message after message to several minor clan leaders, begging for their help. (p. 129)

The aging al-Mutim was one of the few who had never supported the boycott, and now he sent a small armed escort to accompany Muhammad back into the city. (p. 129)

By turning toward it in prayer, the early believers affirmed the primacy of Abraham as the founding monotheist in a tradition far more ancient and venerable than those of the Meccan fathers. (p. 130)

He chose the milk as the middle way between asceticism and indulgence, and Gabriel was delighted: "You have been rightly guided, Muhammad, and so will your people be." (p. 130)

Carefully choosing his words, he introduces the episode this way: "This account is pieced together, each piece contributing something of what that person was told about what happened." And to indicate that the story may be more a matter of faith than of fact, he makes ample use of such phrases as "I was told that in his story al-Hassan said . . ." or "One of abu-Bakr's family told me that Aisha used to say . . ." or "A traditionalist who had heard it from one who had heard it from Muhammad said that Muhammad said . . ." (p. 130)

Whether the Night Journey was a dream, a vision, or lived experience, ibn-Ishaq's view is that what matters is not how it happened, but its significance. (p. 131)

Despite his repeatedly acknowledged debt to ibn-Ishaq, he would omit the episode altogether in his multi-volume history, and ignore the much-quoted dictum attributed to Aisha, speaking many years after Muhammad's death: "The messenger's body remained where it was, but God removed his spirit by night." (p. 131)

Joseph's skill at dream interpretation made him a senior counselor to Pharaoh, while Abraham, Jacob, Solomon, Saint Joseph, and Saint Paul were all visited by God as they slept. (p. 132)

The mystical aspect of dreams would be incorporated into the thirteenth-century Zohar, the foundation book of Kabbala, which would identify the angel Gabriel as "the master of dreams" and the link between God and human, as he was for Muhammad. One story about the Kabbalist master Isaac Luria even has Gabriel appearing to him in a dream wielding the stylus of a scribe. (p. 132)

As in Jacob's dream in the book of Genesis, a ladder led up to heaven. But where Jacob remained sleeping at the foot of the ladder, Muhammad saw it as "that to which a dying man looks," and climbed it. Did he feel as though he was dying, as he had during that first Quranic revelation on Mount Hira? Was this the death of the self that has been the goal of mystics of all faiths, the better to unite with the divine? Or did it seem as though he had taken leave of his body and hovered above it, looking down at his earthly self as some who survive near-death experiences report having done? (p. 134)

Muhammad is no longer the passive recipient of revelation but an active participant: he flies, ascends, prays with the angels, and speaks with the prophets. (p. 135)

Could the grandson establish a new home in his grandfather's birthplace? Put like that, it seems to have the power of narrative inevitability. (p. 138)

Like the Meccans, most Medinans were already halfway to monotheism. They recognized al-Lah as the high god even as many of them followed the cult of Manat, one of the three "daughters of God," but since their economy was not built on traditional faith and pilgrimage as was that of Mecca, it would be easier for them to make the leap away from the totem gods. (p. 142)

[I]ts Arabic root hajar carries greater psychological weight. It means to cut oneself off from something, with all the wrenching pain that the term implies. (p. 146)

It might have been wiser for him to leave along with the first emigrants, but he was determined to stay in Mecca until he was sure that as many of his followers as possible had made it out safely. (p. 148)

The Meccans had never taken the Medinans seriously before; the Khazraj and the Aws were so divided that they posed no threat to anyone but themselves. (p. 148)

Though the total population of Medina was about the same as that of Mecca, some twenty-five thousand, the Medinans were farmers, not fighters. (p. 148)

Knowing that the posse would look first on the route north out of Mecca, toward Medina, they headed some five miles in the opposite direction and hid out in a cave high on the side of Mount Thaur, overlooking the southbound caravan route to Yemen. (p. 150)

As former New York governor Mario Cuomo once put it: "You campaign in poetry, and govern in prose." (p. 156)

