THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

MUḤAMMAD

Edited by

Jonathan E. Brockopp

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As the Messenger of God, Muḥammad stands at the heart of the Islamic religion, revered by Muslims throughout the world. *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad* comprises a collection of essays by some of the most accomplished scholars in the field who are exploring the life and legacy of the Prophet. The book is divided into three parts, the first charting his biography and the milieu into which he was born, the revelation of the Qur'ān, and his role in the early Muslim community. The second part assesses his legacy as a lawmaker, philosopher, and politician. In the third part, chapters examine how Muḥammad has been remembered across history in biography, prose, poetry, and, most recently, in film and fiction. Essays are written to engage and inform students, teachers, and readers coming to the subject for the first time. They will come away with a deeper appreciation of the breadth of the Islamic tradition, of the centrality of the role of the Prophet in that tradition, and, indeed, of what it means to be a Muslim today.

Jonathan E. Brockopp is associate professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University. A specialist on early Islamic legal texts, he has written widely on Islamic law, ethics, and comparative religions. His books include *Early Mālikī Law: Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam and His* Major Compendium of Jurisprudence (2000); *Judaism and Islam in Practice: A Sourcebook* (2000, coauthored with Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn); and two edited volumes on Islamic ethics. His article "Theorizing Charismatic Authority in Early Islamic Law" (2005) advances a new theory for understanding the role of Muḥammad in Islamic history.

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This book is dedicated to
Gerhard Böwering,
scholar, teacher, and friend

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Introduction

JONATHAN E. BROCKOPP

Muḥammad is the world's most popular name for boys. The king of Morocco, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the president of Egypt are all named Muḥammad, and when the famous boxer Cassius Clay became a Muslim, he was given the name Muhammad Ali. If there is a Muslim family in the world that does not have a brother, grandfather, or uncle named Muḥammad, they almost certainly have a relative who has been given one of the Prophet's other names: Muṣṭafā', Aḥmad, or al-Amīn. One also finds the names Muḥammadī ("Muḥammad like") and Muḥammadayn ("double Muḥammad"). These habits of naming are indicative of a popular devotion to the Prophet that enhances, and in some cases overwhelms, the historical limits of the man who died more than fourteen centuries ago.

The fact of this devotion should not surprise. The popular veneration of Muḥammad is quite similar to that offered to Jesus, the Buddha, and countless other religious figures around the world. Yet time and again – whether in reaction to Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* or to cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* – Muslims' reactions in defense of their prophet have caught non-Muslims off guard. There are many reasons for this gap in understanding, but three concern me here. First, although Jesus and the Buddha have overwhelmingly positive reputations in contemporary Western civilization, that of Muḥammad is decidedly more mixed. Second, many readers are simply unaware of the breadth and depth of devotion to Muḥammad in Muslim societies as evidenced in the riches of Persian literary traditions, rituals surrounding the celebration of his birthday, modern poetry, music festivals, and more. But the third, and perhaps most important, reason for this misunderstanding has to do with the unique role of the Prophet Muḥammad in Islamic religious history.

Muḥammad is much more than a man who died more than 1,400 years ago; he is the central animating figure of the Islamic tradition. He is imitated in virtually every act of ritual, leadership, devotion to

God, morality, and public comportment. Muslims pray in just the way that Muḥammad did, and the Ṣūfī quest for unity with God is based on Muḥammad's own journey to heaven. Some Muslim men seek to dress and wear their hair as the Prophet did, and some Muslim women seek to dress as did his wives. To carry out these actions, Muslims study the life of their prophet to perfect their own religious practice. But every act of reading is also one of interpretation, and imitation is no rote repetition but a creative adaptation to current circumstances. We could even say that Muslims continue to define Muḥammad as they reread and apply the events of his life to their own time and place.

