

Islam - An Overview of Beginnings, Beliefs and History

The Beginning. It all began in a cave on Mount Hira outside of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula in the month of Ramadan,¹ the 17th day of the year 610AD. Muhammad ibn Abdallah (hereafter referred to as “Muhammad”; referred to by Muslims as “the Prophet Muhammad”), age 40, married to Khadija, a wealthy business woman fifteen years his senior,² had made his way to the cave for a spiritual retreat. While sleeping that night, Muhammad had a dream. In the beginning of the dream, Muhammad is commanded to read and to recite what he has read. Muhammad, who could not read or write at the time, replied, “I do not know how to read.” The following is Muhammad’s account of the night’s happenings (as reported partly in the Qur’an, Surah (chapter) 96:3f):

The angel caught me (forcefully) and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it anymore. He then released me and again asked me to read, and I replied, ‘I do not know how to read.’ Thereupon he caught me again and pressed me a second time till I could not bear it anymore. He then released me and asked me again to read, but again I replied, ‘I do not know how to read (or what shall I read?).’ Thereupon he caught me for the third time and pressed me and then released me and said, ‘Read! In the Name of the Lord, Who has created (all that exists). Has created man from a clot. Read! And Your Lord is Most Generous. . . (unto) . . . that which he knew not.’ (Surah 96:5).³

It was not until two years later that Muhammad came to believe that he had actually been visited by the angel Gabriel, sent from Allah.⁴ The revelation he received that night became the first of many over the next twenty three years that made their way into the Muslim holy book, the “Qur’an” (literally, the “recitation”). The religion of the recitation was named “Islam” (literally, “submission” or “surrender”);⁵ and, the claim of the reciter, was that it was the last of the Divine revelations before the end of the world. *The reciter claimed that the religion was a “correction” of the prior Divine revelations to Jews and Christians.*⁶ As such, Islam accepts all of the prophets of Judaism as well as Jesus Christ of the Christian faith (but not as Son of God, or Savior/Messiah; only as prophet).⁷

Muhammad set about to preach the message that he had received that night, beginning with the tribe from which he was born - the Quaraysh of Mecca.⁸ His initial preaching in Mecca was without success. In fact, the first to believe was Khadijah, his wife, followed by Ali, his cousin and also his foster child, who would later become the fourth caliph (successor to Muhammad).⁹ Early adherents were from the poor and indigent of Mecca. The first person of influence was Abu Bakr, a member of a respected family of Mecca (Abu would later become the first caliph). The next convert of influence was Uthman, a member of the house of Umayya, one of the ruling families of Mecca. Uthman was Muhammad’s sole convert from among the ruling aristocrats of Mecca.¹⁰ Uthman would later become the third caliph.

The Qur’an. According to author Karen Armstrong, the Qur’an is not an account of Muhammad’s life (as the Gospels are for Jesus’ life for Christians); rather, the Qur’an “reveals the Creator rather than his messenger.”¹¹ According to Muslims, the Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel beginning in the year 610AD. Muhammad claimed that for twenty-three years he received direct messages from God, which were collected in the book Muslims refer to as the Qur’an. Further, the Qur’an, according to Muhammad, came to him verse by verse, line by line, chapter by chapter (a chapter is

referred to as “Surah”). As each new verse was revealed to Muhammad, he recited it aloud. The first revelation received by Muhammad is the beginning of Surah 96:

“Read out! In the Name of the Lord who creates, who creates man from a blood-clot. Read out! For thy Lord is the Most Munificent who teaches by the pen, teaches man that which he knew not.”¹²

As other revelations were recited by Muhammad, his Companions committed them to memory. Those who could write, wrote them down¹³ on “pieces of papyrus, flat stones, palm leaves, shoulder blades and ribs of animals, pieces of leather and wooden boards, as well as from the hearts of men.”¹⁴

The collections of the Qur’an did not take place until the caliphate of Abu Bakr (632 - 634 AD). Alphonse Mingana, quotes from a “tradition” of Islam as follows. In this “tradition,” the secretary of Abu Bakr, Zaid ibn Thabit, is speaking¹⁵:

“We have heard it from Musa b. Ismai’il, who heard it from Ibrahim b. Sa’d, who heard it from ibn Shihab, who in his turn heard it from Ubaid b. Sabbak, who related that Zaid b. Thabit said: “At the massacre of Yamamah, Abu Bakr summoned me, while Umar ibnul-Khattab was with him; and Abu Bakr said: ‘Slaughter has waxed hot among the readers of the Koran, in the day of Yamamah, and I fear that it may again wax hot among the readers in other countries as well; and that much may be lost from the Koran. Now, therefore, I deem that thou shouldst give orders for the collection of the Koran.’ I said to Umar, ‘How doest thou something that the Apostle of God – may God pray on him and give him peace – has not done?’ And Umar said: ‘By Allah, this is good.’ And Umar did not cease to renew it repeatedly to me, until God set my breast at ease towards it, and I considered it as Umar had considered it.” Zaid added and said: “Abu Bakr then said, “Thou art a young man and wise, against whom no man can cast an imputation, and thou wast writing down the Revelation for the Apostle of God – search out then the Koran and collect it.’ By Allah, if I were ordered to transfer a mountain it would not have been more difficult for me than this order to collect the Koran; and I said, ‘How canst thou do something that the Apostle of God- may God praise on him and give him peace – has not done’; and (Abu Bakr) said: ‘By Allah, this is good’; and he did not cease to renew it repeatedly to me, until God set my heart at ease towards it, so He has done for Umar and Abu Bakr– may God be pleased with both of them – and I sought out the Koran, collecting it from palm branches, white stones, and breasts of men. . . And the . . . (rolls) were with Abu Bakr until God took him to Himself, then with Umar, in all his life time, then with Hafsa, the daughter of Umar, may God be pleased with him.”¹⁶