"the Jews are one community with the believers," the document declared, again using the word umma. "Each must help the other against anyone who attacks the people of this document. They must seek mutual advice and consultation." (p. 158)

In the insult of exile, turning the other cheek began to seem at best ineffective, at worst self-defeating. So if the Meccan elite anticipated a peaceful life without him, they would not do so for long. (p. 159)

Eager to transform the stigma of exile into a banner of proud defiance, they saw raiding as a way to get back at the Meccans where it would hurt them most: in their traders' pockets. (p. 160)

The early Islamic histories would call these raids military expeditions, but all through the year 623 they were hardly on that level. In fact they were strikingly unsuccessful. In March, for instance, seven months after the hijra, thirty emigrants under the command of Muhammad's uncle Hamza tried to intercept a Meccan caravan led by abu-Jahl but "separated without a battle" after the local Beduin chieftain intervened. (p. 160)

The emigrants seemed to be so ineffective a fighting force that even when Beduin raided their milk camels just outside Medina and they set off in pursuit, they lost track of them. (p. 160)

He was not aiming for material success so much as to disrupt the smooth working of the caravans. He was making a point, establishing his presence beyond Medina as a force to be reckoned with, and doing so at very little cost. (p. 160)

But whatever their mission was, the men he sent had been miserably unsuccessful. Two had carelessly forgotten to hobble their riding camels one night, so had been forced to stay behind and search for them after they'd wandered off into the desert. The remaining six got as far as Nakhla, between Mecca and Taif, where they came across four Meccans traveling with a few camels loaded with raisins and leather. (p. 161)

To kill a Meccan for the sake of a few loads of leather and raisins? This was pure provocation. Had they really invited Muhammad to Medina to make peace between them, only to have him then declare war on someone else? (p. 161)

"Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but do not begin hostilities, for God does not like the aggressor," (p. 162)

Revelation was needed, and it came. "They question you with regard to warfare in the sacred month," the Quranic voice told him. "Say: 'Fighting in that month is a great offense, but still greater offenses in God's eyes are to bar others from God's path, to disbelieve in him, to prevent access to the Kaaba, and to expel its people. Persecution is worse than killing.'" And to clarify things (p. 162)

"Permission is granted to those who fight because they have been wronged . . . those who have been driven out of their houses without right only because they said our god is God." In other words, offense was now sanctioned in the name of ex post facto defense. (p. 162)

"If you object to the political methods recommended because they seem to you morally detestable, if you refuse to embark on them because they are too frightening,"8 Berlin wrote, "then Machiavelli's answer is that you are perfectly entitled to lead a morally good life, be a private citizen (or a monk), seek some corner of your own. But in that event, you must not make yourself responsible for the lives of others or expect good fortune; in a material sense you must expect to be ignored or destroyed." (p. 165)

Machiavelli himself famously put it: "All armed prophets have conquered, and unarmed prophets have come to grief." (p. 165)

Under the command of the head of Mecca's Umayyad clan, abu-Sufyan, there would be more than two thousand camels returning from Damascus, loaded with luxury goods. And they'd be an easy target: Muhammad's scouts had reported the presence of only seventy armed guards. (p. 166)

"You came out to protect your caravan and your property, oh Quraysh," his message said. "God has kept them safe, so turn back." (p. 167)

As Machiavelli would put it, "There is no doubt that a ruler's greatness depends on his triumphing over difficulties and opposition. So fortune finds enemies for him and encourages them to take the field against him, so that he may have cause to triumph over them and ascend higher on the ladder his foes have provided." (p. 168)

Not only would his forces advance on to Badr, he declared, but "we will spend three days there, slaughter camels, and give food to eat and wine to drink to all, so that the Beduin may hear of what we have done and continue to hold us in awe." (p. 168)

Muhammad told his men as he surveyed the field afterward, as much in sadness as in pride. The crème de la crème of Mecca had fought what they thought was a ragtag group of outcasts, including freed slaves—their own former slaves!—and lost. What had happened at Badr was simply not possible, not in their scheme of things. The natural order of their world had been upended. (p. 170)