It is fair to suggest that Muḥammad would be amazed at the Islam of today. He was an Arab and perceived of himself as a prophet to the Arabs, yet less than a fifth of the world's Muslims speak Arabic today. Muslim rituals and practices, from Indonesia to the Americas, incorporate tradition and modernity in an almost-bewildering variety. Yet almost all Muslims use some Arabic phrases in prayer, including recitation of the Qurʾān in its original language, though they may not understand the meaning of the words. Further, scholars of Muslim history must master the Qurʾān and the earliest Islamic literary sources, all of which are written in Arabic. To learn about Muḥammad, then, first requires an imaginary journey into the time and space of Arabia some fourteen centuries ago.

Muḥammad was born, lived, and died in Arabia, or more specifically, in the part of western Arabia we call the Ḥijāz. This is a strip of mountains with a coastal plain that parallels the Red Sea and receives a small amount of rainfall (about four inches) each year, just enough to support small animal herds and, in the lowland oases and the highland plateaus, some agriculture. Archeological evidence tells us of lively cultural centers in the south and north of the Arabian Peninsula, but we still have much to learn about the area where Muḥammad was born. His hometown of Mecca was probably an important trading town, with a religious cult centering on the Kaʿba, a shrine that would later become the physical center of Islam. Caravans of camels were apparently organized both north to Syria and south to Yemen, as well as east to Iraq, but local trade was probably also important.

The religious world of the Ḥijāz likely reflected that of the surrounding regions, where local traditions lived side by side with various forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. What little we know about these local traditions, often called paganism or polytheism, comes largely from later Islamic sources. These inform us that Meccans venerated many different gods and goddesses, some of them representing qualities of strength or of fate, whereas others represented natural forces.

Map 1. Map of the Arabian Peninsula, showing the location of Mecca and Medina.

The name Allāh was known to them, however, as that of a high god who had especial control of weather and ships at sea (Q 29:63–5; 31:31–2). As for other religions, it must be recalled that Arabia was quite distant from the centers of those cults, and that Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism were all undergoing significant shifts in their identity during this period. Therefore, the adherents of those traditions, who made their way to the Ḥijāz for one reason or another, may have had beliefs and practices quite different from what we might normally associate with the versions of those religions that have been transmitted to us.

THE LIFE OF MUḤAMMAD

Just as we depend on internal sources for our knowledge of early Christianity and Buddhism, so also we are entirely dependent on Islamic sources for Muḥammad's own history, especially the most significant events of his life. These tell us that Muḥammad was born to ʿAbd Allāh

and Āmina, perhaps in the year 570 CE. Most biographers emphasize the miraculous events associated with his conception and birth, such as the appearance of a mystical light on his father's brow before conception and the emerging of this light from Āmina's womb. Further signs of his calling are recorded in his childhood, including a visitation from angels who split open his breast to remove from it the black spot of sin. These are some of the hints that this man had already been chosen by God to be his special servant and to receive the Qurʾān, the last of God's revelations to humankind. Before that moment, however, Muḥammad lived in Mecca, and like many inhabitants of that town, he was involved with organizing caravans. For a time he worked for a wealthy widow named Khadīja, and his industriousness caught her eye; they were married and started a family together. So life was quite ordinary when, at the age of forty (in 610 CE), Muḥammad began meditating in a cave high in the hills outside of Mecca.

During these meditations, he was overwhelmed by a vision of the angel Gabriel commanding him, "Recite!" This event changed his life forever, and he began, slowly, to understand that God had chosen him for a special mission. From that point forward, Muḥammad's life would be caught up with the persistent, at times unpredictable, appearance of revelations from God, revelations that would eventually be gathered together to make up the Qurʾān.

Muḥammad's life is, in many ways, inseparable from that of the Qurʾān. Just as the Qurʾān is traditionally divided into Meccan and Medinan phases, so also Muḥammad's life may usefully be separated into two periods: the first from 610 to 622, from the time he first received revelation until his flight (*hijra*) from Mecca to Yathrib (later called Medina), and the second from 622 until his death in 632. This break is significant in many ways and is marked by the fact that Muslims begin their calendar in 622, the year that the new Muslim community was founded in Yathrib.