Over the years that followed Abu Bakr’s initial order to Zaid ibn Thabit to compile the revelations in a holy book, divergent translations of the Qur’an arose. The following describes the process of arriving at an “official” text once again:

According to tradition, the next step was taken under Uthman (644 - 656). One of Uthman’s generals asked the caliph to make such a collection because serious disputes had broken out among his troops from different provinces in regard to the correct readings of the Koran. Uthman chose Zaid ibn Thabit to prepare the official text. Zaid, with the help of three members of the noble Meccan families, carefully revised the Koran comparing his version with the “leaves” in the possession of Hafsa, Uthman’s daughter; and as instructed, in case of difficulty as to the reading, Zaid followed the dialect of

*the Quraish, the Prophet's tribe. The copies of the new version, which must have been completed between 650 and Uthman's death in 656, were sent to Kufa, Basra, Damascus, and perhaps Mecca, and one was, of course, kept in Medina. All other versions were ordered to be destroyed.*¹⁷

The Qur'an is arranged by Surah (chapter) and within each Surah, by verse. However, the Surahs are not presented in the order uttered by Muhammad. When the first official text was first compiled by Abu Bakr's secretary, Zaid, the longer Surahs were placed at the beginning and the shorter Surahs were placed at the end.¹⁸ Further, the earliest parts of the Qur'an are said to refer to the special problems that Muhammad encountered while his religion was still a struggling sect. As these problems arose, Muhammad would receive or remember a recitation; the recitation would be stated and then implemented by Muhammad and his followers.

The revelations came to Muhammad in the Arabic language, the language acclaimed by Muslims to be the "language of God."¹⁹ Muslims believe that the Qur'an was, in fact, recited to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel in Arabic as the very words of Allah. Thus, they believe it impossible to translate the Qur'an in its "reality" into another language. Translations of the Qur'an are therefore unusable for ritual and liturgical purposes.²⁰ Muslims believe Muhammad gave the final revelation of the Qur'an a few months before his death (6/8/632) wherein the following recitation was made: "*Today, I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed my blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion.*" (Surah 5:5) Muslims memorize the Qur'an with regard to their knowledge of Arabic. The first phase of primary education in Muslim countries is the memorization of the Qur'an. According to Cyril Glasse' "thousands upon thousands" of Muslims know the entire Qur'an by memory.²¹ Karen Armstrong gives this summary of the Muslim response to the Arabic of the Qur'an:

*The Arabs found the Qur'an quite astonishing: it was unlike any other literature they had encountered before. Some . . . were converted immediately, believing that divine inspiration alone could account for this extraordinary language. . . . Muslims still find the Qur'an profoundly moving. They say that when they listen to it they feel enveloped in a divine dimension of sound, rather like Muhammad on Mount Hira when he experienced the embrace of the angel or when, later, he saw this supernatural being filling the entire sky whichever way he looked.*²²

The Hadith (literally, "speech," "report," "account"). The *Hadith* (sometimes referred to as "Traditions") are collections of the sayings of the Prophet as recounted by Muhammad's Companions.²³ The Hadith (along with the "Sunnah") are secondary to the Qur'an in importance. Each *Hadith* amounts to a narration from the life of the prophet as related by a Companion, as opposed to what the prophet said specifically²⁴, i.e., as a revelation (which is in the Qur'an). The Hadith have been compiled by four different Islamic scholars over Islam's history. The compilation considered to be the most authentic is that of Sahih Al-Bukhari. The Hadith are followed by the Sunni sect of Islam since the content can be traced to one of Muhammad's Companions. The Shiites do not follow the *Hadith* but follow the *khbar*. For Shiites, the authenticity of Muhammad's sayings can only be traced or authenticated by Ali and the Imams of Shiism.²⁵ *Hadiths* offer explanation or additional information on the Qur'an. An example of a Hadith can be seen by the quoted Tradition above concerning the Qur'an's formation:

"We have heard it from Musa b. Ismai'il, who heard it from Ibrahim b. Sa'd, who heard it from ibn

*Shihab, who in his turn heard it from Ubaid b. Sabbak, who related that Zaid b. Thabit said: "At the massacre of Yamamah, Abu Bakr summoned me, while Umar ibnul-Khattab was with him; and Abu Bakr said . . ."*²⁶

The Sunnah - The *Sunnah* (sometimes "customs") includes what the Prophet approved, allowed, or condoned. "The *Sunnah* is the crucial complement to the Qur'an; so much so that there are in fact isolated instances where, in fact, the *Sunnah* appears to prevail over the Koran as, for example, when the Koran refers to three daily prayers (24:58 and 11:116), but the *Sunnah* sets five.²⁷ The *Sunnah* is the basis of the legal code of Islamic law (*Shari'a*), and is authoritative in rulings among Islamic states. It depicts the life of Muhammad and offers examples for ethics and living. Glasse' provides as an example of the legal code of Sunnah the case of a Muslim leader, Ibn Hanbal, who, in his entire life never ate a watermelon because he could not find an example of the Prophet's having done so.²⁸