Determined to show no favor, Muhammad held both men along with the others, but when Zaynab sent jewels from Mecca as ransom payment—a good wife, she had stayed with her husband in Mecca rather than emigrate—she included a necklace that had been Khadija's wedding gift to her. (p. 171)

By pledging mutual self-defense and recognizing Muhammad's authority, they were allying themselves with the new umma; in time, belief would follow action. (p. 173)

If he was to establish his newly made power position, he would need to meet the expectations of his time. A new ruthlessness was called for, and it would be demonstrated nowhere more than in his relations with the Jewish tribes of Medina. (p. 173)

Like all Arabians, the Jews spoke of God as al-Lah, the high one, and often used the honorific that would become familiar in the Quran, ar-Rahman, the merciful, just as the newly completed Babylonian Talmud used Rahmana. (p. 174)

"Believers, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, whoever believes in God and the Day of Judgment and does what is right, all shall be rewarded by God . . . We believe in God and in what was revealed to us, in that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael, to Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and in that which God gave to Moses and Jesus and the prophets. We discriminate against none of them." (p. 175)

While details of the biblical stories as told in the Quran certainly differ from those now accepted in the West as canonical, they were current throughout the Middle East of the time. (p. 176)

With its vivid image of a victimized half-naked girl, it was perfectly calculated to inflame the imagination. Nobody could honorably stand by and allow that to happen. Yet at least part of the story is clearly apocryphal, since no Medinan women, let alone hard-working Beduin, wore veils at that time. The idea of the veil would be introduced only three years later, and then only for Muhammad's wives. (p. 177)

This was an over-reaction on his part, but that was precisely the point: it was a demonstration of his power and authority, and of ibn-Ubayy's lack of the same. (p. 179)

They were allowed to take only what they could carry. What they left behind—land, palm groves, houses—would be divided among the emigrants, with one fifth kept back for the community treasury. The rest of Medina watched silently. If there was irony in the fact that the exiles had now in turn exiled others, nobody cared to comment on it. (p. 180)

That same night, he went to her house, found her asleep with her youngest child in her arms, and drove his sword through her breast. "Shall I have to bear any penalty on her account?" he asked Muhammad the next morning. The answer was curt: "Two goats shall not come to blows for her." (p. 181)

Just as the Jews swore with their bodies never to forget Jerusalem—"If I forget thee, oh Jerusalem, let my right hand be cut off"—so now the Muslim believers were to use their bodies as a reminder to never forget Mecca. (p. 182)

Where abu-Jahl's fierce opposition had only strengthened Muhammad instead of weakening him, abu-Sufyan would have aimed for containment rather than repression. He might even have co-opted some of Muhammad's social principles, whether out of political calculation or recognition of their value. (p. 183)

One believer would remember him taunting every enemy fighter he came across that day, and in particular a man whose mother was a female circumciser in Mecca, a practice Hamza clearly saw as belonging to the dark days of jahiliya, or pre-Islamic ignorance. (p. 188)

"Then hear this," abu-Sufyan shouted back. And instead of threatening to finish the job or gloating in victory as might have been expected, he made it clear that his wife's mutilation of Hamza's corpse had not been at his orders: "Some of your dead have been mutilated. I neither commanded this nor forbade it, and it neither gave me pleasure nor saddened me." (p. 190)

Any leader can use a victory to his advantage, but one who can turn defeat to his advantage is much rarer. Muhammad had done it before, after being hounded out of Mecca, and now he would do it again, with ibn-Ubayy unwittingly making his task all the easier. (p. 191)

The new coinage was a challenge to all those who had accepted islam but did not necessarily accord every statement of Muhammad's the power of divine authority. They distinguished, that is, between the messenger and the politician, and it was this distinction that the Quranic voice now seemed to blur. The messenger was fast becoming the prophet, no longer simply "one of you," but to be thought of as divinely directed in every aspect of his life. (p. 192)

