

# Understanding Islam

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## Series I: The Big Picture

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## **Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture**

To view the videos that go with this series, go to <https://chrishewer.org>

### **Part One: Where to start?**

The most obvious place to begin an understanding of Islam is with the Prophet Muhammad, who was born in Makka on the western side of the Arabian peninsula probably in the year 570 (all dates are given according to the common calendar dating system). In the year 610, he said that he began to receive the revelations of the Qur'an from God and these continued to come in small groups of verses up until his death in 632. In the year 622, a major change took place when Muhammad and his small Muslim community migrated from Makka to another city about 300kms further north, which from this time onwards was known simply as Madina. This migration (*hijra*) is so important in Islamic history that it marks the start of the Islamic calendar. This is called AH; “in the year of the *hijra*.” Muhammad continued to live in Madina for the rest of his life until his death in 632.

We can see then that we can divide the life of Muhammad into three parts.

- First, from his birth until the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an in 610.
- Second, from 610 until 622 during which time he was in Makka. The Muslim community only amounted to a few hundred people during this period. They were persecuted by the people of Makka because Muhammad brought a new way of life and new teaching. The Arabs at that time worshipped many gods but Muhammad taught that there was one God only, who was to be worshipped by human beings and that the worship of anything else was worthless and to be avoided. He laid great stress on living an ethical way of life; being faithful in all one's dealings and relationships. The hallmark of the Muslim way of life was to be justice. A person is required to do justice even if it goes against oneself [Q. 4:135]. Muhammad also taught that this life is not all that there is, there is also the “life hereafter” and every human being will face the judgement of God, which will determine where and how that life is to be lived.
- Third, from the migration to Madina in 622 until Muhammad's death in 632. The life of the Muslim community in Madina was quite different to that in Makka. They were now a settled community in which there were also people of other faiths, notably Jews as well as those who continued to follow the traditional Arab way of life. The verses of the Qur'an that were revealed at this time guided Muhammad in establishing a way of life under the divine decrees. We can think of the period in Madina as being “City-State Islam” in which Muhammad was not only the spiritual guide but also the political leader of the community, the final court of appeal in legal matters and the one who had to call the community to arms when necessary to defend themselves.

The problem with starting from this point in history is that it distorts the bigger picture of Islam. Muslims never claim that Muhammad was the only prophet sent by God but

rather than he was the last prophet. There were thousands of earlier prophets before the time of Muhammad. Similarly, Muslims never claim that the Qur'an was the only scripture revealed by God but rather than it was the last; again, there were many other scriptures sent to earlier generations of humankind. To begin here is like opening a detective thriller at the last chapter; one gets the ending but not the plot! We need to return to this final prophet and revelation but that is not the place to start. Just notice, before we go on, that Makka can also be spelt Mecca, and Madina – Medina, and also Qur'an – Koran. We are trying to make the sound of an Arabic word using English letters.

## **The family of Abraham**

We could turn to a biblical starting point and look at the person of Abraham. In the Bible (Genesis chapters 16, 17 and 21), we read of Abraham being married to Sarah but them growing older together childless. Abraham, we are told, took a second wife, Hagar, an Egyptian, and together they had a son called Ishmael. Later, Sarah was blessed by God and she and Abraham also had a son called Isaac. It was through Sarah and Isaac that the Hebrew people are descended, who feature in the biblical accounts. Of the Hebrew people was born Moses and so we can speak of Judaism. Jesus was born a Jew and thus we can see that Christianity grows out of and separates from Judaism. Jews and Christians often forget the second part of the Abrahamic family tree. According to the Bible, God promised that a people would also descend from Hagar and Ishmael. They too would be protected by God. The Bible calls them the Ishmaelites but we more commonly know them now as the Arabs. The Bible tells us that God told Abraham to let Hagar and Ishmael go into the land between the Red Sea and the great rivers of Iraq. Of this people Muhammad was born and thus we can speak of the coming of Islam. We often hear the expression that Jews, Christians and Muslims are part of the Abrahamic family. They are cousins in the faith of Abraham; that is, faith in the one and only God, three communities that have a special place for Abraham in their traditions.

The Qur'an teaches that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Moses and Jesus were earlier prophets sent by God. Similarly, Abraham, Moses and Jesus received earlier scriptures just as Muhammad received the Qur'an [Q. 2:136]. In fact, there are twenty-five prophets mentioned by name in the Qur'an and twenty-one of them also appear in the Bible. This broadens out our starting point but it is still pretty narrow; it only speaks about one of the groups amongst humankind, the Semitic peoples. It tells us nothing about all the other human groups: the peoples of Asia, Africa, the Americas, Europe and so on. It is a fundamental belief of Islam that God is the one and only God of all humankind and not the god of one small section. We need to go in search of a wider starting point yet.

## **Beginning with God**

The only ultimate starting point for the story of Islam as far as Muslims are concerned would be with God. God alone existed before anything was created; God is the only

eternally existing being. As soon as we put a capital G on the word God, we have made a statement. God in the one and only, there is no plural form of the word. The many gods of the ancient world are written with a small g. If we translate the word God into Arabic, we have the word Allah. This means “the one and only God” in just the same way; it too has no plural form. Allah is an Arabic word and is used by Muslims worldwide to refer to God. Muslims read the Qur'an in Arabic and say their formal prayers in Arabic, therefore they use the name Allah for God even if Arabic is not their mother-tongue. It is important to remember that only around fifteen per cent of Muslims worldwide today have Arabic as their mother-tongue, so we cannot think of Islam as an Arab religion.

People who speak Arabic and share the Muslim belief in the one and only God also speak of God as Allah. This is important as there are some fourteen million Arabic mother-tongue Christians in the world, who also speak of God as Allah. In addition there are around two million Jews in the world, who are descended from the Jewish communities of southern Europe, who were driven out by the Christian conquest of those lands in the eleventh to seventeenth centuries. They were welcomed into the Muslim lands around the eastern Mediterranean and thus Arabic became their cultural mother-tongue too. They also speak of God as Allah when speaking Arabic.

This belief in the one and only God is the central belief of Islam. God is one and God created one human family. All human beings are called to live in obedience to this one God; that is the human project. God has no favourites. The whole human family has been guided by God to live the human project with the prospect of drawing ever-closer to God in this world and the life hereafter [Q. 40:78]. Here is a crucial point: one God, one human family, one human project and one human destiny; therefore the guidance sent by God to guide this human family to their destiny has always been in essence the same. All the peoples of the earth have been sent at least one scripture and at least one prophet by God; the message of those scriptures and prophets has always been in essence the same. Now we can see Muhammad and the Qur'an in context. Muhammad is the final and universal prophet of humankind bearing witness to the essential human way of life to which all are called. Likewise, the Qur'an is the last and definitive scripture sent to guide humankind with the pure, essential, timeless guidance that God has sent throughout the human centuries.

This insistence on the oneness of God is the defining belief, not just of Muhammad but also of the earlier prophets too. We can think of Abraham, Moses and Jesus also as living at a time when there were people around them who held other views of the divine. There were people who followed tribal gods, local gods, political gods – many gods. So also in the time of Muhammad; the pre-Islamic Arabs worshipped hundreds of various gods. The key criterion for whether one had joined the community of Muhammad or not was whether one followed his pure monotheism or was still living in an age of ignorance of God following idolatry. This is why Muslims are so opposed to any notion of worshipping anything other than God and it is through the Qur'an and the prophethood of Muhammad that humankind has the best access to knowledge of that one and only God.

## Part Two: What is *islam*?

In the first part we saw that God is the only eternally existing being. God existed before the creation was created and everything that exists came into being by the divine command [Q. 39:5]. God alone is perfect. God exists beyond time and space; therefore there is no aging or “wearing out” where God is concerned. Creation exists within time and space; therefore it cannot be perfect like God. All that we can say is that God creates the best of all possible worlds [Q. 95:4]. Now that we have a creator and a creation, we can ask about the relationship between them. First, it is clear that this is not a relationship of equals. God is dependent on no-one and nothing whereas the whole of the creation is dependent on the creator, who brought it into being.

Islam understands this relationship between God and the creation as being one of harmony and balance with everything in due order and in its rightful place. We can speak of this as a relationship of justice, which Plato described as everything being in the right relationship to everything else. It is then in a state of security and safety; a state of deep and abiding peace. This can only come about when the whole of creation functions according to the great designer’s plan; when everything is obedient to God. For the human being, who is possessed of freewill, this includes the submission of the human will to the divine will. It entails learning that I am not God; I am to learn my place and submit. God is by definition good; there is no evil in God. God wills what is good for each element within the creation; what will bring it to live in this relationship of peace, harmony and balance. If I am in harmony with God and you are in harmony with God, then we must be in harmony with each other. Not just us but the whole of creation. That is the way that God created the universe and how God wants it to live; then we will flourish and grow to our full stature.

The reality is that the creation is limited by time and space. Over a period of time, things go wrong; things, if you like, “wear out.” This is the way in which some Muslim scholars have spoken about natural disasters, like the moving of the tectonic plates of the earth, which can result in an earthquake or tidal wave. This is part of living in a physical universe; sometimes things go wrong. This is not to mention the effect that human beings can have on the natural order of things by the way that we disturb the balance of creation. We are responsible for things like pollution and destroying the ozone layer and suchlike.