The Hijra - The Beginning of the Islamic Era. Historian Paul Fregosi provides details of one of most important events for Islam – *The Hijra* (literally, "emigration") – the migration of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina (located approximately 280 miles north of Mecca) in September, 622 AD. This event marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. According to Fregosi, a group of pilgrims from Medina (in pre-Islamic times, Medina was known as "Yathrib") arrived in Mecca to worship at the Kaaba (the religious shrine located in Mecca from which Muslims still worship today). They heard Muhammad's preaching and invited him to Medina to become their leader. In view of Muhammad's limited success to attract followers in Mecca, Muhammad accepted the invitation. The departure from Mecca began in June, 622, with around 200 followers departing uneventfully. Muhammad and Abu Bakr were the last to leave Mecca, and on or about September 17, 622, the two arrived in Medina.²⁹ At that time in Medina's history, most of the population were Jews.³⁰ The Arabian village included five clans, three of whom were Jewish and two were Arab.³¹ The name of the migration became known in Islam as the Hijra, and its calendar records its first day of existence with this event³²³³

The Islamic Community - "Umma." While at Medina, the concept of "*Umma*," or Islamic community was born. The foundation of this concept was an agreement that Muhammad entered into among his followers. The agreement regulated the lives of his followers so that all disputes of the *Umma*, the community, were brought to Muhammad for resolution and settlement;³⁴ further, all Muslims were a part of this community, regardless of their tribal or ancestral affiliations. Karen Armstrong writes,

*"All the tribes were 'one community' (umma) to the exclusion of all other men. Hitherto, the tribe had been the basic unit of society; the umma however was a community which was based on religion rather than on kinship. This was unprecedented in Arabia. It had not been part of Muhammad's original mandate to form a theocracy – he would probably not have known what a theocracy was. But events had pushed him beyond his original preconceptions into an entirely new solution. For some years now, Islam had been a divisive force in society: Muhammad had been accused of stealing children away from their parents. But until the hijra nobody had dreamed of abandoning the tribe of Quraysh (Muhammad's family living in Mecca). Now the old tribal bonds had been abrogated and the Quraysh, the Aws, and the Khasraj (other tribes) formed one umma. Islam was beginning to be a force for unity instead of division."*³⁵

Bernard Lewis adds:

*The Umma thus had a dual character. On the one hand it was a political organization, a kind of new tribe with Muhammad as its Sheikh, and with Muslims and others as its members. Yet at the same time, it had a basically religious meaning. It was a religious community, some would say a theocracy.*³⁶

Finally, author Malaise Ruthven summarizes the importance and impact of *umma*, Islamic community, that replaced the ancient tribal society of Arabia:

*The old tribal system had been at the root of Arabia's problems, barring the road to future development. . . Yet tribalism could not be eliminated overnight. . . The new solidarity provided by Islam was the Umma, a super-tribal entity whose loyalty was to Allah, the super-tribal deity. All other allegiances, symbolized by inferior deities or tribal totems, were either abolished or so subsumed within the new allegiance to the Prophet's community that in due course they could be expected to 'wither away.'*³⁷

The Islamic Concept of Church and State. The confusion for Westerners in understanding an "Islamic state" is quite often rooted in our Western practice that within society, there should be separation of church and state. For the *Umma*, this is unthinkable. Lewis states in another of his writings the following:

*When we in the Western world, nurtured in the Western tradition, use the words "Islam" and "Islamic," we tend to make a natural error and assume that religion means the same for Muslims as it has meant in the Western world, even in medieval times; that is to say, a section or compartment of life reserved for certain matters, and separate, or at least separable, from other compartments of life designed to hold other matters. That is not so in the Islamic world. . . . In classical Islam there was no distinction between Church and state. In Christendom the existence of two authorities goes back to the founder, who enjoined his followers to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and to God the things which are God's. . . . In prewesternized Islam, there were no two powers but one, and the question of separation, therefore could not arise. The distinction between church and state, so deeply rooted in Christendom, did not exist in Islam, and in classical Arabic, . . . , there were no other pairs of words corresponding to spiritual and temporal, lay and ecclesiastical, religious and secular. It was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and then under the influence of Western ideas and institutions, that new words were found, first in Turkish and then in Arabic, to express the idea of secular. Even in modern usage, there is no equivalent to "the Church," meaning "ecclesiastical organization." All the different words for mosque denote only a building which is a place of worship, not an abstraction, an authority, or an institution.*³⁸

The Islamic Concept of "Jihad." Historian Bat Ye'or summarizes the origin of *jihad* as follows:

"Islam – a religion revealed in Arabic by an Arabian prophet – was born in seventh-century Arabia and developed in the midst of a population whose traditions and customs were conditioned by a specific geographical environment. Consequently, while borrowing the essentials of its ethical teaching from the two biblical religions, Islam integrated specific local cultural elements from the customs of the nomadic or semi-sedentary tribes which populated the Hijaz. These tribes formed the militant nucleus

of the Islamic community and, by war, ensured that its resources and its followers constantly expanded. . . Lacking means of subsistence, the small emigrant Muslim community lived at the expense of new converts (upon arrival in Medina in 622) in Medina. As this situation could not last, the Prophet organized armed incursions to intercept the caravans which traded with Mecca. Interpreter of the will of Allah, Muhammad combined the political power of a military leader; the religious power and the functions of a judge: "Whoever obeys the Messenger, thereby obeys God." (Qur'an 4:82). Divine revelations relating to these raids justified the Muslim's right to the property and lives of their pagan enemies. Verses in the Qur'an sacralized the psychological conditioning of the fighters, the logistics and procedures of battle, the division of booty, and the fate of the vanquished. . . The umma (Muslim community) continued to grow and increased its wealth by raids on caravans and oases populated by Jews, Christians or pagans in Arabia, and to the furthestmost Syro-Palestinian deserts (629 - 632). . . . Utilizing contemporary sources, Michael the Syrian later described the events:

(Muhammad) began to assemble a band of his own and to organize ambushes in parts of Palestine, so that by bringing something back for them (the Arabs), he persuaded them to believe in him and to join him. As he had gone down (from Medina) and gone up several times without being harmed, had pillaged and had returned laden with booty, (Muhammad's preaching) was confirmed for them by the love of possessions which led them to make a regular feature of going out to pillage. . . Soon his troops set about invading and pillaging several lands. . . We showed earlier how from the beginning of the empire of the Arabs, they went out to take prisoners, to pillage, to steal, to ambush, to invade and destroy whole regions during all of Muhammad's life.¹⁸⁹

Ibn Warraq defines the term as follows:

As for religious minorities, the relations of Muslims and non-Muslims are set in a context of a war: jihad. The totalitarian nature of Islam is nowhere more apparent than in the concept of jihad, the holy war, whose ultimate aim is to conquer the entire world and submit it to the one true faith, to the law of Allah. To Islam alone has been granted the truth – there is no possibility of salvation outside it. It is the sacred duty – an incumbent religious duty established in the Qur'an and the Traditions – of all Muslims to bring it to all humanity. Jihad is a divine institution, enjoined specially for the purpose of advancing Islam. Muslims must strive, fight, and kill in the name of God:

Surah 9:5-6: 'Kill those who join other gods with Allah (God) wherever you may find them.'

Surah 4:76: 'Those who believe fight in the cause of Allah (God).'

Surah 8:12: 'I will instill terror into the hearts of the Infidels, strike off their heads then, and strike off from them every fingertip.'⁴⁰

Subsistence through Jihad. Muhammad and those who had participated with him in *hijra* (migration to Medina) were over 200 in number. There was little available to them for subsistence. Islam turned to the sole remaining profession left to them – war. The Muslims began raiding caravans in route to Mecca. This effort established a blockade on Mecca, prohibiting supplies from reaching this desert city. It also enriched the Muslims with booty from their conquests. With each successful raid, the followers of Muhammad saw the favor of Allah being poured out upon Muhammad.

A key victory was won at Badr near the Red Sea when a very large caravan was in route to Mecca. This victory was more than about conquest of a Meccan possession; it set in motion the underlying purpose of war - booty (as opposed to religion). Historian Paul Fregosi adds: *“The Badr victory gave Muhammad great standing amidst the Medinese. The victors captured 150 camels, ten horses, a considerable amount of merchandise, and 70 Meccans, most of whom were ransomed for 1,000 to 4,000 dirams apiece.”*⁴¹ In the years that followed, Muhammad continued his raids against caravans to Mecca. The Meccans (the Quaraysh tribe of Muhammad’s own family⁴²) had no choice but to respond to Muhammad’s increasing attacks upon its caravans. It was not until 630AD (only eight years after having “migrated” from Mecca to Medina) that Muhammad ultimately captured Mecca and exacted terms of surrender from the remaining Meccans. Malise Ruthven offers this account of the moment of triumph: *“On 30 January 630 Muhammad entered the now deserted streets of the Holy City. The event has become known as the ‘Opening’, the same word that is used for the first Surah of the Qur’an. Only a few pagans offered resistance in one quarter, where they were soon rounded up by Khalid ibn al-Walid. The Prophet made for the Ka`ba and touched the Black Stone with his stick, proclaiming, ‘Allahu Akbar,’ (God is Great), the traditional war-cry of Islam. . . .”*⁴³

By the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad was nearing the end of his life. Two years later, on June 8, 632, Muhammad died of natural causes after complaining of a headache.⁴⁴ The significance of Muhammad’s accomplishments in the name of Allah cannot be underestimated. Having conquered Medina and Mecca as well as much of Arabia formerly controlled by bedouin tribes, Muhammad had brought the Islamic community to the one place in its history that it would never again be: *united*. Malise Ruthven summarizes this period in Arabian history as follows:

*For the first time in its history, Arabia had been unified. This unprecedented political unity was the first fruit of the new religious system, under which allegiance to Allah and his Prophet overrode all prior allegiances based on tribal or family ties. The new solidarity of the Umma (community, see below) opened the way to what would become the most remarkable of Islam’s historic achievements – the conquest, almost overnight of the whole of the Sassanid empire and the southern Byzantine provinces of Syria and Egypt. No doubt the internal weaknesses of the empires, their exhaustion after years of mutual conflict and the religious and class divisions affecting their populations played a part in their defeat, among the most sudden in recorded history. But the decisive factor was the new religion. The greater mobility and superior fighting skills of the Arab warriors was – for the first and last time ever – directed towards a common cause. The energies that had previously wasted themselves in bitter tribal feuding were welded into a new, irresistible power.*⁴⁵

Muhammad’s Ten “Companions.” Muhammad’s first “disciples” were composed of ten men – they are referred to as the “Companions.” Cyril Glasse’ describes them as follows: “Companions - *Strictly speaking, those followers of Muhammad who were closest to him in his lifetime, kept frequent company with him, and strove to assimilate his teachings. They memorized and transmitted Hadith and the Qur’an, before these were written down and compiled.*”⁴⁶ These Ten are also referred to as the “Blessed Ten Companions.” Their names:

Abu Bakr Siddiq (hereafter “Abu Bakr”)
U'mar-e-Farooq (hereafter “Umar”)