The plan was apparently to drop a large boulder from the top of the wall against which Muhammad was sitting and then call it an accident. It was foiled at the last moment, when Muhammad suddenly left "as though to answer a call of nature" and never came back, explaining later that an angel had quietly warned him of the conspiracy. But angel or no, every detail makes it an unlikely scenario. The council meeting on the Sabbath; Muhammad's departure without abu-Bakr and Omar, presumably leaving them in danger; the little logistical matter of exactly how a heavy boulder could be brought to the top of a wall, let alone dropped from it with fatal precision—none of these seem likely. That is, they are the hallmarks of a story fabricated to justify what happened next, in the awareness that it might otherwise not be considered justifiable. (p. 195)

The language itself was telling: not Medina, nor even the pre-Islamic name Yathrib, but "my city." And treason charged not against Medina but "against me." It was a statement of absolute authority: L'état c'est moi. (p. 195)

In Arabia, trees of any kind were treasured, but date palms especially so. Each one represented generations of careful tending and work, so that to destroy the palms was to destroy not only property but history. Cutting them down was a calculated statement that the Nadir now had nothing left to stay for, and a warning of what might happen to them if they resisted further. (p. 196)

Unlike the Qaynuqa, the Nadir left Medina in what seemed more like a triumphal parade. They beat drums and tambourines as they went, dressed in their finest clothes and decked out in all their jewelry. As one witness put it: "They went with a splendor and a glory the like of which had never been seen from any tribe in their time." It was an impressive display of protest, a defiant statement by the Nadir that they were the ones who should be proud, and all the rest of Medina ashamed. (p. 196)

For the volatile Omar, however, this was not enough. Always the warrior, he urged Muhammad to have done with ibn-Ubayy and give the order to kill him. Instead, he received a political lesson. "What? And let men say that Muhammad slays his companions?" came the reply. To make a martyr of ibn-Ubayy would only be counter-productive; he was far more useful kept close, as a subordinate. (p. 197)

The first of his late-life marriages, to a quiet widow named Sawda, had been arranged by his followers, who were concerned about the depth of his grief for Khadija. (p. 198)

As one of Islam's most powerful politicians would remember years later, "There was never any subject I wished closed that she would not open, or that I wished open that she would not close." (p. 199)

If Aisha was indeed married so young, however, others would certainly have remarked on it at the time. Instead, more restrained reports have her aged nine when she was betrothed and twelve when she was actually married, which makes sense since custom dictated that girls be married at puberty. But then again, to have been married at the customary age would make Aisha normal, and that was the one thing she was always determined not to be. (p. 200)

[k]ind of Arabian syllabub, probably, made with egg whites and goat's milk beaten thick with honey, for which he had a special weakness. (p. 200)

Other times she went further, as when Muhammad arranged to seal an alliance with a major Christian tribe in the time-honored manner by marrying its leader's daughter, a girl renowned for her beauty. When the bride-to-be arrived in Medina, Aisha volunteered to help prepare her for the wedding and, under the guise of sisterly advice, told her that Muhammad would think all the more highly of her if she at first resisted him on the wedding night by saying, "I take refuge with God from thee." The new bride had no idea that this was the phrase used to annul a marriage; the moment she said it, Muhammad left, and the next day she was bundled unceremoniously back to her own people. (p. 200)

The whole purpose of his marrying so many times was to bind together the widening umma of believers and allies, but such alliances were sealed by children. Mixed blood was new blood, free of the old divisions. What was the point of marriage without offspring? (p. 204)

Since all the wives except Aisha were widows or divorcées and already had children by other husbands, infertility on their part is unlikely. Perhaps, then, despite the highly sexualized image of him in the West, the multiply married Muhammad was celibate. Or since anyone lucky enough to reach his fifties in the seventh century was physiologically far older than he would be today, age may have worked on him to lessen desire, or maybe simply sperm count. But Islamic theologians in centuries to come would posit another explanation. The absence of children with these later wives, they'd say, was the price of revelation. Since the Quran was the last and final word of God, there could be no more prophets after Muhammad, and thus no sons to inherit the prophetic gene. Essentially, they finessed the issue, as theologians often do, in this case by saying that a man so graced with revelation was beyond the simple everyday grace of offspring. (p. 205)