In terms of the Qurʾān, the Meccan and Medinan phases mark a difference in language, content, and style. For example, a typical seven-verse sample (Q 80:17–23) from the Meccan period reads like this:

> May humankind perish! How ungrateful!
> Of what things did He create them?
> Of a drop of fluid
> He created them, and determined them,
> then He made the path easy for them,
> then makes them to die, and buries them,
> then, when He wills, He raises them.

In pithy language, the Qurʾān reprimands humankind for being ingrates. The audience for these short verses is universal, and the scope reaches from conception to resurrection; further, the Arabic is punctuated with rhythmic language and rhymes. In contrast, here are three verses (Q 2:183–5) typical of the Medinan period:

> O you who believe! The Fast is prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those who were before you – perhaps you will be aware!
>
> Days numbered – but if anyone is sick, or on a journey, then a number of other days, and for those who are able to fast, a redemption by feeding a poor person. But those who willingly do the better, so it is better for them, and should you fast it is better for you, if you only knew.
>
> The month of Ramaḍān, in which the Qurʾān was sent down as a guidance to people, and as clear signs of guidance and salvation. So those of you who witness the month should fast it. As for the one who is sick, or on a journey, then a number of other days. God desires ease for you, not hardship; and that you complete the number, and magnify God according to that to which He has guided you, perhaps you will be grateful.

In these Medinan verses the scope is narrower. Instead of all humankind, a specific group of believers is addressed and given the task of fasting. Whereas the Meccan verses invoke the natural world and speak of its ultimate end in apocalyptic terms, the Medinan verses are often interested in providing a community with order and rules. What ties them together is the command to remember God's activities (e.g., creation, revelation) and to be grateful for them. This is only one example of the complex relationship between the two styles of writing, but the distinctions here form a striking parallel to the stories we have of the Prophet. During the Meccan period, we are told that the Prophet was caught up in an adversarial relationship with the population of Mecca, which largely rejected his preaching. The strong exclamations in the first excerpt seem especially suited to this crowd. In contrast, the Prophet found a receptive community in Medina, one that needed to differentiate itself from surrounding communities of Jews, pagans, and, outside of Medina, Christians.

To some Western scholars, the relationship between the Qurʾān and Muḥammad seems too convenient, as if stories of the Prophet's life were designed to explain differences found in the Qurʾān. For the Meccan period, the problem is complicated by the fact that the Qurʾān is the only

writing we possess that derives from that period. All the rest – histories of the period, biographies of the Prophet, interpretation of the Qurʾān – was written down long after the Arab conquest of the Sassanid empire and the southern half of the Byzantine Empire (632–645 CE) and certainly after Muḥammad's successes in Medina. As several contributors to this volume point out, Muḥammad's doubts in his early mission (as described in the Qurʾān) were hard to understand given the almost-unbelievable expansion of Islam after his death. Although some histories dutifully record the Prophet's despair, others gloss over those weak moments in favor of a more triumphant picture, one that fits better with his ultimate success.

Nonetheless, all the sources agree on this basic outline of events: After his first experience of receiving the revelation, Muḥammad took three years before he began preaching publicly. During that time, he discussed these incidents with his wife, Khadīja, who helped him understand the nature of the supernatural events. All agree that she was the first to believe in his mission, though there is a significant dispute about who among the men was first: his cousin and eventual son-in-law ʿAlī, his freedman Zayd b. Ḥāritha, his friend Abū Bakr, or several others. The members of this intimate circle are worth noting, especially his wife, Khadīja; his daughter, Fāṭima; his cousin, ʿAlī; and his friend Abū Bakr, as their examples are precedent setting for Muslims, and their names are often mentioned in this volume. But it is also worth noting that this close circle did not include his influential uncles, though the precise role of Abū Ṭālib, Muḥammad's protector after his father and grandfather died, is disputed. Abū Ṭālib did, however, continue to extend his protection to Muḥammad, even after his nephew (Muḥammad) and son (ʿAlī) rejected the religion of their fathers.