Uthman Bin Affaan (hereafter "Uthman")
Ali Ibn Abi Talib (hereafter "Ali")
Abdur-Rahman bin Aaowf
Sad ibn Abi Waqqas
Said ibn Zayd
Abu Ubaydah bin Jirrah
Talhah ibn Ubaydullah
Zubayr bin Al-Awam.⁴⁷

The Ten are described in numerous Islamic sources. Here is one such description referred to as "*The Precious Pearls*":

"The Companions were horsemen by day and spent their evenings in worship. They were people of prayer, fasting, charity, kindness and truthfulness. They were chaste, sincere and pious. They were people who knew self-control of mind, body and temper. They did not go about feeding their lusts. They went about instead feeding the hungry. All of these things are Jihad. When the call for Jihad (meaning war or struggle) was proclaimed, the Companions readily sacrificed everything: their wealth, their lives, and they left their families behind. The fear of death was not an issue, for they knew no better reason or way to die than in fighting to uphold Muslim's rights or Islamic values. And this is the true meaning of the testimony: La ilaha illallah (none has the right to be worshiped but Allah). In return for their loyalty to the cause, Allah bestowed on them true happiness and Paradise."⁴⁸

These ten individuals were Muhammad's inner circle while he was living. To Christians, these ten are comparable to the twelve disciples of Jesus. After Muhammad's death, the first four caliphs of Islam came from this group as well as the two primary sects of Islam: the Sunnis, the largest sect, and the Shiites, the smaller sect.

Successor to Muhammad - the First "Caliph" of Islam. The biographies of Muhammad agree that on the 6th of June, 632, Muhammad died after returning from Mecca to Medina for the annual pilgrimage (*Hajj*). Karen Armstrong reports that upon Muhammad's return from Mecca, he began complaining of excruciating headaches, and not long afterwards, Muhammad died in the lap of his favorite wife, Aisha.⁴⁹ The shock of Muhammad's death was one of the greatest crisis' the *Umma* (community) would ever deal with. In the ten years since the *hijra* (emigration from Mecca to Median to begin the Islamic era), Muslims under Muhammad's leadership would unite to form the most powerful military force the world to date had known. The Arabian Peninsula was united under Muhammad's leadership and Islam seemed ready to push into even greater venues. Muhammad's death was sudden and unexpected; and, Muhammad had not appointed a "successor" (*kalifa* or "caliph"). His Companions were faced with the overwhelming task of appointing a successor, and through this successor maintaining the unity of the community that Muhammad had been so successful in achieving. As might be expected, the likelihood of the success of the successor was no doubt impacted by the fact that Muhammad's revelations were no more; they had ended with his death; and, no successor would be able to relate further details of the Revelation. These factors impacted the survival of the religious community and its unity; and, unless the unity of the community could be maintained, then the victorious conquest waged by Islam under Muhammad would be

erased and the Arabian Peninsula and the surrounding conquered lands would return to the pre-Islamic occupations along with tribal divisions, factions and tribal disputes for the Peninsula.

The process of selecting the “right” successor or caliph fell to two possible candidates:

1. Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s close friend and early convert from the Quraysh tribe of Mecca, who accompanied Muhammad on his emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622, and the father of Muhammad’s favorite wife, Aisha.⁵⁰
2. Ali b. Abi Talib (hereafter “Ali”), Muhammad’s foster child, raised by Muhammad, and one of his earliest converts; also his first cousin from the tribe of Hashim,⁵¹ and his son-in-law by marriage to Fatima,⁵² who was one of Muhammad’s three daughters by his first wife, Khadija.⁵³

The majority of the Companions held for Abu Bakr who became the first caliph of Islam. The reasons for Abu Bakr’s selection were: Abu Bakr was one of the earliest converts to Islam, he was the father of Muhammad’s favorite wife, Aisha, he had been chosen by Muhammad to lead prayers during Muhammad’s final illness as well as lead the pilgrimage of 631, only a year prior to Muhammad’s death.⁵⁴ The only qualification Ali possessed was that he was Muhammad’s closest male, blood relative (he was the only male relative (first cousin) of the prophet surviving). Ali was also considered by the Companions to be too young to successfully lead Islam as compared to the elder Companion, Abu Bakr.

The “Rightly Guided Caliphs.” Abu Bakr was selected as the first successor or “caliph” of Islam following Muhammad’s death. As mentioned, Ali, Muhammad’s closest male relative was passed over. The selection of the next three caliphs included Ali as a possible successor but in each case until the fourth, Ali was passed over. The selections of the first four caliphs and their terms of office and nature of death are as follows:

1. Abu Bakr. 632 - 634. Abu Bakr died in the second year of his caliphate.⁵⁵
2. Umar b. al-Khattab, 634 - 644. Umar was murdered by a Persian captive.⁵⁶
3. Uthman b. Affan, 644 - 656. Umar was murdered by a group of Arab soldiers who believed they had been double-crossed by the Uthman and his clan, the Umayyads.⁵⁷
4. Ali. 656 – 661. Ali was assassinated while preparing to lead the morning prayer at the mosque of Kufah by a “*Kharijite*,” an early militant sect of Islam.⁵⁸

These four caliphs are known in Islam as the “Rightly Guided Caliphs” (or “Patriarchal” Caliphs). They are given this designation by Sunni Islam, only, which considers them to be true, legitimate leaders who successfully modeled their lives after the life of Muhammad. These four were all Companions and considered to be legitimate leaders from both a spiritual as well as a military/political standpoint. The caliphs who followed the first four were considered to be capable military leaders, but, in general, not capable spiritual leaders.⁵⁹