Conflating adultery with rape, they'd argue that any such charge could be valid only if the woman could do the virtually impossible and produce four witnesses. Unless she could do so, a ghastly catch-22 came into effect: the accused rapist was to be declared blameless and the accuser punished not only for slander but for adultery, since by charging rape she had herself testified to illicit sexual relations. (p. 207)

The believers kept close tabs on how much time Muhammad spent with which wife, whose honeyed drink he seemed to like best, what mood he was in after spending the night with whom. There could hardly be a more public private life, one far more conducive to stress than to the licentiousness imagined with such envious censoriousness by many Victorian-era European scholars. (p. 209)

Far from encouraging polygamy, the revelation went on to openly discourage it. Four wives were permitted only so long as each had equal status. But that, said the Quran, was hardly likely. Muhammad was to instruct his followers that "you will never be able to deal equitably between many wives, no matter how hard you try, so if you fear you cannot treat them equally, then marry only one." (p. 209)

Muhammad had again held off a huge Meccan army, yet his followers gave him little credit for it. They were left full of an intense frustration created by the enforced powerlessness of having been under siege. However successful the defensive strategy of the dry moat, it ran against the grain psychologically. That enemy accusation of having acted in an "un-Arab" way by avoiding battle rather than rushing into it cut deep into their sense of honor. (p. 215)

Some scholars suspect that the early Islamic historians created this role for Saad in order to absolve Muhammad from responsibility for the massacre. It establishes plausible deniability, since it could then be argued that this was not Muhammad's decision but Saad's, and that Muhammad had no choice but to honor the word of the dying man. But the argument itself reveals a painful awareness that this was something that needed justifying, and so was implicitly not justifiable. It certainly seems unlikely that Muhammad would leave such a drastic decision to someone else, let alone to a man who was not one of his senior advisers. And even if the decision was not made directly by him, it was clearly made at the very least with his consent. Indeed, far from overruling it, Muhammad personally oversaw the executions. Trenches were dug alongside Medina's main marketplace, and when that was done, all the Qureyz men—"all those on whose chins a razor had passed," as ibn-Ishaq puts it—were led out in small groups, made to kneel by the trenches, and beheaded. (p. 217)

It was now crystal clear to all that there would be no further tolerance of any form of dissent. (p. 218)

There is sometimes a very fine line, if not an invisible one, between reason and rationalization. Innumerable reasons have been given over the centuries for the massacre of the Qureyz. It has been argued that they collaborated with the Meccans, though there is no convincing evidence that they did. That this was standard operating procedure for the time and place, though it was not. That Muhammad did not order it himself, which is only technically true. That the Qureyz themselves expected nothing less, though most of them clearly did. That Muhammad was left with no choice, which ignores the established alternative of expulsion. That the high number of executions is exaggerated, which while quite possible is also impossible to demonstrate. Even that the massacre was justified by the Quran, despite the fact that the Quran demands an absolute end to hostilities the moment an enemy submits. (p. 219)

"A ruler must want to have a reputation for compassion rather than for cruelty," he wrote, "but he must nonetheless be careful not to make bad use of compassion." (p. 220)

At the head of the procession were seventy specially fatted camels, each one a perfect specimen adorned for sacrifice with the customary woven garlands and necklaces. The most resplendent of them was also the most recognizable: the magnificent silver-nose-ringed male that had once been the pride and joy of Muhammad's nemesis abu-Jahl, and had been chosen by Muhammad as his share of the booty after the Battle of Badr. The symbolism of his bringing it back to Mecca for sacrifice was unmistakable. (p. 222)

In time, the truce of Hudaibiya would come to be seen as a strategic masterstroke on Muhammad's part. Ibn-Ishaq would write that "no victory greater than this one had been won previously in Islam. There had only been fighting before, but when the truce took place and war laid down its burdens and all the people felt safe with each other, they met with each other in conversation and debate, and all who possessed understanding and were told about islam accepted it." (p. 226)