One may wonder, however, to what extent either Muḥammad or the earliest sūras of the Qurʾān demanded a rejection of pre-Islamic religious practices. After all, the verses quoted herein demand that "He" has ultimate authority over life and death but do not explicitly deny the existence of other divine powers. (In contrast, later sūras of the Qurʾān are quite clear in their rejection of polytheism or, in the language of the Qurʾān, of "ascribing partners to God.") One indication that Muḥammad may have sought reconciliation early in his career is the event now known as the Satanic Verses. The story, as told to us by the historian Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922–923[1]), goes that Muḥammad

[1] In the field of Islamic studies, it is common to use "double dating." The first year refers to the Muslim calendar, which begins with the Prophet's flight (or *hijra*) from Mecca

wished so fervently for reconciliation with the religion of his forebears that when Satan whispered false verses in his ears, he mistook them for true revelation.

Whether true or not, the story points to an increasing animosity between Muḥammad and his Meccan audience, an animosity discussed at length by Walid A. Saleh in Chapter 1 and illustrated by an emigration of some of Muḥammad's followers from Mecca to the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia and by a boycott against Muḥammad's clan. Tradition has also preserved many stories of both Muḥammad's and his followers' suffering, especially after the deaths of Abū Ṭālib and Khadīja in 619.

With the loss of his protectors, Muḥammad was openly mocked in Mecca and forced to look outside the town for support. Numerous verses in the Qur'ān, said to come from this period, seem to console Muḥammad, encouraging him to be patient. This is also the time when most sources say that this verse (Q 17:1) was revealed:

> Glory be to Him who transported His servant by night from the sacred mosque to the farthest mosque, which We have surrounded with blessing, in order to show him one of Our signs.

This verse, of especial importance to Ṣūfīs, is the scriptural basis for Muḥammad's Night Journey, in which God transported him to Jerusalem. This event is often combined with the *mi'rāj*, Muḥammad's ascent into heaven, where he spoke with God face-to-face. Early historians disagreed on when, precisely, these trips occurred, but their connection to a period of persecution is psychologically satisfying: in Muḥammad's time of trouble, God granted him a vision that marked his special place among the prophets.

MUḤAMMAD IN MEDINA

Eventually, Muḥammad left Mecca, negotiating safe passage for him and for his followers to the oasis of Yathrib, some two hundred miles to the north. This *hijra*, the emigration of Muslims from Mecca to Yathrib in 622, was a turning point for the early community. Yathrib would come to be known as Medina (Ar. *madīnat al-nabī*, "the city of the Prophet"), and there hundreds converted to the new religion; when the Prophet died there in 632, he left behind thousands of believers.

We know much more about Muḥammad's ten years in Medina than about his time in Mecca. In addition to the Qur'ān, we have the accounts

to Medina; it is sometimes marked by the symbol AH (*anno hegira*). The second date refers to the Common or Christian Era (CE).

transmitted by his ever-increasing cohort of followers. It is also worth noting, however, that although the key events of Mecca were interior (Muḥammad's first revelations, his response to his mission and to the Meccan resistance, his Night Journey), the key events of Medina were public (community organization, several significant battles, and many minor raids). Public events not only have more witnesses but also conform to known patterns of human social behavior. Medina was also home to a diverse community of social and religious groups, and Muḥammad's increasing stature brought him into negotiations with even more such groups in the surrounding territory. As a result, we often have competing accounts of single events, thus reflecting the different interests of those groups.

Unlike Mecca, Medina did not have a single town center but rather a variety of settlements strewn across an area of some twenty square miles. As Michael Lecker discusses in Chapter 3, we know a good deal about who occupied which areas of land because of recorded disputes over prestige (in providing land for the Prophet, for example) and other sources, such as histories of Medina, that do not belong to the traditional biographical literature. From these accounts we know that Medina had two key Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, which were split into a number of clans. In addition, there were other tribal groups in the oasis, including several Jewish tribes; they were Arabic speakers and fully integrated into the political and economic life of the oasis, but we know little of their precise religious practices or of what contact, if any, they had with the larger Jewish communities of Palestine and Iraq.