The Dividing Event in Islamic History. The roots of the dividing event in Islamic history can be traced all the way back to the choosing of the first caliph of Islam, Abu Bakr. The two choices for caliph were: Abu Bakr, the father-in-law of Muhammad (through Muhammad’s marriage to Aisha, Abu Bakr’s daughter); and Ali, the foster child, first cousin, and son-in-law of Muhammad through Ali’s marriage to Fatima.,

Muhammad's daughter. Ali, as the closest male blood relative was passed over in favor of Abu Bakr. Ali was passed over as caliph two additional times. When Umar was chosen as second caliph; and Uthman was chosen as third caliph. Uthman's reign as the third caliph was marred by two reasons: First, some of the soldiers believed that the distribution of booty from conquered lands was disproportionate in favor of Uthman and his clan, the Umayyads; and, secondly, the most lucrative appointments over conquered lands were given to those of Uthman's clan.⁶⁰ Since the existence of *umma* (community) now held greater importance than family clan, Uthman had violated a basic principle established by Muhammad. The result was the first civil war in Islam. A group of Arab soldiers broke into Uthman's house and murdered him. A five year civil war erupted. Ali was acclaimed caliph by the mutineers as well as most of those of Medina. Aisha, the late Muhammad's favorite wife, opposed Ali because Ali refused to take action against those who had murdered Uthman. Ali and his followers formed an opposition force to Aisha; and Aisha's forces, supported by two Companions of Muhammad joined forces. The two met in battle at Basra, and Ali's forces scored a decisive victory. Aisha observed the battle atop a camel, and the battle became known as the "Battle of the Camel."⁶¹ In spite of Ali's victory, Uthman's clan, the Umayyads, refused to recognize Ali as caliph. A powerful leader arose from the Umayyad clan – Muawiya. The two opposing forces once again met in battle. No clear victory was won by either in spite of months of skirmishing between the two forces. Muawiya meanwhile demanded that Ali hand over the murderers of Uthman while at the same time seeking the Caliphate for himself. Ali refused to hand over the murderers, and deadlock between the two groups resulted. Ali eventually lost, but not by the direct hand of Muawiya. From within his own camp, dissension occurred. In the year 661, Ali was stabbed to death in the mosque at Kufa by a clansman from within Ali's own camp.⁶²

Ali was survived in death by two sons, Hasan and Husayn, both through Fatima, Muhammad's daughter. Hasan succeeded his father as caliph for half a year but was then forced by Muawiya to cede the Caliphate to Muawiya under threat of death. Hasan died a few years later, poisoned by his wife who had received a promise of marriage from Yazid, Muawiya's son. After the death of Muawiya and the ascension of his son to the Caliphate, Husayn attempted to lead an insurrection against Yazid. Husayn was invited to Kufa by Muslims of Kufa with the intent of Husayn gaining the Caliphate from Yazid. Husayn first sent his cousin to Kufah as an emissary with Yazid. The cousin, ibn Aqil, was captured and summarily executed by Yazid. Husayn then led a small force of his own to Kufa, expecting the people of Kufa to join his forces in the expected conflict with the forces of Yazid. Husayn's small force included eighteen of his own family members and another sixty or so followers. Husayn was urged by surviving Companions not to attempt the conquest of Yazid for his forces were severely outnumbered. Husayn refused this counsel, expecting the people of Kufa to join him in battle. They did not do so. The battle between the two forces took place at Karbala. Husayn's forces were outnumbered and were cut off from water for eight days.⁶³ His tragic death at the hands of troops of Yazid is described as follows:

"With his six-month old son Ali Asghar in his arms, the Imam (Husayn) cried out to the enemy that as this innocent babe had defiled none, at least he should be spared and a little water given to him to allay his thirst. But the reply was an arrow shot at the child's neck which pinned it to his father's arm. After returning the cruelly murdered child to its sorrowing mother's arms (who then sang a mournful mother's lament over her dead child) the Imam returned to pay the last of the sacrifice with his own blood. Arrow after arrow followed piercing his body into a sieve until, when the aged Imam fell from his horse his body did not touch the ground but was held off the ground by the arrows that were sticking

out of his body. Shamr (one of the Umayyad soldiers) who has earned everlasting shame for himself, after deriding the fallen hero, cut off his head. Ruqaiya, Husayn's young daughter, weeps over the death of her father whose head is then brought into her presence whereupon she falls upon it moaning and sobbing until she, too, dies of sorrow, prostrate over the severed head."⁶⁴

This event, dated October 10, 680 AD, marks the final divide between Sunni and Shiite Islam. The Battle of Karbala is still celebrated by Shiites today in annual "passion plays." Professional narrators paint word pictures of every detail of the bloody massacre and martyrdom of Husayn, likening Husayn's suffering to that of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.⁶⁵ After this battle, the Shiites never acknowledged the Sunni caliphs as legitimate, including the first three, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman nor Sunni caliphs in the succeeding years. Instead, to Shiites, the true leadership of the Islamic community was passed down from Ali to his son Husayn and thereafter to Husayn's descendants, each of whom they referred to as *Imam* (as opposed to the title used by Sunnis of "caliph").⁶⁶ The followers of Ali became known as "Shiites" or "Shi'as" (literally, "partisans" or "helpers" of Ali). The followers of Muhammad's "customs," became known as "Sunnis" (literally, "customs" or "sunna").⁶⁷