Arabic is a language in which most words are based on three-letter roots. Such a root carries within it a whole range of meanings. All the words that are based on that root form a family of words with a shared set of meanings. One such Arabic root is made up of the three letters *slm*. This root carries that range of meanings that we mentioned above when talking about the relationship of God to the creation. By adding vowels to the root, we can make a series of words as follows:

*s l m*  
*i s l a m*  
*m u s l i m*  
*s a l a m*

We can see the three-letter root *slm* running through all three. Now we can ask: What is *islam*? And answer: *islam* is that natural state of the whole of creation in harmony, balance, justice, peace etc. with God and within itself, which is the way that God created things and the state in which God wants them to live. This can only come about when everything lives according to the designer's plan, which for human beings means choosing to submit our wills to the divine will. Only then will we and all creation flourish in this world and the life hereafter. Our second word, *muslim*, is an adjective based on the same root; it describes something in the state of *islam*. We can say that God creates the universe in the state of *islam* or God creates a *muslim* universe. You might also recognise the third of our words, *salam*, from the greeting that Muslims exchange: *Salam 'alaykum*. This is often translated as, "Peace be with you" but we can now see its deeper meaning: "May you come ever more fully and completely into that state of perfect peace, which is *islam*, which will only come about when you submit to the divine will in every way" [Q. 33:44]. That state of abiding *islam* is the condition of Paradise, one of the names for which is *Dar al-Salam*, the Place of Peace [Q. 10:25]. You might also notice that this word is similar to the word *shalom* in Arabic's sister language, Hebrew.

Now we have found the true beginning of *islam*: it is the natural state of the universe right from the very first moment of creation. Everything that God creates is created *muslim* [Q. 64:1-3]. Every thing, not just human beings [Q. 17:44]. The mineral world is *muslim*: the planets follow their God-given orbits, metals have their God-given properties – the softness and density of lead, the hard workability of iron, and so on. Rivers are *muslim*; they flow downhill. We might say, they are obeying the law of gravity, which is their God-given nature. The vegetable world is *muslim*: trees, flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Have you ever noticed the daffodils or sunflowers? The way that they turn their heads to absorb the sun's rays? We could say that this is imprinted in their DNA or that this is their God-given *muslim* nature. The same applies to the animal world. The human being is the top of the pyramid of creation [Q. 17:44]. Like the rest of it, we will flourish if we obey our God-given nature.

This natural way of life that leads to human flourishing is called in Arabic the *din al-fitra*. To live this way leads us to develop fully as human beings, living as God intended [Q. 30:30]. We are however free beings, therefore we have the potential to rebel [Q. 10:99]. Such rebellion will inhibit our growth into the fullness of humanity [Q. 18:29]. To put this another way, we can say that every human being has an *islam*-shaped vacuum in our hearts that needs to be filled with the correct, obedient, disciplined, natural, balanced way of *islam*. This is a useful point to keep in mind as we go further in our study of understanding Islam. By virtue of the fact that we are

human beings, the teachings and wisdom of Islam should resonate in our hearts as we reflect on them – whether we believe in Islam or not, Islam should in some way “make sense” or “speak to our hearts.”

Up until now, I have carefully used the words *islam* and *muslim* in italics and with small letters. In this way, I have tried to show the timeless natural way of things that was revealed in all scriptures to all the prophets that have ever been sent to the earth. We may call this *generic islam*. Beginning on that awesome night in 610, when God began to reveal the Qur'an to Muhammad, we can say that the creation entered into a new phase. The Qur'an is the last, definitive revelation for all time and Muhammad the final and universal prophet. Before that moment, there were many communities on the earth more or less accurately following that timeless *islam* that had been sent to them. From the time of the coming of the Qur'an and Muhammad, God has sent the ultimate guidance to cure the ills of humankind. As Muslims understand it, if human beings knew what was best for them from that time onwards, they would follow this ultimate guidance. From now on, we can speak of capital I, Islam, and capital M, Muslim, that is, that way of life based on the ultimate guidance conveyed in the Qur'an and the lived example of Muhammad.

### **A critical question**

In speaking of God as creator of all that exists, the question often arises about Muslim attitudes to evolution. God is understood as both creator and sustainer of the creation; God is actively involved in maintaining the life of all creatures [Q. 11:6]. We can think of this as like the current that runs through a light bulb. The bulb in a sense exists even without being connected to the current but it only becomes a light bulb when it lights up due to the power that flows through it. Without the current, one has a thin glass structure.

The reality is that the vast majority of Muslims around the world and Muslim scholars are what we would call “creationists,” that is, they understand the various elements of creation to have been created by God in more or less their current form. The Qur'an does not go into detail about the process of creation but gives us the critical information that God only has to will a thing and there it is, or as the Qur'an puts it, God says “be” and it is [Q. 36:81-82]. God creates by the divine word of command.

So, are there Muslims who speak in evolutionary terms? Over recent decades, some Muslim scientists have come to examine the compatibility of various theories of evolution with Islam. In their working around this question, they have to keep four elements within their system. First, whenever whatever happened at the beginning, it was by the divine will and command; God is and must remain the first cause or originator of all that exists. Second, God continues to be involved in the outworking of the creation; it cannot all happen by chance and random selection. Third, somehow one must find a way to speak of the uniqueness of the human being. Various Muslim scholars through the centuries have done this in different ways, for example, by speaking of the arrival of a human soul, as Aristotle also taught. The Qur'an speaks of

God blowing God's spirit into human beings to make us human [Q. 38:72]. Today, some scholars might speak about the uniqueness of human consciousness in a similar way. Finally, the Qur'an speaks of Adam and his wife as the first human beings and so this has to be worked into the system, perhaps through seeing them as proto-parents from whom all human life is descended [Q. 2:35]. All scientists who develop different theories to speak of the origins of life on earth are trying to make sense of their observations and build them into a coherent system; these theories are "work in progress" rather than any definitive description of "what really happened."

### **Part Three: What's special about being human?**

We saw in Part Two that all creation in its original state is *muslim*. Daffodils and sunflowers obey their God-given *muslim* nature by turning towards the sun. The point is that they make no choice to do so. They are programmed by their *muslim* nature and just do it. Human beings have the faculty of freewill and part of our dignity is that we can choose to obey our God-given nature and live a *muslim* way of life or we can rebel.

The question of human freedom is not simple. If we were to stop people in the street and ask: What does it mean to be free? We might receive an answer something like, "I am free to do whatever I want. No-one tells me what to do!" Technically, we would call this value-free freedom. If I have two identical exercise books, one with a red cover and one with a blue, and give my daughter the choice between them, then this choice is value-free; whichever choice she makes will have an equally good outcome. If I were to say to her older sister, "You are free to choose whether you drive on the left or the right side of the road," we can see that the consequences of this choice are not the same – the wrong choice here could see her being killed in an accident. This would be a value-laden choice; she is still free to choose but I want her to make the right choice and attain the right outcome!

In Islamic understanding, the moral choices that we make are value-laden. God has given human beings guidance on how human life should be lived and we have been given freedom to choose the right path, which will lead to human flourishing. This would be freely choosing to live in accordance with the ethical will of God, which will lead us towards being fully human. A wrong choice here also has consequences [Q. 18:29]. We need to ask, "What kind of a being is God?" God is defined as being purely good; there is no evil in God. God never wills a bad outcome for any creature. If one freely follows the guidance of God, the outcome will be good.

How free are we really? Muslim scholars have given a whole range of answers to this question. Indeed, on many questions, there is a spectrum of positions that have been taken by different Muslim scholars and schools of Islam. Let's explore that on the question of freewill. There were some people who said that human beings have complete freedom and are accountable for their actions, which will be judged by the justice of God alone. They argued that, if God is being merciful to the person who makes a wrong choice and sins, then God would be acting unjustly with regard to the person who made the right choice and avoided sin. At the extreme end of this spectrum, some said that God must judge by justice alone. This leaves no room for mercy and means that human beings receive exactly the outcomes that they earn. The majority of Muslim scholars said that this was going too far as it allows no room for God's mercy. One of the principal names for God in the Qur'an is "the All-merciful." The Muslim spectrum on freewill must end short of this extreme position.

At the other end of the discussion, there were those people who said that human beings have no freedom at all and that we just play out the part that has been written for us. At the extreme end of this position, there were those who said that God

compels our actions. If this were so, then how could God hold human beings to account? We would have no moral responsibility. The Muslim spectrum on freewill must end short of this extreme position too. The spectrum can be seen to lie between these two extremes. Some Muslim scholars emphasise the pre-determined nature of human freedom but would say that nothing is written for us until we write it ourselves. Other Muslim scholars emphasise the free nature of human freedom but without taking anything away from the all-powerful nature of God.