Ostensibly, Muḥammad's arrival (traditionally on the twelfth of Rabīʿ al-Awwal, year 1 of the *hijra* [September 24, 622]), was meant to provide some central leadership to the various warring elements of the oasis. That he did, but he also brought along a further division, one that would prove decisive for Medina's future. From Mecca, Muḥammad was accompanied by numerous followers (known as *muhājirūn*, "those who had undertaken the *hijra*"), all of whom were believers in his message. These were largely settled among the Medinan believers of the Aws and Khazraj tribes, a group sensibly known as the helpers (Ar. *anṣār*). Although the *muhājirūn* and the *anṣār* were united in faith, they were divided by tribal and other loyalties. The negotiation of those loyalties, and the relationship of the believers with the other inhabitants of Medina, is the subject of a curious document that Western historians have dubbed the Constitution of Medina (see the appendix to Chapter 3).

The Medinan verses of the Qurʾān give us an insight into the social complexity of this community. There are lengthy disputes with Jews

and Christians, collectively known as the People of the Book (Ar. *ahl al-kitāb*), on theological matters, ranging from the nature of God to the nature of Jesus. There is extensive regulation of family matters: marriage, divorce, manumission of slaves, and treatment of children. There are descriptions of ritual cleansing, exhortations to pray and remember God, and rules of warfare. These last have received a good deal of attention, and rightfully so, as the transformation of *jihād* (from struggling against persecution in Mecca to taking up arms in Medina) coincides with the establishment of the community in Medina.

It is clear that the *hijra* from Mecca to Medina did not end the hostile relations between Muḥammad and his hometown. The Battle of Badr (2/624) is the most important of these early skirmishes. While trying to raid a Meccan caravan, Muḥammad and about three hundred of his followers ran into a larger Meccan military force instead. The Muslims decided to stay their ground and fight, surprisingly winning the day. The event is celebrated in the Qur'ān, with God reminding the Muslims that He was behind their victory. Curiously, this animosity with the Meccans roughly coincides with a change in the prescribed prayer direction, one that put Mecca, not Jerusalem, at the center of the Muslim world. At the same time, verses are revealed that incorporate certain pre-Islamic practices, such as the pilgrimage to Mecca, into Islamic worship. In these ways, Islam was further differentiated from the practices of Jews and Christians.

The battles with the Meccans continued; some of these were barely survived by the Muslims (Uḥud in 3/625), and others were a draw (Battle of the Trench in 5/627). During this period, Muḥammad perceived the Jewish tribes in Medina to be a threat – they did not support his policies of war and refused to succumb to Muḥammad's leadership. He banished one tribe after another, finally besieging the last significant tribe, the Qurayẓa, after the Battle of the Trench. In a brutal judgment, several hundred men of the tribe were executed and the women and children were enslaved. That this was a political and not a purely religious persecution seems evident from the fact that other, smaller groups of Jews remained in Medina.

The Battle of the Trench proved a turning point, emboldening Muḥammad to expand his influence among the Bedouin tribes to the north of Medina. In the year 6/628, he concluded the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyya with the Meccans, allowing Medinans to perform the pilgrimage rites in Mecca without fear of reprisals. Muḥammad then undertook the first two conquests of his career: Khaybar (7/629) and Mecca (8/630). Khaybar was a rich oasis largely inhabited by Jews, and

Muḥammad's negotiation of that conquest (in which Jews would maintain their rights to their lives, religious practices, and land in exchange for recognizing Muslim authority) was a key precedent for the conquest of Byzantine and Sassanid territory after his death. At the conquest of Mecca, Muḥammad explicitly forbade his followers from killing any Meccans who stayed in their homes; the historian Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767) records that only four Meccans were killed.