Imam - the Shiite Version of Caliph. Following the battle of Karbala and the irrevocable split between Sunnis and Shiites, Shiites no longer accepted the first three caliphs as legitimate successors to Muhammad. "Imam" became the term used by Shiites to refer to their successor to Muhammad. This term also took on a different meaning to Shiites than the term "caliph" for Sunnis. Shiites believed that:

1. The role of Imam could only be filled by someone related by blood to Muhammad. This meant that only descendants of Muhammad's first cousin and son-in-law Ali, husband of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, qualified.⁶⁸
2. The individual had to be "designated" (referred to as "*nass*," a doctrine similar in function to that of "Apostolic Succession within the Catholic Church"⁶⁹) as the predecessor Imam prior to death (as opposed to "elected" as was the case in Sunni Islam for their "caliph").⁷⁰

Therefore the first three caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman were all considered "usurpers" by Shiites. The meaning of the "successor" was broadened and redefined further as Shiites came to consider their Imam to be an infallible, sinless, spiritual guide, divinely appointed by Allah (through the predecessor Imam). The Shiite Imam is "infallible" in the sense that his judgments are without error; they are, in fact, divine authority.⁷¹ Ja'far al Sadiq, the fifth Shiite Imam, is reported to have stated: "*It is to the Imams that God has ordained obedience.*"⁷² To Shiism, then, the criteria is bloodline and designation.⁷³

In Shiite history, disagreement has arisen as to who is legitimately "designated" as the next Imam prior to the death of the predecessor Imam. Sects within Shiite Islam have resulted over who is the legitimate successor Imam. The "Twelvers" (comprising 90% of Shiite Islam) are one such sect and the "Sevens" another (comprising 10% of Shiite Islam and often referred to as "*Isma'ili's*"). Each sect takes its name from the particular Imams each considers legitimate.

Twelvers believe that there were twelve Imams, the last of whom "disappeared" in the tenth century AD (939AD). The Twelvers believe that Jafar (the sixth Imam) designated his younger son, Musa, as the seventh Imam and that the true line is through Musa not Ismail (as Sevens believe). Twelvers believe

that Ismail died before he was “designated” by his father, Jafar. The Twelvers continue Musa’s line through the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad ibn Hasan, born 872AD, the son of the 11th Imam. The line of Imams for Twelvers ends with this Imam, who is the twelfth Imam, who went into “hiding” without a living descendant. For Twelvers, there is not a 13th Imam. The Twelfth Imam is considered the “Hidden Imam” who lives in perpetuity, in hiding, until Allah calls him to reappear in the Last Days as *al-Mahdi*.⁷⁴ Shiites believe that when al-Mahdi appears, he will fill the earth with equity and justice and lead the world to conversion to Islam. In the meantime, the “*ulama*” (the scholars and mystics of Shiism) exercise spiritual authority on behalf of the hidden Imam in absentia.⁷⁵

Seveners do not accept the *last five Imams* of the Twelver sect. The Seveners accept the line of Imams through Muhammad, the son of Ismail, the grandson of Jafar, rather than Ismail’s younger brother, Musa.⁷⁶ Therefore, the five imams who are descendants of Musa do not qualify as “rightly guided” for Seveners because they are not descendants of Ismail.⁷⁷

The Twelvers are by far the largest group of Shiite Muslims. Twelvers constitute ninety percent of the modern population of Iran and fifty-five to sixty percent of the population of Iraq. Twelver Shiites are the majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and also have substantial populations in Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Syria, India, Afghanistan and Bahrain.⁷⁸

Each sect within Shiite Islam has different views on the nature and qualification of the Imam. For example, the “*Ghulats*,” or “extremists, consider the Imam to be Divine (as well as Ali and his descendants), thereby granting the Imam a far greater status than even that of Muhammad.^{79 80}

Muhammad, the Messenger from God. Muslims (at least Sunni) have never claimed that Muhammad was divine (as Jesus claimed, according to the Bible and Christian). Muslims liken Muhammad to a prophet similar to “Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah or Isaiah – who were passionately religious men but not paragons. . . . Muhammad was no plaster saint. He lived in a violent and dangerous society and sometimes adopted methods which those of us who have been fortunate enough to live in a safer world will find disturbing.”⁸¹ According to Armstrong, “Muhammad had great spiritual as well as political gifts – the two do not always go together – and he was convinced that all religious people have a responsibility to create a good and just society. He could become darkly angry and implacable, but he could also be tender, compassionate, vulnerable and immensely kind.”

The Five Pillars of Islam. The basis of belief and practice common to Muslims is found in five pillars as follows:

1. *The Shahada*. The profession of faith whereby a Muslim acknowledges his allegiance to Allah and Muhammad. The specific words: “I testify that there is no god but Allah, and I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.”
2. *The Salat*. Prayer, a basic duty to be performed both individually and publicly, at least three times per day. Friday is the day of public prayer.
3. *The Zakat*. Charity,

1The month of Ramadan is the ninth lunar month of the Islamic calendar; Ramadan also means “fasting.” It is the fourth “pillar” of Islam. Available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramadan> at February 22, 2007.

2Robert Spencer, *The Truth About Muhammad*, p. 38.

3Ibid., p 41, quoting Bukhari, vol. 9, book 91, no. 6982.

4Karen Armstrong, *Islam, A Short History*, p. 4.

5Ibid., p 5.

6Ibid., p 8.

7Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, p. 192.