### **Why take the risk?**

The nature of giving human beings a degree of freewill means that we have the capacity to rebel and choose not to live by the ethical values contained in God's guidance. Would it not be easier to programme us like the daffodils and sunflowers so that we automatically do what God wants? In Islamic understanding, angels do not have freewill. God has all the angels that God wants in heaven constantly worshipping God [Q. 39:75]. They have no choice in the matter; we can say that they are programmed to do it. In creating human beings with freewill, God wants that we should freely choose to worship and obey God – freely chosen and not programmed.

Perhaps this example will make it clearer. We have a washing machine at home. We fill it with clothes and turn it on. The rest is automatic. It does not choose whether to obey or not. It just does what it is programmed to do. I don't feel the need to thank it! Now one day it breaks down and the washing begins to pile up. I get up before anyone else on Saturday morning and steadily work my way through the pile washing things by hand. I know that my wife has had a hard week at work and want to save her the time and effort. My action is a free one based on love and concern for someone else. I have done what no machine can do; that is a free act. What God wants is the worship of a free being motivated by love.

### **Two high dignities**

God has given every human being two high dignities and also responsibilities. These are summed up in two Arabic words: *abd* and *khalifa*. To be an *abd* is to be a loving servant of God. Service without love is forced, de-humanising slavery. Love without the discipline of service leads to chaos. The servant obeys the master's will and lives according to God's commands. The servant seeks to attune his or her will completely to accept the divine will in all things. Four things go together in Islamic thinking: worship, obedience, service and love.

In the Qur'an we read that God created human beings for no other reason than that we should worship God [Q. 51:56]. If we want to worship God, then we must obey all God's commands and keep clear of those things that God forbids. This will lead us to a life of service – to serve God and our fellow human beings. Muhammad tells us that “you have not put your foot on the first step of the ladder of faith until you wish for your neighbour all the good that you wish for yourself.” We must learn to serve our families and take care of our neighbours. We must also serve our own selves by not

doing anything that will harm us. Suicide is forbidden in Islam as we take to ourselves the right of God to decide when we should die [Q. 4:29-30]. Alcohol and drugs are forbidden as they ruin us physically and mentally. All life is of the highest value in the sight of God. As the Qur'an puts it [Q. 5:32]: to take a life unjustly is like killing all humankind and to save a life is like saving all humankind.

The motive for all human actions should be love. We have a saying summarising this that is attributed to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad:

Some worship God out of fear, that is the slaves' worship.

Some worship God for reward, that is the businessmen's worship.

And some worship him out of love for him, that is the worship of freemen.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Rabi'a of Basra, an 8<sup>th</sup> century woman mystic:

O God, if I obey you out of fear of hell, send me there as I am unworthy of you.

O God, if I obey you out of hope of the reward of heaven, deny it to me as I am unworthy of you.

But, O God, if I obey you out of pure love for you alone, then hide not your face, for you are a loving God.

To be a *khalifa* is to be the regent, the agent or representative of God on earth [Q. 2:30]. The *khalifa* is the one sent with full authority to tend the earth according to the guidance of God. If human beings are polluting or corrupting the earth in some way, then we must act to stop it and repair the damage. The *khalifa* must be an ecologist, as we would put it today [Q. 31:20]. We are stewards of the earth; trustees accountable to God. We have to bring out the full beauty and potential of the creation. Consider the roses in our gardens. They are not natural. They are the work of human rose growers bringing out the full beauty over many years of grafting together rose bushes of different sorts. We can see the same thing with domestic animals. Over many generations, farmers have bred cows to be docile when being milked, to produce a high yield and to calve down with minimal problems.

We can think of the many breeds of dogs that we have today. They have been bred over a long time to bring out certain characteristics: it would not be wise to use a St Bernard to send down holes to scare out rats! Some breeds of dogs have been over-bred, so that they have developed weaknesses. There are limits to human interaction with the creatures of the earth. We are the regents of God and a regent is one who obeys and puts into practice the will of the one who sent her or him. There is always an ethical constraint on our exercise of the power of being a regent. We could think of the debate about genetically modified food crops as an example: Are we acting in accordance with the divine will to feed the peoples of the earth or are we going beyond the ethical limits given by God?

The *khalifa* must also be active in society. Human beings are charged with building a just society. We have to establish the rule of law, to make money circulate to those in need and to promote a life that leads to peace, prosperity and goodness.

These two dignities are given to every man and woman that ever lived and ever will live. We are to worship, obey, serve and love God and we are to be the agents of God on earth. Muslim men are reminded of this by their names. Have you ever met a man whose name begins with Abd followed by one of the beautiful names of God? Think about Abdullah (Servant of God) or Abd al-Rahman (Servant of the Most Merciful) or Abd al-Karim (Servant of the Most Generous). These very names are reminders of our common human dignity.

### **Held to account**

God has given us these two responsibilities and made us free so that we can freely choose to obey them. With responsibility comes accountability. It is only reasonable that God will hold us to account for our lives. Every human being will face the Day of Judgement [Q. 6:21-31]. We will be questioned and judged according to the way that we have lived. The Qur'an records an assembly of all the pre-embodied human souls before they were sent to the earth. God asked them: "Am I not your Lord?" They responded, "Yes indeed!" [Q. 7:172]. From this Muslim scholars deduce that every human being has a natural ability, based on reason, to know that we are all creatures of God and in a relationship of service and obedience. In addition to this, none of the peoples of the earth has been left without the guidance of revelation and at least one prophet. We will all be judged then according to what we know and the way that we have followed what we know to be right.

Some people on earth have never even heard of the guidance of the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad. They cannot be judged on what they do not know but they have all received guidance at some time and so will be judged according to the way that they have followed what they do know. There is a difference between ignorance and rejection of something; those who know and reject the guidance of God must expect to face the consequences on the Day of Judgement. On that awesome day, God alone is the judge. God alone knows the human heart and the inner intentions of each one of us. No human being is capable of standing in ultimate judgement on another human being. Following on from that judgement comes the life hereafter, which can be lived in Paradise and drawing ever closer through wisdom and purity to the infinite being of God or Hell and the torments of those who have knowingly rejected God's guidance and been judged worthy of it by God.

## **Part Four: We need guidance!**

We have seen in Part Three that all human beings are called to the high dignities of being the *abd* or loving servant of God and the *khalifa* or regent of God on earth. All human beings are endowed with reason and are required to establish justice as the central ethic of human living. In the light of this, all human beings will be held to account by God. It would be fundamentally unjust of God to hold people to account without giving them guidance on how to live the human project. That would be like telling people that they would be punished for breaking the speed limit but not telling them what the limit is on that stretch of road!

Who needs this guidance? The whole of humankind. God has been sending guidance to the earth from the very beginning. The first people to receive guidance from God were the first human beings, Adam and Eve [Q. 2:37-39]. The Qur'an tells us that no people or nation on earth has been left without guidance. God is one and all human beings are equal. God has no favourites. We all belong to the one human race. This means that the essence of the guidance sent by God is always the same. It would be unjust for God to guide one group of people to live the human project one way and another group in a fundamentally different way.

### **Two deposits of revelation**

Guidance from God is called revelation. The Qur'an tells us that revelation comes in two deposits: in the scriptures and in the world around us, the "book of nature." We should not think that "scripture" has to be something written down. It could be verbal guidance given by God. We do not know how many scriptures have been sent to the earth but we can assume that it must be hundreds. All the peoples of the earth have been sent at least one. We can also read the signs of God in nature [Q. 3:190-191]. By using our powers of observation, investigation and reason, we can draw out guidance from the natural world [Q. 91:1-10]. This might be through observing the ways of life of animals. It might be through investigating the health-giving properties of plants. We can see that if we do certain things, like destroying our natural environment, certain consequences will follow. It is interesting that the word that we translate as verse, as in the verses of the Qur'an, *aya*, literally means "sign." The signs of God's guidance are there in the scriptures as well as in nature. When a gale hits us or there is a flood, we are reminded how puny human beings are compared to the forces of nature. We cannot control such forces and we cannot control the will of God either; we are creatures not the all-powerful creator. If God does not send the rain and sun in due proportion, the farmer cannot grow the crops; nature recalls us to our dependence on God.

As both the scriptures and the creation are full of the signs of God, then both the theologian and the scientist are serving God in unpacking them and seeking to read the signs. There is no fundamental conflict between science and religion in Islam. If our science appears to contradict what we read in the scriptures, then we have either more science to do until we resolve the apparent contradiction or we have to go back and re-

interpret our scriptures to understand them more fully. The Qur'an tells us on many occasions to puzzle things out and use our reason [Q. 3:190]. The medical researcher trying to find the cause of an illness and its remedy or the food technologist seeking to find better ways to produce the food that we all need are servants of God obediently seeking to read God's signs. There are verses of the Qur'an that puzzled earlier generations of scholars that speak of the development of the human foetus in stages: a drop of fluid that lodges in a secure place, becomes a clinging mass, then fleshy tissue, which develops bones and then the bones are clothed in flesh [Q. 23:13-14; 22:5]. Their meaning only became fully clear in the twentieth century with the development of ultrasound scanning to monitor the development of the foetus in the womb, thus the scientists helped the theologians to understand the signs of God in the scripture.