In the last three years of his life, Muḥammad devoted himself to consolidating his control over central Arabia through diplomacy and warfare. Having seen his rise to power, many surrounding leaders were anxious to curry his favor, sending emissaries to Medina. Muḥammad also led a sizable military force (our sources say thirty thousand men) to the Byzantine border town of Tabūk. The battle was not decisive, however, and it would not be until after Muḥammad's death that Muslim forces would successfully defeat a contingent of the Byzantine army. It is possible, however, to overestimate the extent of Muḥammad's influence in Arabia. Even up to his death there remained significant opposition to his rule both within Medina and without.

In the year 10/632, Muḥammad undertook his "farewell pilgrimage," accounts of which have been preserved by his Companions. His death a few months later was devastating to this early community. The believers were dismayed, and many left the new faith to return to their old ways. Eventually, leadership was unified under one of Muḥammad's close Companions, Abū Bakr, who was called a caliph, a deputy or a follower, of the Prophet. Abū Bakr was an old man, however, and at his death two years later, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, another early Companion of the Prophet, but one with more ambition, took over leadership of the community. It was under ʿUmar and his successors that the conquests of surrounding territory began in earnest. Within a few decades, two of the world's major empires, the Byzantine and the Persian, would lose much of their territory to this new Arab-Islamic movement, a movement that gained strength with every successful conquest.

This early movement also survived enormous challenges. Numerous groups rejected the authority of the caliphs, including the partisans (Ar. *shīʿa*) of ʿAlī, who believed that leadership of the community should remain within the Prophet's own family. Significant civil wars were fought in 656, 660, and 680. Perhaps even more surprising is that this movement maintained a separate identity and did not lose itself among the powerful cultural influences of the major world empires it conquered. After all, empires do not disappear overnight, and neither were the early conquests missions of wanton destruction. Tax structures, bureaucracies, and property ownership were all maintained as they were found,

and the populace was not forcibly converted. The millions of Christian Copts in Egypt today attest to this fact, and Lebanon is still almost half Christian. Although the military conquests were an event of remarkable swiftness, the bureaucratic and cultural conquests were a much longer process. Slowly, the language of bureaucracy began to change from Greek to Arabic. The Roman denarius and Greek drachma became the Arab dinar and dirham, and the emperor's visage was gradually replaced with the statements "There is no God but God" and "Muḥammad is the Messenger of God." Muḥammad's name was thereby stamped into the consciousness of this community sixty years after his death.

SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF MUḤAMMAD

The coin depicted below is symbolic of the difficulties faced by researchers who seek to understand this earliest period of Islamic history. On the one hand, this coin is tangible evidence of Muḥammad's life and legacy; it, along with ancient Qurʾān manuscripts also from this period, forms irrefutable evidence of the early Muslim community. On the other hand, gold coins and fine manuscripts can be produced only by a wealthy and powerful state, one that has clear political interests in maintaining a certain sense of the past. For information from Muḥammad's own period, we must turn to a difficult set of literary sources – histories, biographies, and legal texts. The earliest of these may go back to the first century of Islam, but even these did not reach their final form until the full flowering of Arabic literature, almost two hundred years after the Prophet's death. Although these sources are rich with information, they also contain contradictory voices and even fabrications, as the memories of the Prophet's Companions were recalled for subsequent generations. As Michael Lecker argues, there are pearls of specific details in this sea of information, but the process of distinguishing fact from falsehood is quite controversial.

The earliest compilers, Ibn Isḥāq, al-Wāqidī (d. 207/823), Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845), and al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), worked hard to include accurate accounts, but they were also remarkably tolerant of contradiction, fearing more the omission of an important story than the cacophony of Companion voices. An early biography, therefore, reads somewhat like a postmodern novel, with multiple accounts of single events all packed next to one another. The *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq, for example, includes two accounts of Muḥammad's chest being split open, one when he was a child in the care of a Bedouin nursemaid and the other when he was an adult, before being sent on the Night Journey. He makes no effort to reconcile the two or to say that one or the other is false. Yet the difference

Figure 1. Umayyad coin with Muḥammad's name, dated 78/697–698. Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, New York.

is significant. In one, Muḥammad is made pure long before taking up his prophetic mission; in the other, the splitting of the chest is a spiritual preparation for his journey to heaven. Scholars have responded to this contradictory information in numerous ways. Early Muslim scholars argued over whether Muḥammad's Night Journey was a bodily journey or merely a spiritual one. Early modern Christian writers called Muḥammad a fraud for claiming to have achieved this impossible act, whereas writers in the early twentieth century saw this journey as a fiction created by devoted followers.

WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP ON MUḤAMMAD'S LIFE

Fifty years ago when Maxime Rodinson first published *Mahomet*, he prefaced his book with an apology for adding yet one more study of Muḥammad to a world already full with "a very great number of biographies of the prophet of Islam." As John V. Tolan describes in Chapter 11, the study of Muḥammad in Europe goes back several hundred years. But Rodinson needed only to look at the first half of the twentieth century to find significant works of scholarship produced by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, W. Montgomery Watt, Frants Buhl, Tor Andrae, and others. Although it is easy to dismiss some of these texts as "Orientalist" and therefore unworthy of attention, this is a mistake. These early twentieth-century authors engaged the primary sources with care, bringing new insights into these complicated texts. In the case of Tor Andrae, for example, his comparison of emergent Islamic with Ebionite religious texts produces remarkable insights, though he was perhaps overly influenced by the notion of parallels among religious traditions. Similarly, Rodinson has been taken to task for explaining away Muḥammad's prophetic experiences as epilepsy, yet his astute observations on the

role of ideology and social relationships in the early Muslim community cannot be easily dismissed.

In the past fifty years, scholars have tended to shy away from sweeping treatments of Muḥammad's life, leaving to writers such as Karen Armstrong and Hans Küng the task of reconciling Muḥammad's story with modern life. The appearance of Michael Cook's *Muhammad* in 1986 is remarkable for its exception to this trend, yet it also is arguably less a biography of Muḥammad than it is a study of problems facing anyone who would write such a biography. Instead, Western scholars have either retreated into specific, narrow studies or rejected the search for the historical Muḥammad altogether. The first of these trends seeks to refine the work already done by the great scholars of the past. A specific event from the Prophet's life or a relevant text passage is subjected to close scrutiny. The scholars carrying out this work bring enormous erudition to their tasks, but their work, published in such journals as *Oriens* and *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, is not accessible to a general reading public. This is, in part, by design. First, it takes a significant mastery of texts to understand the point of the research in the first place, and second, there is little support for such work, either in the Muslim world or outside of it. More than ever, universities are under pressure to demonstrate relevance, making it significantly harder to fund scholars to devote years of their lives to mastering difficult languages and texts.

Such scholars are also under pressure by the second trend, the rejection of any search for the historical Muḥammad. The meaning of this phrase, "the historical Muḥammad," was once seen as self-evident. It meant the empirical data of Muḥammad's life as a man, apart from any supernatural claims by him or his followers. Although the original notion might have been to weed out the ideological (i.e., religious) convictions of Muḥammad's followers from their accounts of his life, it is now well understood that there can be no ideologically free account of such a man. As John Tolan points out, scholars have very often used their research as a foil for working out their own polemical agendas. In hopes of avoiding this trap, many have simply abandoned the task of understanding Muḥammad in his own world, seeking rather to understand the ways in which his followers have perceived him. The focus, they argue, should be on who Muslims say Muḥammad was, not on who scholars say he was.

To be sure, some non-Muslim scholars still remain blithely unaware of the influence their research can have on the Muslim world. Others seem openly antagonistic toward Islam or religious belief altogether. Yet it is a mistake to abandon historical-critical analysis of the texts for one simple reason: if we do not understand the earliest accounts of