8 According to Cyril Glasse, the *Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, p - 279-280, Muhammad's father was “Abd Allah, the son of Abd al-Muttalib, and grandson of Hisham, the founder of the Hashimite clan of the Quaraysh. The patriarch of the Quaraysh, two generations before Hisham, was named Fihir of the Kinanah tribe, and it is from his epithet of Quaraysh that his descendants take their name. Since Fihir was able to trace his lineage from Ishmael, Muhammad is a descendant of Ishmael and Abraham, and heir to God's promise to Hagar, “Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand, for I will make him a great nation.” Gen 21:18.

9 Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, p. 280. Bernard Lewis, *Arabs in History*, p. 36.

10 Bernard Lewis, *Arabs in History*, p. 36-37.

11 Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, p 48.

12Ibid., Cyril Glasse' p. 229.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibn Warraq, *The Origins of the Koran, Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book. Introduction by Ibn Warraq*, p. 11.

15 Ibn Warraq, *The Origins of the Koran, Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book. Chapter 5 by Alphonse Mingana, The Transmission of the Koran*, p. 369, note 13.

16 Ibid., p. 99.

17 Ibn Warraq, *The Origins of the Koran, Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book. Introduction by Ibn Warraq*, p. 13.

18 Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, p. 50.

19 Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, p. 90. Even today, official Muslim translations always carry the Arabic text and usually refer to themselves as “interpretations.”

20Ibid., Cyril Glasse', p. 231.

21Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 49.

23Ergun Mehmet Caner and Emir Fethi Caner, *Unveiling Islam*, p. 95.

24Ergun Mehmet Caner and Emir Fethi Caner, *Unveiling Islam*, p. 95.

25Ibid., Cyril Glasse' p. 141.

26 Ibid., p. 99.

27Cyril Glasse', p. 380.

28Ibid., p. 381.

29 Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, p. 49.

30 Ibid., p. 37.

31 Paul Fregosi, *Jihad*, p. 38.

32 Ibid., p. 38.

33The Muslim calendar is a lunar based calendar, not a solar based Western calendar. Therefore, the length of the months vary and so one cannot convert dates between the two calendars by subtracting 622 from the Christian calendar. See Timothy R. Furnish, *Holiest Wars*, p. 22, note 2.

34 Ibid., p. 40.

35 Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, p. 154-155.

36 Ibid., p. 41.

37 Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, p. 60.

38 Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam*, p. 2-3.

39Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam*, p. 37 - 39.

40 Robert Spencer, editor. *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance, How Islamic Law Treats Non-Muslims*, p 14.

41 Paul Fregosi, *Jihad*, p. 43.

42 Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World*, p. 50.

43 Ibid., p. 58.

44 Ibid., p. 68.

45 Ibid., p. 67.

46Cyril Glasse, p 87.

47<http://www.anwary-islam.com/index.htm>. Website link, October 2, 2006.

48<http://www.islamicbookstore.com/b7402.html>. Website link, October 2, 2006, and referencing the book, *The Precious Pearls - The Description of the Ten Companions Who were Given the Glad Tidings of Paradise*, Publisher: Dar-us-Salam Publications.

49Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, p. 255-256.

50Ibid., Malise Ruthven, p. 69.

51Ibid., p. 40.

52Ibid., Cyril Glasse', p. 35.

53Ibid., Cyril Glasse', p. 123.

54Ibid., Malise Ruthven, p. 69.

55Ibid., Cyril Glasse', p. 18.

56Ibid., p. 72.

57Ibid., Cyril Glasse', p. 412.

58Ibid., Cyril Glasse', p. 34.

59Ibid., Cyril Glasse', p. 309.

60Malise Ruthven, p. 73.

61Malise Ruthven, p. 73.

62Malise Ruthven, p. 74.

63Cyril Glasse', p. 33-34.

64Malise Ruthven, p. 181, quoting from Gustav Thaiss in N. R. Kedie (ed.), *Scholars, Saints and Sufis* (Berkeley, 1972), p. 356.

65Malise Ruthven, p. 181.

66Timothy R. Furnish, *Holiest Wars, Islamic Mahdis, Their Jihads, and Osama bin Laden*, p. 4.

67Congressional Research Study, RS21745, 2/23/2004, www.fas.org/irp/crs/RS21745.pdf

68Ali had eight wives after Fatima and a total of thirty six children, so the choice was not so much about Ali, alone, but rather, Ali and Fatima, together, thereby insuring the true and closest bloodline to the Prophet. Available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali#Descendants>.

69Malise Ruthven, p. 197.

70Neither Shiite sect accept the first three caliphs as "rightly guided." They begin their first true Imam with Ali, cousin of the Prophet, and husband of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet.

71Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, p. 34.

72Ibid., p. 35.

73Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, p. 36.

74Malise Ruthven, p. 196.

75Malise Ruthven, p. 78, 196 - 198.

76Of course, the seventh Imam of both Seveners and Twelvers is a different person. Thus, one might conclude that relative to Seveners there are six Imams of Twelver Islam that do not "qualify" (the seventh - twelfth Imams, beginning with Musa, the Twelver's seventh Imam). However, "fallen" is defined relative to the seven heads of the beast, meaning Sevener Islam. This means we must begin with the seven Sevener Imams (through Muhammad Ismail), and count disqualification beginning with the Twelver's eighth Imam. Of course, our count continues through Twelver's twelfth Imam, and bringing us to five fallen Imams, not six.

77Need footnote

78Available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-ithna-ashari.htm>.

79Cyril Glasse', p. 186.

80Available at <http://www.alseraj.net/maktaba/kotob/english/Beliefs/ProductOfIslam/hyla/wahabia/08.htm> at April 25, 2007.

81 Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, p. 52.