All our study, research and seeking to gain wisdom must result in action. Islam is not just a body of wisdom to be known but rather guidance to be put into action. All true knowledge enhances our ability to live a life in service of God and that life of service draws us deeper in knowledge of God. As one well-known statement of God related by the Prophet Muhammad puts it,

My servant keeps on coming closer to me through performing good deeds beyond what are commanded, until I love him. When I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, I am the sight with which he sees, I am the hands with which he holds and I am the feet with which he walks.

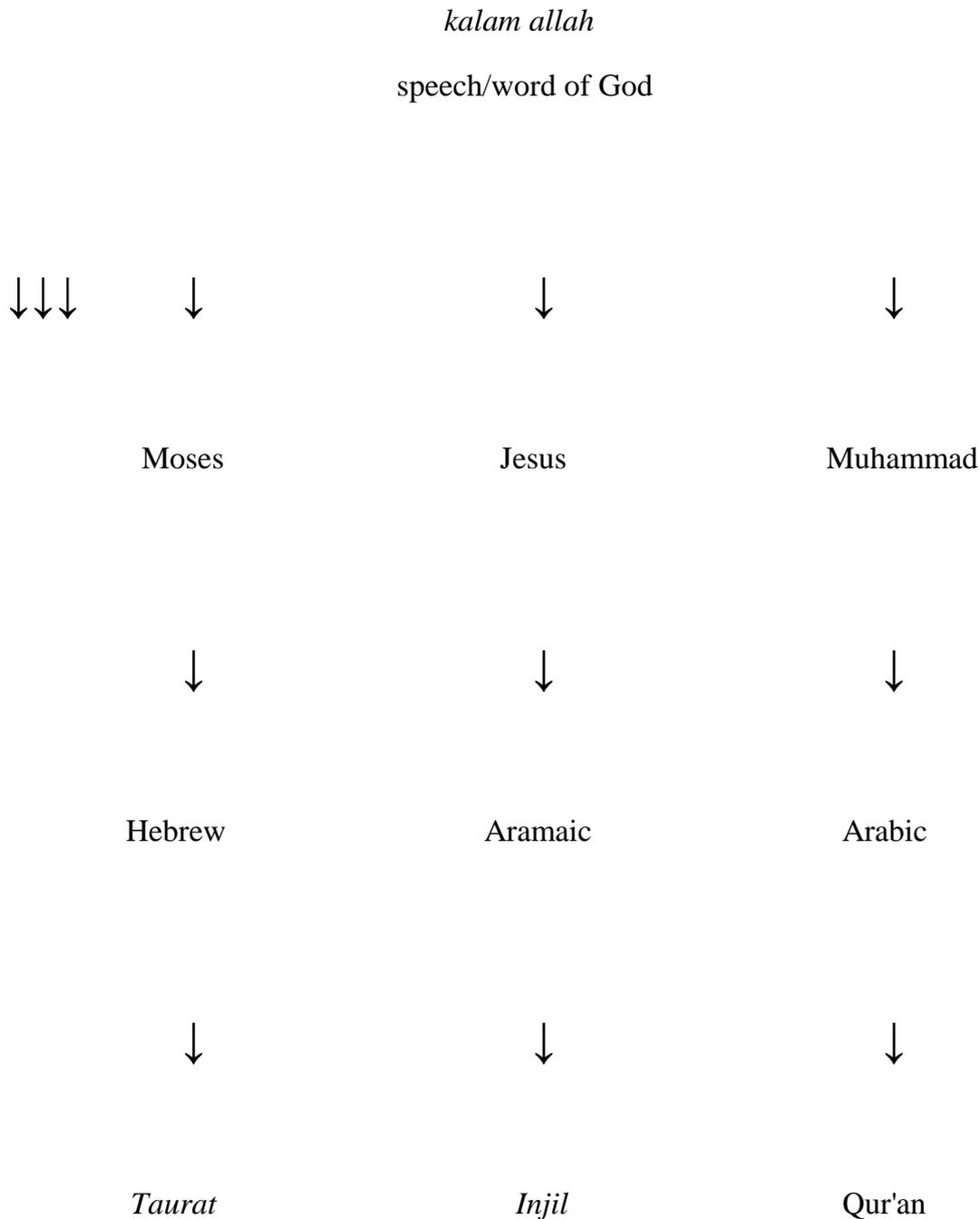
We do not know the number of scriptures that God has sent to the earth; all that we can say is that none of the peoples of the earth has been left without guidance. It is for the scholars to investigate the religious books of the earth to see to what extent they might be the remains of these earlier scriptures. The Qur'an is the benchmark by which possible scriptures can be judged. The extent to which they agree with the Qur'an determines the level of probability that they may be deposits of authentic scripture. When the Mughals ruled in India, they encountered those people who followed the Vedas. Some Muslim scholars investigated the Vedas and were prepared to say that, on the balance of probabilities, they seem to contain some authentic revelation. This can only be a scholarly assessment of probability; we can never be sure.

The Qur'an does however mention five scriptures by name. These were the scriptures sent to Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad. Before examining those scriptures in more detail we need to see how they relate to God and the word or speech of God.

### **The sending down of the word of God**

God is transcendent, beyond our world. God communicates through the *kalam allah*, which we can translate as the speech or word of God. The *kalam allah* is not God but it cannot be separated from God; the speech cannot be separated from the speaker. The *kalam allah* belongs with God beyond our world but throughout the centuries of human existence, God has been sending down this word to human prophets in earthly

languages. There is one *kalam allah* but the languages of the earth are many and various. Human beings need to have their revelation in earthly languages that they can understand; it would be no good to communicate with an Arabic-speaking prophet in Chinese! [Q. 12:2]. The following diagramme makes this clearer:



The one *kalam allah* was sent down to the earth an unknown number of times in different languages to prophets who spoke them; these are represented by the three arrows to the left of the diagramme. However, we can take three of the five examples

mentioned in the Qur'an and say that the *kalam allah* was sent down to Moses in Hebrew and is called by the Qur'an, the *Taurat*. The same *kalam allah* was sent down to Jesus in Aramaic and is called by the Qur'an, the *Injil*. Finally, the *kalam allah* is sent down in Arabic to Muhammad and that is the Qur'an. We see here the principle of continuity: the source and the message are the same but the languages, prophets and scriptures are different. The particular details contained in the scriptures may differ but the essence of the message is always the same. For example, the Jews were taught through the scripture sent to Moses that there are certain animals that may not be eaten, that the name of God is to be mentioned over the animal before it is killed and that it is to be killed as quickly and painlessly as possible by shedding its blood. The same essential message is contained in the Qur'an. When it comes to particulars, the Jews were taught that acceptable animals had to have cloven hooves and chew the cud, which ruled out the pig amongst other animals, that fish must have scales and fins, and so on. The particulars contained in the Qur'an rule out the pig and animals that feed on dead animals, like the hyena, but the list of excluded animals is shorter than for the Jews.

### The earlier scriptures

Let us look now at the five scriptures mentioned by name in the Qur'an and the prophets to whom they were sent. They were:

Abraham (Arabic: Ibrahim)	–	<i>Suhuf</i> (“leaves/sheaves”) [Q. 87:19]
Moses (Musa)	–	<i>Taurat</i> (Torah?) [Q. 6:91]
David (Daud)	–	<i>Zabur</i> (Psalms?) [Q. 17:55]
Jesus (Isa)	–	<i>Injil</i> (?) [Q. 5:46]
Muhammad	–	Qur'an

The last in the list is easy: Muhammad was sent the Qur'an. We know nothing of the scripture sent to Abraham other than that it was called the *Suhuf*, which is normally taken to mean something like loose leaves or sheaves of writing. If we begin with David, the Qur'an tells us that he was sent a scripture called the *Zabur*. The obvious question arises as to how this relates to the collection of Psalms contained in the Hebrew Bible. There are 150 Psalms in the Bible, which are poetic songs that, for example, praise or give thanks to God. If we ask a modern Christian biblical scholar about the Psalms, then we are likely to get an answer that some probably go back to the time of David but others have been written and added later. The Book of Psalms is normally thought of as the hymnbook of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (Built after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon in 515BCE and demolished to make way for the building of Herod's Temple in 19BCE). They could hardly be thought of as a complete guide to a way of life. From a Muslim perspective, this means that our

current collection of Psalms may contain some material from the *Zabur* but it cannot be seen as a definitive deposit exclusively of the scripture that was given to David.

Moses was given a scripture called the *Taurat*; how does this relate to the Torah of the Hebrew Bible? The Torah is the first five books of the Bible or the Law as Jews understand it to have been given to Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This is the essential deposit of the Law to govern the way of life of the Jewish people and therefore it probably resembles the type of material contained in the *Taurat*. There are however problems: we will take just one here. Some of the accounts of the lives of the prophets contained in the Torah do not fit with the exemplary lives of prophets as understood by Islam. We can think of Lot (Arabic: Lut) becoming drunk and committing incest with his two daughters as an example (Genesis 19:30-38). Lot was a prophet sent by God according to the Qur'an and prophets do not act in such a way, therefore that cannot be a true account of Lot's life. The biblical account of Lot's incest must have been added by someone else. Once some errors have crept into a scripture, then it loses its sense of being an accurate deposit of the original. We do not know what else may have been added or changed. Indeed, the Qur'an speaks of the Hebrew scriptures as containing unspecified errors, additions and misunderstandings [Q. 2:75-79]. Even though the Torah as we have it today may contain much that was originally revealed to Moses in the *Taurat*, it must be regarded by Muslims as an unreliable deposit.