Muḥammad's life, then we cannot know how later writers changed and adapted those accounts. In other words, we need to identify the earliest layers of biographical writing if we are to trace out the ways that later authors utilize this information; only then can we assess the work of interpretation undertaken by those later authors.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad is designed to represent current trends in the scholarly study of Muḥammad's life and legacy. It is split into three sections: "Muḥammad in His World," "Muḥammad in History," and "Muḥammad in Memory." The first section gives essential background on the social and political landscape of Arabia before Muḥammad's appearance on the world stage. It focuses on specific events in his life, from the Meccan and Medinan periods, and subjects our sources for these events to historical-critical analysis. The second section moves to the literature and culture produced in the premodern era (750–1453), focusing on the influence of Muḥammad's example in this period. Separate chapters (on law, Ṣūfism, ritual, personal piety, philosophy and politics) explore the ways that Muḥammad was held to be the ideal example for Muslims in all areas of society. The final section moves to the early modern and modern periods, analyzing poems, theological and literary texts, and even songs and images, to elucidate the ways that the Prophet is remembered – by Muslims and non-Muslims alike – up to our own time.

The contributors to this volume all hold university appointments and all are devoted teachers. As such, they write with intellectual rigor and uncommon clarity of thought. Although it is our intention that this volume will help advance scholarly study, the book is designed to be read by nonspecialists. Read in aggregate, the chapters of this book should give readers a clear sense of who Muḥammad was and some insight of his meaning for Muslims today and in the past.

In the opening chapter of the first section, Walid Saleh provides a brief survey of Arabian history, beliefs, and practices before the rise of Islam, quickly moving on to the way that Muḥammad was received as a prophet among the Arabs. His analysis combines a close reading of Qur'ānic passages with the earliest biographical sources and shows how Muḥammad addressed Arab expectations while also laying the foundation for their future conquest of the Sassanid and much of the Byzantine empires. The next chapter, by Uri Rubin, continues Saleh's analysis of the relationship of the Qur'ān to the Prophet's biography, focusing on one key episode during Muḥammad's Meccan period: the splitting of

the moon. Early Muslim writers understood this event as a miracle and developed it into one of the most memorable images of Muḥammad, one still popular among Muslims today. Rubin discusses this interpretation in light of Muḥammad's preaching in Mecca, where he was primarily a warner of apocalyptic events. This view of Muḥammad is in stark contrast to Muḥammad's Medinan period as described by Michael Lecker. In his chapter, Lecker takes advantage of competing, often contradictory, accounts of Muḥammad's life in Medina to find small, solid pieces of data on which we can begin to build a firm sense of Muḥammad the man. Like Rubin, Lecker focuses on an event of seeming insignificance – Muḥammad's acquisition of land in Medina – to illustrate Muḥammad's standing after the *hijra*. At the end of his chapter, he includes a translation of a key document from this period known to Western scholars as the Constitution of Medina.

The chapters of the first section have much to say about how we read early sources for Muḥammad's life, especially the Qurʾān and the biographical literature (Sīra). They are concerned with capturing a sense of how Muḥammad was regarded during his own lifetime, before the development of Islam into a world phenomenon. The subsequent section, however, concerns sources written long after the story of Muḥammad's life had been written. What we see in that section is the ways that authors of the period (750–1453) emphasized different aspects of Muḥammad's life and personality as they sought to incorporate his life into Muslim rituals and institutions, providing an example of emulation to their audiences.

The first chapter in the second section, by Joseph E. Lowry, shows the process by which Muḥammad came to be understood as the ideal lawgiver. Muḥammad's example, known as his *sunna* (literally, "the well-worn path"),was made manifest through a specific narrative form known as a *ḥadīth*. But as Lowry demonstrates, not all early Muslims agreed that Islamic law should be based on the words and deeds of the Prophet; nor was there agreement as to how one gets from prophetic precedent to applied law. Some of these arguments continue today, but the study of Muḥammad's *ḥadīth* remains a central aspect of Islamic learning. In Chapter 5, Robert Gleave addresses another problem posed by the *ḥadīth*: how does imitation of the Prophet's actions translate into Muslims' everyday practices? The *ḥadīth*s, after all, preserve much more than the way the Prophet prayed or led the troops into battle; they also contain advice on hygiene, medical treatments, and other personal matters. Gleave points out that a number of fine distinctions were developed to help pious believers sort through this vast array of information, but he also elucidates the theological issues that are intimately bound up