Whether in the seventh century or the twenty-first, he would frustrate the simplistic terms of those trying to pigeonhole him as either a "prophet of peace" or a "prophet of war." This was not a matter of either/or. A complex man carving a huge profile in history, his vision went beyond seemingly irreconcilable opposites. He had allowed himself to be turned away from Mecca in the full knowledge that he had in fact completed the first stage of his return. (p. 227)

When abu-Sufyan had led a massive army against Medina, with its similar system of strongholds, he had laid siege to it and failed. Now Muhammad would give practically a textbook illustration of how it should be done. (p. 228)

Having established how severe he could be, he had no need to resort to such drastic measures again. Considering what they might have faced, the Khaybar tribes willingly agreed: they accepted Muhammad's political authority and his protection, pledged their support, and surrendered half their annual income in taxes to Medina. (p. 228)

The man who had laid siege to Medina just three years before was now obliged to beg for Muhammad's restraint, appealing to him on the grounds that only with Muhammad's cooperation could he contain the hardliners at home in Mecca. (p. 231)

What happened next can only have been agreed on beforehand. Abu-Sufyan came out of Mecca and rode into the Medinan encampment on a distinctive white horse that belonged to Muhammad, a sign that he was under Muhammad's protection. (p. 232)

While the popularly accepted image has him demonstratively smashing the idols said to be inside the Kaaba, there is no historical record of this, not least because the sanctuary was almost certainly empty of all physical representation. (p. 237)

It was a private moment, unrecorded, so that one can only imagine him closing the door behind him and welcoming the hush as the men's shouts of acclaim and the women's ululations of celebration were muffled by the thick stone walls and he was a man alone once more, whispering into the darkness, offering a quiet prayer of praise and thanksgiving. (p. 238)

The massacre of the Qureyz had already established that he was capable of ruthlessness when he deemed it necessary; he had no need to prove it again. On the contrary, to forgo revenge even when it seemed justified would create a sense of obligation and loyalty far more reliable than anything that could be obtained by force. (p. 239)

It was true. Here was the oldest daughter of his foster mother Halima—the girl in whose arms he'd wriggled and fought when all she was trying to do was keep him safe—reduced all these years later to begging him for mercy. Was this what warfare and victory brought? When would it end? Childhood memories crowded in on the newly acknowledged head of state, reminding him of the extraordinary distance he had traveled. Holding back tears, he stunned everyone by spreading out his cloak and inviting Shayma to come sit on it beside him. (p. 242)

To devout Muslims, the speed of the Arab conquests in the decade after Muhammad's death seems a manifestation of divine will. Even modern historians appear somewhat at a loss to explain it, falling back on hoary Orientalist theories like "a tribal imperative to conquest." In fact such cultural assumptions are not only questionable but unnecessary. (p. 246)

The curtain in question was just that: a piece of muslin draped over a section of each room, providing at least a modicum of privacy. It applied only to Muhammad's wives, and there is no historical indication that he ever intended it to be taken as an order for any woman to veil. The Quran would advocate modesty for both sexes, but it never specified veiling, which is in any case a misnomer. What would be called "the veil" was in fact a thin shawl, and when it was first adopted in Islam, decades after Muhammad's death, it was to a large degree a matter of status. (p. 248)

Like an expensive manicure or a pair of Prada shoes today, it was a public indicator, a sign that these women were above any kind of hard work. They had servants, and so could allow themselves the luxury of flamboyantly impractical dress. (p. 248)

Within a few months of Muhammad's return from Mecca, dissension had built to such a pitch that he simply couldn't take it any longer. In effect, he declared a strike against his role as a multiple husband, and began sleeping alone in a small storeroom on the roof of the mosque. Word of this spread instantly, and along with it the rumor that he was about to divorce all nine of his wives. (p. 249)