When we come to Jesus and the *Injil*, we have even greater problems. There are four Gospels contained in the New Testament and Christians understand them to be the work of human authors under divine inspiration, who wrote a theological account of the life and teaching of Jesus based on the accounts that had been remembered and passed on by the earliest generations of Christians. They are generally held to have been written forty to seventy years after the death of Jesus and are edited works to which several hands contributed. Christian history and theology does not know of or recognise a scripture given to Jesus by the name of *Injil* or any other name; it simply does not fit within the Christian system.

The word *Injil* is generally held to be an Arabic borrowing from the Greek, *evangelion*, from which we get the English word gospel. Some scholars understand it as an Arabic word based on the root *njl*, in which case it would mean something like "that which issues forth," as in an oral tradition. Over the centuries, Muslim scholars have put forward different suggestions about the *Injil*. Some have seen it as an earlier scripture from which the gospel-writers drew but which is now lost. In this case, the best deposit that we have of it is in the reported direct speech of Jesus in the Gospels. Some have held it to be an early gospel that was not included in the New Testament by the early Christian Church; we know that many gospels existed at this time and that the Church collectively decided that only these four were worthy of inclusion in the New Testament. There exists a document called "The Gospel of Barnabas" that was discovered in the seventeenth century in an Italian edition but most scholarly opinion is that this is of medieval origin. A document of that name was listed in the early Christian centuries but how it relates to the seventeenth document is unknown and

there is no trace of it in the intervening centuries. It has won some following amongst contemporary Muslims as, where the Qur'anic account of the life of Jesus differs from that of the Christian Gospels, it follows the Qur'anic account. Whatever may be the truth of these various theories, the simple fact remains: the Qur'an teaches that Jesus received a scripture from God called the *Injil* and Christians do not have it intact or teach it today.

### **The critical importance of the Qur'an**

Now we can see why the Qur'an is of critical importance for Muslims. It is the only accurate and authentic deposit of the *kalam allah* that is available today. It is the word of God and as such acts as the benchmark by which all other scriptures can be judged. Anything that differs from the Qur'an is by definition in error. Things have happened to the earlier scriptures given to Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus: errors have crept in, things have been changed, an unknown amount has been lost; they have not been preserved in their pristine form as they were given originally to the prophets. The Qur'an says of itself that it comes to restate the original, perennial, authentic guidance from God to humanity and to correct errors of fact and misunderstandings contained in the contemporary versions of those earlier scriptures [Q. 10:37-38; 2:97]. As the Qur'an is the literal revelation of the word of God sent down to Muhammad, God, who speaks in the Qur'an, knows best the contents of that perennial message. Whereas the earlier scriptures were given to the communities who followed those prophets for safekeeping, which they failed to do, the Qur'an says that God will be the custodian and protector of this last scripture and will preserve it free from error for all times [Q. 15:9].

## **Part Five: What is a Prophet?**

Amongst the untold billions of human beings who have lived upon the earth throughout the human centuries, God chooses to confer on a number of them great spiritual and intellectual gifts and to endow them with the noblest of characters; such are the prophets. They receive guidance from God and then put it into practice in their daily lives so that they act as a perfect example for other human beings to follow. They are people of the highest spirituality, ever reaching up to enter into a relationship with God; they are thus able to act as spiritual guides to their communities. The gifts that they receive from God are not for their own benefit but are to be used to establish a way of life for their communities to lead them through this life and reach paradise after death.

If some human beings are to be perfect examples to other people, then two things follow: they must be human like the rest of us and they must be without sin, otherwise, if part of the time they were sinning and part of the time they were doing the right thing, we would never know when to believe and follow them. Prophets share our common humanity [Q. 14:11]; they are in no sense divine beings. Prophets are not angels or part-god/part-human; they are fully, one hundred per cent, human – nothing more and nothing less. In this way they share all the potential for good and bad that we share. We can model our lives on the characteristics that we see radiating from their lives. It is as though the prophets are highly polished mirrors in which the qualities of God reflect, so that we can glimpse the highest virtue to which any man or woman can rise.

When it comes to the sinlessness of the prophets, there is a spectrum of beliefs amongst Muslims. The majority of Muslims see prophets as being free from all sin throughout their lives through the power of God – for example through the gift of knowledge. All Muslims hold that all prophets are free from all major sins. A minority of Muslims are prepared to accept that prophets might commit minor sins; and then they are corrected by God and repent immediately [Q. 4:105-106; 40:55]. This sinlessness does not rob them of their humanity; they have the capacity to sin like the rest of us but they do not do so. For the minority group, their immediate repentance is an example in itself.

### **A long line of prophets**

The first prophet according to the Qur'an was Adam. This raises the question of what happened to Adam and his wife in the garden (she is not named in the Qur'an but the Islamic tradition knows her as Hawwa, Eve). According to the Qur'an, they made an error of judgement in thinking something evil was good. This led to them being cast out from the garden. Eventually they repented and were reconciled to God [Q. 2:30-39]. Adam and Eve lived in a state of pure innocence; they did not choose to rebel but made an error of judgement. We can never say that God needs anything but in order to be known as the All-merciful, there had to be something for God to forgive,

therefore their error of judgement allowed this central aspect of God to be manifest. By tradition, they were reconciled to God on the Plain of Arafat near Makka.

The Qur'an does not give the exact number of prophets that have been sent to the earth [Q. 40:78] but there is a Hadith from Muhammad that mentions one hundred and twenty-four thousand. All the peoples of the earth received at least one prophet at some point in their history [Q. 10:47; 16:36]. They all had essentially the same message – guidance for human beings on how to live a life perfectly in tune with the will of the creator, that is *islam*.

The Qur'an mentions twenty-five prophets by name and twenty-one of them are mentioned also in the Bible:

<b>Name in the Qur'an</b>	<b>Name in the Bible</b>
Adam	Adam
Idris	Enoch
Nuh	Noah
Hud	
Salih	
Ibrahim	Abraham
Isma'il	Ishmael
Ishaq	Isaac
Lut	Lot
Ya'qub	Jacob
Yusuf	Joseph
Shu'ayb	
Ayyub	Job
Musa	Moses
Harun	Aaron

Dhu 'l-Kifl	Ezekiel
Dawud	David
Sulayman	Solomon
Ilyas	Elijah
Alyasa'	Elisha
Yunus	Jonah
Zakariyya	Zachariah
Yahya	John the Baptist
'Isa	Jesus
Muhammad	

### **Biblical and Qur'anic understandings**

The first thing to notice here is that the biblical definition of a prophet is quite different from that used in Islam. In the biblical tradition, prophets are not sinless and thus are not perfect examples of living a godly way of life. They do not receive a direct, literal revelation from God (*tanzil*) as in Islamic understanding but are the agents of God to take a message from God to a particular people, which they express in their own words. The biblical prophets were not necessarily prophets throughout their lives but may have been chosen by God for this function only for a particular purpose. The Christian tradition departs from the Jewish also by interpreting all the biblical prophets as in some way pointing to the future coming of Christ. There are many other prophets mentioned in the Bible, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos. The fact that they are not mentioned in the Qur'an does not mean that they were not prophets of God, they might have been some of the many thousands of unnamed prophets but, as they are not mentioned by name, we cannot be sure.

Some of the episodes mentioned in the Bible related about Qur'anic prophets cannot be seen as perfect role models for human living. We may think of the story of Lot being made drunk by his daughters and committing incest with them (Genesis 19:30-38) or David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, whom he had killed so that he could marry his wife (Second Book of Samuel, chapters 11-12). The child of this adultery died because of the sin of David and Bathsheba; later they had a second child, who was Solomon, also a prophet mentioned in the Qur'an. How would Muslims react to these biblical stories? It is clear that such behaviour is not in

accordance with a Qur'anic understanding of prophethood and so they cannot be true; they must be later false stories added into the biblical accounts.

Jesus is a prophet mentioned in the Qur'an but Christian claims to his divinity would be regarded as false by Islam [Q. 21:7-8]. Just as the many prophets sent to the Hebrew people were charged with bringing them back to the true message taught by Abraham and Moses, so Muhammad and the Qur'an came to correct the false ideas that had crept into the Jewish and Christian traditions.

### **Prophets in the Qur'an but not in the Bible**

The prophets mentioned in the Qur'an who are not biblical characters: Hud, Salih and Shu'ayb, are understood to be earlier prophets sent to the Arab peoples. Some Muslim scholars have linked Shu'ayb with the biblical Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses (Exodus, chapter 18). Although Muhammad is not mentioned by name in the Bible as we have it today, the Qur'an is clear that Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad [Q. 61:6] and so some Muslims have searched the Bible for possible references to him.

### **Spiritual Guides**

Prophets are spiritual guides to their people, to bring them into a relationship with God that will guide them through this life and on into the life hereafter. This is made clear in the life of Muhammad in his night journey to Jerusalem (*isra*) and ascent into the divine presence (*mi'raj*). On this occasion, he received practical instructions from God, such as the requirement for his community to pray five times each day, and knowledge was transmitted to him that could only come directly from God, the knowledge of the unseen. In the spiritual wisdom that he transmitted to his followers, they were enabled to progress on their spiritual journey in purity and wisdom, thus, in a sense, to journey on their own spiritual *mi'raj*.

### **Laying down a way of life**

The Qur'an uses two terms when speaking of the prophets: *nabi* and *rasul*. Some English translations use the terms "prophet" and "messenger" to translate these Arabic terms. The distinction is that a *rasul* is a prophet who is sent with a new scripture, such as Moses (Musa), and a *nabi* is a prophet who comes to reinforce and call people back to the scripture and way of life of an earlier *rasul*, such as Elijah (Ilyas). Each *rasul* was required to establish an *islamic* way of life or shari'a, which people were to follow. The Qur'an speaks in particular of five "resolute prophets" who were sent with a shari'a: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad [Q. 42:13].

For a person to be a prophet is the highest dignity that can be given to any human being. Muslims are not allowed to discriminate between prophets but must believe that they were all prophets sent by God [Q. 2:285]. Some are elevated to a higher function, such as bearing a new scripture, and some have special characteristics: Abraham is called the "Friend of God," Moses is the one whose encounter with God

required him to veil his face, and Jesus was born through a virginal conception. Muhammad is the last and the seal of the prophets. The Qur'an makes clear that there will be no more prophets after him. He is the seal, in that he confirmed and validated all that had gone before him; he is the universal prophet and for all time.

### **Knowing the prophets' teaching**

To the extent that we have an accurate record of the sayings and actions of the various prophets, they all act as role models for Muslims. This is seen *par excellence* in the case of Muhammad, of course, through his biography (*sira*) and his Hadith. Sayings attributed to Jesus have circulated amongst Muslims for many centuries, which are used in character training and etiquette (*adab*). A helpful collection has been put together and translated into English by Tarif Khalidi (*The Muslim Jesus: sayings and stories in Islamic literature*, Harvard, 2001). There is also a genre of such stories of the prophets (*Qisas al-Anbiya*), which can be found in various collections, notably that of Ibn Kathir (d. 1372), translated into English.

## **Part Six: What can we say about God?**

The most fundamental belief of Islam is that there is only one God and that nothing, either created or uncreated, is worthy of worship except the one God. This doctrine is associated with the Arabic term *tawhid*. God is one in two senses: God is utterly unique and unlike any other being and God is one in the sense of being indivisible [Q. 112:1-4]. There can be no parts of God and nothing can be associated with God. God cannot share divinity with any other being. The one sin that God will never forgive is *shirk*, that is to give God partners or to associate God with any other being [Q. 4:48]. This obviously rules out the worship of idols, multiple or local gods, semi-divine people, and things that were worshipped by our ancestors. It also rules out modern-day idols, such as money, power, ideology, racial superiority or military might.

It is not enough for a Muslim just to believe this. A Muslim has to demonstrate his or her belief through action [Q. 103:1-3]; to devote their whole existence to the worship of God. That is what human life is all about - to serve, obey, love, and worship God [Q. 51:56]. Muslims need to consider whether their work serves God or something else. Do our financial or political practices serve God? Am I serving God in my family relations or are there other values at work?

### **The transcendence of God**

God is beyond our comprehension and human language lacks the capacity to describe God fully. There is always a resistance to use human terms to speak about God, but they are all we have. Besides, God uses such terms to speak of himself in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an itself contains many descriptions of God and the ways that God acts. We are told that God sits on a throne [Q. 2:255]. There are references to God's hands [Q. 3:73], eyes [Q. 11:37] and face [Q. 2:115]. The Qur'an speaks of God seeing, speaking and hearing. Some scholars have taken these to be metaphorical and others have said that they are real but they do not mean that God has human features [Q. 42:11b]. God is beyond such allusions [Q. 112:4].

The Qur'an also speaks of God in more abstract terms. God is all-perfect. God is all-knowing and all-powerful [Q. 6:59; 34:22]. God is beyond all time and space [Q. 7:7]. God alone existed before time began and time itself is created by God. God is not a material being, therefore there is nowhere that we can say that God is and nowhere that we can say that God is not; God is not limited by space [Q. 2:115]. God is transcendent or totally other.

### **The unknowable essence of God**

The essence of God is unknowable; we cannot make any adequate positive statement about God. We must proceed by negatives – saying what God is not. So we can say that God is not like a human being, for example. Technically, we can use two terms here to refer to God: God is ineffable and God is transcategorical – beyond all our

categories. We have a category of mercy, for example, and we can say that God is all-merciful but we do not have any idea of just how merciful God is or the quality of God's mercy; we do not have a category that will stretch to God's essence. The Islamic tradition tries to speak of this with a saying: God has one hundred mercies and God sends one mercy to the earth to suffice all beings for all ages. This means that if we could possibly imagine the sum total of all mercy on earth throughout the ages, then we would know only one per cent of the mercy of God.

Whenever we speak of God we must use the language of analogy. Let us proceed by a two-stage example. If I say that my foot is located on the end of my leg, we all know what that means. We possess the category of foot. So, by analogy, I can say that I am going to walk to the foot of the mountain. Mountains do not have feet but by analogy, we know that I am not going to walk to the summit of the mountain or half-way up; we know where the foot of the mountain is located. In the second stage, we take a category that we do not possess. Let us say that I want to explain the colour scarlet to a person who was born blind. Such a person does not possess the category of colour. How would we do it? We have to use a category that the person does possess and see if that can give some inkling of the colour scarlet. Imagine first the colour scarlet as we see it with our eyes: not crimson or cherry-red but scarlet. Then what non-visual images of scarlet come to our mind: "she wore a scarlet dress!" or "she was a scarlet woman!" Now let us imagine that our person born blind has the category of sound; what sounds might convey something of scarlet to them? We could take them to a group of trumpeters and get them to blow a blazing, raucous fanfare. Try first to hear it – and then what non-aural associations does it convey? Can you see that there is a tiny carry-over from the fanfare of trumpets to scarlet? That is where we are when we speak of God. Whatever we say of God is within our own categories – a fanfare of trumpets – but we do not have the necessary categories to stretch to God's essence – we speak of a fanfare of trumpets but God speaks of scarlet. Everything that we can say of the essence of God is like that – we cannot know or speak about God in God's very essence.

### **The immanence of God**

This total otherness of God does not mean that God is distant or unapproachable [Q. 2:186]. The Qur'an says that God is nearer to us than our jugular vein [Q. 50:16]. How intimate is that? Our life-blood courses through our jugular vein and we cannot imagine life without one.

### **Speaking about God**

How can we speak of God if the essence of God is unknowable? The scholars of Islam have searched the Qur'an and Hadith to find the names by which God has called himself or is called by Muhammad [Q. 7:180; 59:23-24]. These give a list of characteristics or qualities of God. They give us some insight into the way that God acts. The names of God are beyond number but there are ninety-nine that are most commonly used. Among these Beautiful Names are:

the Most Great, the Just, the Almighty, the Source of Goodness, the Majestic, the All-seeing, the All-forgiving, the Acceptor of Repentance, the Guide, the Wise, the Abaser, the Truth, the Patient, the Creator, the Protector, the Light, the Compassionate, the Source of Peace, the Compeller, the Loving, the Unique, the Friend, the Provider, the Giver of Death, the Judge, the All-knowing.

### **Colouring oneself with the names**

These are the names by which Muslims call on God and they provide a rich source of meditation. The prophets are people of the highest spiritual order, whose lives are characterised by purity and wisdom. They are like polished mirrors on which these qualities of God shine and are then reflected so that, in looking at them, we glimpse something of the character of God. The spiritual journey of each individual is one of growing in purity and wisdom also, so that we are shaped by the beautiful names and in turn come to reflect something of these qualities, to the limits of our human capacity. The sufis have a saying that conveys this well: to colour oneself with the colours of God.

Muslims memorise these ninety-nine beautiful names and then recite them; often with the aid of a string of ninety-nine beads to help in counting, called a *tasbih*. One name can be taken and recited continually as an aid to meditation on this quality of God. In sufi practice, someone might take one of these names and repeat it many times a day, meditating on it, to allow that quality of God to enter their hearts and shape their lives. Their sufi teacher (masc. *shaykh*, fem. *shaykhah*) might choose a name which refers to a quality in which the student is deficient. So someone lacking in generosity might be told to repeat the name *al-Karim* “the Most Generous” a thousand times a day.

The *tasbih* is used in other pious exercises too, for example, to repeat thirty-three times each: all glory be to God – *Subhan Allah*, all praise be to God – *al-Hamdu lillah*, and God is the greatest – *Allahu Akbar*. This is often done at the end of each prayer session but it is also a recommended practice frequently during the day.