It seems strange, however, that while none of the late-life wives had a child by Muhammad, this girl named after the mother of Jesus reportedly did. The symbolic significance is clear. A son of Mary and Muhammad named after the man the Quran honored as the first hanif, the Bible's founding monotheist, would appeal to Christians throughout the Middle East. (p. 250)

That sparse rooftop retreat was the Medinan equivalent of Mecca's Mount Hira: a place of contemplation in which to come to terms not only with what he had achieved but also with what lay ahead. He must have realized that there was no room left in his life for personal attachment, and that his relationship with Mariya would end here. His life was no longer his own to determine, but belonged instead to the umma. And he certainly sensed that not much of that life remained to him, because when he emerged at the end of the month, he resolved his marital situation with a new Quranic revelation that anticipated his own death. (p. 251)

Those in favor argued that he was the Paraclete, or Comforter, whose arrival Jesus had foretold in the Gospel of John and who was said to embody the Holy Spirit, even to be "the second Jesus." Those against maintained that the Paraclete was supposed to have sons, and since Muhammad did not, it could not possibly be him. Determined to resolve the dispute by debating the matter with him directly, the Najran delegation arrived in Medina only to find that debate was moot. (p. 255)

Indeed the Quran argued for humility as the highest virtue, continually warning against pride and arrogance. But now the widespread reverence for him threatened to make humility a thing of the past. No matter how much he tried to delegate authority, his revelations were still the word of God, and for the believers it was a small leap to assuming that everything he said, down to the last exclamation or passing comment, was a reflection of divine will. For all the Quran's insistence that he was just a man, obedience to him was sworn in the same breath as obedience to God. (p. 256)

Ibn-Ishaq explains this absence by arguing that Muhammad had declared that this would be the last year anyone who had not accepted islam would be allowed to participate in the hajj, and thus would not make his own pilgrimage until Mecca was free of all paganism for the duration. (p. 256)

Throughout this year, Aisha would recall Muhammad spending nights on end in the graveyard of Medina, standing vigil for the dead. There were so many of them by now. Among the simple stone markers, each one barely higher than a child's knee, were those of two of his four daughters, as well as that of his adopted son Zayd. (p. 256)

"Peace be upon you, oh people of the graves," Aisha heard him saying. "Happy are you, so much better off than men here." (p. 257)

Omar would remember being shocked to see Muhammad at the burial: "I confronted him and said, 'Are you going to pray over God's enemy?' But he smiled and said, 'Leave me be, Omar. I have been given the choice and I have chosen.' Then he prayed and walked with ibn-Ubayy's body until it was lowered into the grave." (p. 257)

The more he was surrounded by people, the more Muhammad seemed aware of his isolation. "God made him love solitude," Aisha would say, trying to explain why he preferred the company of the dead to that of his wives. But even in the dead of night, real solitude was the one thing that was impossible. (p. 257)

Both ibn-Ishaq and al-Tabari quote people who were there and who swear they heard one version or the other with their own ears. But as with first-hand testimony today, what they heard may have reflected what they were prepared to hear as much as what was actually said. It would soon be argued that the alternate versions of this one sentence came to essentially the same thing, since the ahl al-bayt personified the sunna just as Muhammad himself had done. (p. 259)

This was no mere headache but a fatal disease, and indeed the symptoms and the duration of Muhammad's final illness—ten days—are classic for bacterial meningitis. (p. 262)

Over the course of those ten days of his illness, all of the men who were to be the first five caliphs of Islam would be in and out of his sickroom: two fathers-in-law, abu-Bakr and Omar; two sons-in-law, Ali and Uthman; and a brother-in-law, Muawiya. But how that would happen, and in what order, was to remain the stuff of discord. (p. 263)

There was no pomp or circumstance, no elaborate ritual or mass procession, no throngs of mourners, no eulogies. Muhammad was buried in the dead of night, as quietly and inconspicuously as he had been born, and one has to think that this is exactly as he would have wished it. As he entered his grave, he was simply a man again, free of the intense public scrutiny that had hemmed him in. The peace and quiet he had sought would finally be his. At last, he would find some rest. (p. 271)