The importance of these beautiful names is reflected in the names that are given to some Muslim men and women. Men are often named by adding the prefix Abd (Loving Servant) to one of these beautiful names. So it is common to find men called: Abd ar-Rahman (Servant of the All-merciful), Abd as-Samad (Servant of the Eternal), Abd al-Wahhab (Servant of the Bestower), Abd al-Malik (Servant of the Sovereign Lord), Abd al-Latif (Servant of the Subtle One) and so on. Muslim women are often named with reference to one of these beautiful names, such as Salma (from Salam – Peace), Nurallah (Light of God), Azizah (from Aziz – Almighty), Karimah (from Karim – Most Generous) and so on. In this way, there is a parallel to the old English tradition of naming girls by the Christian virtues: Grace, Hope, Charity, Patience and so on. The bearer of the name is given a quality of God to emulate.

## **Part Seven: Who was Muhammad?**

Muhammad was born almost certainly in 570CE into a family of merchants in Makka, on the Red Sea side of the Arabian peninsula. Shortly before the time of Muhammad's birth, there was an invasion of Makka by an Abyssinian army. This army was noteworthy because it included war elephants, which were seen for the first time in Makka on this occasion. It was to be called "The Year of the Elephant," which is how we date Muhammad's year of birth. As the invaders were about to attack, a huge flock of birds arrived from nowhere and dropped stones on the invaders to kill them or drive them away [Q. 105:1-5].

His father, Abdullah, died before he was born and his mother, Amina, by the time that he was six years old. Thereafter, he was brought up by his grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, until he too died, and then by his uncle, Abu Talib. In his childhood, he minded sheep; then Abu Talib taught Muhammad the family business of trading by transporting goods with camels. They went south to Yemen to buy goods from India and East Africa. Some of these goods would be taken all the way to the markets of Syria. Makka was a great trading city.

On one of these journeys, when Muhammad was aged about twelve, they were crossing the Syrian Desert on their way to Damascus. A Christian hermit called Bahira saw the camel train approaching and was inspired to approach it to seek out Muhammad. After talking to him, he told Abu Talib that he had seen the sign of prophecy on Muhammad and that he should take good care of him.

In the middle of Makka stood a centuries-old simple cuboid building called the *Ka'ba*. Muslims believe that this was re-built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. It stood on the site of the first building on earth built by Adam for the worship of God. God contributed to the building of the *Ka'ba* by sending a stone from paradise. This was called the Black Stone and was built into one corner.

Over the centuries between Ishmael and Muhammad, the Arabs stopped worshipping God and started to worship idols of their own making. When Muhammad was young, there were reckoned to be three hundred and sixty idols in, on and around the *Ka'ba*. It had become a great centre of pilgrimage. The Bedouin from the desert would bring one of their gods there and then come on pilgrimage a few times each year to worship the god. The merchants of Makka encouraged this as it meant that the Bedouin could buy all that they needed for their next season of travelling in the desert. Muhammad's own family were not idol-worshippers but instead worshipped the one God although they did not have much knowledge about God at that time. We call them the *hanif*, the upright, the seekers after the truth.

### **Marriage and adult life**

When Muhammad became a man, he established a reputation for being wise and truthful. He was known by the name, al-Amin, "the Trustworthy." He was trusted as

an honest merchant, who always dealt fairly with buyers and sellers. There was an occasion when some repair work was being done to the walls of the *Ka'ba*. The builders had taken out the Black Stone during the work. The question came up as to who should replace it. The elders of all the clans of Makka wanted the honour and it would soon have come to fighting. They agreed to ask for Muhammad's help to decide. He laid a blanket on the ground and placed the stone on it. Then he asked for one from each clan to take hold of the blanket. Together they carried the stone in the blanket back to the *Ka'ba* and Muhammad steadied it into place. The tension was ended and all were satisfied that they had done their part.

There was a widow in Makka called Khadija. She had been left a trading business by her husband. She could run the business but she needed a reliable manager to travel with the goods. She asked around to find the most reliable young merchant. People pointed her towards Muhammad. She appointed him as her manager. After a while, she was so impressed by his character that she proposed marriage to him. They were married monogamously for twenty-five years until Khadija died in 619. One of their daughters was Fatima, who later married Ali, the cousin of Muhammad. Their two sons died when they were infants.

Muhammad was always a seeker after knowledge and spiritual wisdom. He had no time for the idol-worship of the Arabs. He wanted to keep away from their ways and develop a deeper knowledge of the one and only God. He used to go away from Makka into the surrounding hills. There was a cave on Mount Hira where he used to make a spiritual retreat. Sometimes he would take food and water with him and stay there for days.

### **The revelation begins**

At about the age of 40, in 610, Muhammad was in this cave when he received the call to Prophethood and started to receive the revelation of the Qur'an. After a short while he began recounting the message to his friends and family [Q. 26:214; 74:1-7]. A couple of years later, he was instructed by God to begin proclaiming his message in the market square of Makka [Q. 15:94]. These early verses of the Qur'an, call people to live ethical lives in the worship of God alone and to stop worshipping idols. The Makkans were reluctant to abandon idolatry; they made money out of the pilgrims who came to worship their idols at the *Ka'ba*. Muhammad had a hostile reception and only a small group of perhaps a few hundred became Muslims, most of these were people without status in society, including a number of poor people and slaves. Amongst the first Muslims were Khadija, Muhammad's wife, Ali, the cousin of Muhammad, Abu Bakr and Uthman; all three men became early leaders in the Muslim community. These early Muslims faced persecution. Some who were more vulnerable were beaten, denied food and drink, and tortured. Muhammad and his immediate family were spared the worst because they were protected by his uncle, Abu Talib.

## As refugees to Abyssinia

The persecution of the young Muslim community grew stronger. In 615, Muhammad sent part of his community away from Makka. They crossed to Ethiopia (Abyssinia) because there was a Christian king there. They told the king that they had been sent by the Messenger of God and asked for protection. He asked them to recite verses from the Qur'an so that he could hear the message. We know that one group of verses that they recited told about the birth of Jesus [Q. 19:1-36]. The king consulted with his bishops and judges then stood up with his royal staff in his hand. He drew a line in the sand. He said that the difference between what he had heard and his own Christianity was the thickness of the line. He took them in as refugees until it was safe for them to return.

## Scenes from life in Makka

A miraculous event occurred during these years in Makka [Q. 17:1]. Muhammad was woken one night by an angel and seated on a wonderful mount called *al-Buraq*. He rode with the angel as far as Jerusalem. The journey is called the *isra*, or Night Journey. He stepped down from *al-Buraq* on the Temple Mount, that is on the Rock, today covered by the Dome of the Rock, where all the earlier Prophets greeted him and he led them in prayer. Then from here he was taken up to heaven where he had an audience with God. During this, he received knowledge known only to God and, amongst other things, the instruction that Muslims should pray five times a day.

He then descended from heaven, returned to the Temple Mount and then was taken by *al-Buraq* back to Makka. This was a journey outside time; it all took place in a single instant and scholars discuss if it was physical or spiritual. This journey stresses the importance of Jerusalem, along with Makka and Madina, as the three holy cities of Islam. The early Muslim community faced towards Jerusalem in prayer and the Dome of the Rock has long been a site of visitation for Muslims. Each year, on the 27<sup>th</sup> night of the month of Rajab, the ascension or *mi'raj* is celebrated on the *Laylat al-Mi'raj*, the Night of the Ascension of the Prophet.

In 619 Muhammad suffered two tragedies. His wife Khadija died. She had been a great support both to him and the infant Muslim community. Also his uncle, Abu Talib died. He had become the head of their clan and so he was able to give Muhammad protection. Now that protection was withdrawn. The persecution increased and there were plots to kill Muhammad. He tried to take his message to a nearby city called Ta'if. They rejected him. Stones and dirt were thrown at him. The children drove him from their city. Muhammad rested, cut and filthy, in a vineyard outside Ta'if. The angel Gabriel came to him. He said that God had given him permission to destroy the city if Muhammad agreed. Muhammad said no. If the people were dead, then they would never have a chance to repent and choose to follow Islam. Muhammad then prayed. He said that he did not complain about the way that he had been treated but only about his own failure to put over the message properly.

As long as things were in order between Muhammad and God, then he did not care about anything else.

Muhammad's reputation began to spread and in 620-21 delegations came from Yathrib, a city 350kms to the north of Makka. The people there came from many clans. The city consisted really of a group of clan settlements, including several groups of Jews. The inhabitants had been in conflict for some years and they felt the need for wise leadership and a new way of life. They came to Makka to invite Muhammad to come to live in their city as their leader. Some would convert to Islam and he would establish an Islamic way of life in Yathrib, which would from now on be called *Madinat al-Nabi*, the City of the Prophet, or just Madina.

### **The Migration**

The Muslims began to move to Madina in small groups so as not to attract attention. The Makkans decided to assassinate Muhammad. Ali slept in Muhammad's place so that he could not be found. Muhammad left for Madina, accompanied by his companion, Abu Bakr, and pursued by the assassins. At one point they hid for three days in a cave, where a spider spun a web over the opening to make the trackers believe that no-one could be inside. It is a sign of the trustworthy character of Muhammad that even his enemies had entrusted things to him for safekeeping. Ali was left behind for a time in Makka to ensure that all these goods were given back to their rightful owners.

In September 622, Muhammad arrived in Madina to take up the responsibility of leading the community. This event, known as the Hijra or migration, is so important in the history of Islam that it marked the start of a new system of dating: AH, 'in the Year of the Hijra'.

When he arrived in Madina, Muhammad allowed his camel to wander freely, so he wouldn't be deemed to have shown favouritism to any one family or group. The place where his camel stopped became the site of his house and the first mosque in Madina, the *Masjid al-Nabi*, or the Prophet's Mosque. The Muslims were now settled and free from immediate persecution.

The Muslims who migrated from Makka mixed well with those who had converted to Islam there. The Muslims from Makka (called *al-Muhajirun* – the Migrants) were traders. Those in Madina (called *al-Ansar* – the Helpers) were farmers. Muhammad paired up one from each community so that they could share their land and talents. This was a practical example of being one single community of Muslims, the *umma*, and bearing one another's burdens [Q. 21:92; 9:71].

Although the young Muslim community had now moved to Madina, Makka still remained the spiritual centre of Islam. The early Muslims in Makka used to offer their prayers at the *Ka'ba* so that they were also facing Jerusalem. When they moved to Madina, for the first sixteen months they faced Jerusalem for prayer. Then verses

were revealed [Q. 2:142-145,149-150], commanding the faithful to change their direction for prayer so that they faced towards the *Ka'ba* in Makka. This direction is observed by Muslims worldwide and is called the *qibla* or direction.

## **Life in Madina**

The verses of the Qur'an revealed from this time are often described as laying down the pattern of life for a settled community. A document from this period, the "Constitution of Madina", acknowledged Muhammad as the leader and final judge under God. A mutual defence treaty between all the parties in Madina was drawn up, including the Jewish communities in the city. During these years, in addition to being the spiritual leader, Muhammad was also the head of the community, the interpreter of God's guidance in the Qur'an and the ultimate arbiter in disputes. He also had the awesome task of calling the men to arms.

The Makkans still feared that Muhammad would harm their trade and way of life. So they continued to attack with the aim to kill Muhammad and wipe out the young Muslim community. They came under attack by armies from Makka on three principal occasions: the Battle of Badr in 624, the Battle of Uhud in 625, and the final and conclusive Battle of the Ditch (or Trench) in 627.

Some of the Jewish clans in Madina had strong trading and economic links with the Makkans, which led them to become openly hostile and treacherous towards the Muslims. Some helped the enemy in time of battle and so were sent into exile. Finally, after a major act of treachery during the Battle of the Ditch, Muhammad took their case to arbitration, as was the Arab custom. The Jewish clan leaders appointed the arbiter who decided to impose the customary penalty for treason. This was confirmed by Muhammad: all the clan's goods were forfeit, the men were executed and the women and children sold into slavery.

## **Makka becomes a Muslim city**

Following a dream [Q. 48:27], Muhammad wanted to make the *umra*, the minor pilgrimage to Makka. So in 628 he approached Makka but met with armed opposition. In the end a treaty was made with the Makkans at a place called Hudaibiyya, under which he agreed to make his sacrifices in the desert and return with his followers to Madina. Some of the Muslims believed that the Prophet had given too much ground in this treaty but it allowed Muslims to trade with the Makkans and paved the way for Makka to become a Muslim city. Under the terms of this treaty, Muhammad returned with two thousand Muslims in 629 and the city was evacuated for three days, so that they could make their *umra*. The pilgrimage took place peacefully. However, in 630 the treaty was breached by the Makkans and Muhammad marched on Makka with his men. The Makkans surrendered almost without bloodshed or loss of property. They agreed to embrace Islam and a Muslim governor was installed.

The first act of Muhammad in the Muslim city of Makka was to order that all the idols should be smashed so that the *Ka'ba* would be purified for the worship of God [Q. 17:80-81]. Muslims were now free to live in Makka and make their pilgrimages in peace. Muhammad's only Hajj took place in 632, shortly before his death. During this Hajj he made his Farewell Sermon on the Plain of Arafat.

Muhammad's influence began to spread. Many of the local Arab clans came to him to make treaties and many of them converted to Islam. In 631, one group came from the Christian city of Najran. Muhammad received them with courtesy in his mosque and allowed them to pray there. They discussed the person of Jesus and he invited them to convert to Islam [Q. 3:33-80]. Even though they did not, they had such respect for the Prophet that they asked him to appoint a wise Muslim to live amongst them to settle any disputes that they could not resolve themselves.

Muhammad died in June 632 and was buried in the house in Madina. Later a tomb was built over his grave and eventually this was incorporated into his mosque. The mosque has been hugely extended through the centuries and now Muhammad's tomb can be found in the *Masjid al-Nabi*. Many Muslims go there and pray to God near his tomb in the belief that he can hear them and lend his prayers to theirs.

### **The exemplary life of Muhammad**

Muhammad was not only the conveyor of the Qur'an, he also perfectly put it into practice in his own life and in all that he said and did. Through the purifying gift of knowledge from God, Muhammad, like all the prophets, was rendered sinless. This meant that his every word and action became an example. So the story of his life, or *sira*, is a source of intense scrutiny and many biographies have been written about him.

Muhammad's life so manifested all that the Qur'an revealed as divine guidance that he is regarded as "the living Qur'an." To see the Prophet was like seeing the Qur'an lived out in practice. Muhammad is *al-insan al-kamil*, the Perfect Human Being, the archetype of all that it is to be human. So any attack upon the person of the Prophet is like an attack upon human perfection itself. This helps us to understand why Muhammad is the perfect role-model for human life, to be imitated by all who would be truly human [Q. 33:21,45-46]. He showed hospitality and trustworthiness in all his dealings, humility in his relations with other people and always claimed only to be the servant of God. Because he lived a long and full life, we see him crying over the body of his dead infant son, intervening in jealousy between his wives and guiding the younger members of his community. We see him as a merciful judge, turning his face away from things that he need not see, yet being fearless in judgement to support those who have been wronged. It is related that a young woman came to him with her father and husband. She complained that her father had given her in marriage against her will and asked him to dissolve the marriage. After investigation, he did so. Then she asked Muhammad to marry her to the same man as she was now free to give her

consent. He did so. In this way, he defended the free decision of a woman against the social practice of the time.

As a community leader, Muhammad had to make hard decisions and enter into treaties. He was far-sighted and saw that appearing to 'give way' today could lead to much greater success in the future, as in the Treaty of Hudaibiyya. His community in Madina was repeatedly attacked by the Makkans and so he had the awesome responsibility of leading his men into battle as the last resort rather than be wiped out.

As long as Khadija lived, Muhammad was married to her alone. In the years after her death, Muhammad contracted twelve marriages with women from various Arab clans. Some of these were political unions. Some were acts of kindness – for example when he took in and cared for a widow whose husband had been killed in battle. The Qur'an permits a Muslim man to marry up to four wives, provided he can treat them all equally [Q. 4:3], but the case of Muhammad was a one-off exception, explicitly allowed by the Qur'an, to provide practical guidance on how to treat all sorts of women fairly [Q. 33:50-52].

Because of their great love and respect for Muhammad, Muslims react with great sensitivity to any insult or bad word spoken about him. Whenever his name is mentioned, it is immediately followed by saying 'peace and blessings be upon him' [Q. 33:56]. Such respect is applied to all the prophets and compliments are added to their names also.

Most Muslims celebrate the Birthday of the Prophet, *Mawlid al-Nabi*, every year on the 12<sup>th</sup> of the Islamic month of Rabi' al-Awwal. There are processions and speeches in honour of the Prophet. Poems are written and recited and lectures are given to make his life and teaching better known.

## Part Eight: What is the Qur'an?

God created all human beings to find happiness in this world through obedience to the divine will and the reward of paradise in the next. In God's great mercy, God sent guidance to all humanity in the form of books of revelation or scriptures. The Qur'an is the last scripture and the ultimate benchmark by which all earlier ones can be judged. It lies at the core of the Muslim faith and way of life. It was sent down by God to Muhammad who conveyed it to the world by speaking it aloud – the name Qur'an means 'the recitation'.

### The revelation begins

The revelation of the Qur'an began in the year 610, on a dark night towards the end of the month of Ramadan [Q. 2:185]. Muhammad had gone to spend time in deep meditation and spiritual retreat in a cave on Mount Hira, just outside Makka. A light appeared on the horizon and drew closer [Q. 53:3-10]. Eventually it was identified as the angel Jibril (Gabriel). Jibril halted a distance away from Muhammad and spoke the word *iqra*, commanding him to 'recite' or 'speak forth.'

Muhammad did not know what to do. Jibril came closer and again said *iqra*. At this, Muhammad said that he didn't know what he was supposed to say. Like most people at this time, Muhammad had not received any formal book-based education. He was *ummi*, meaning that he had not received education on earlier scriptures and he was "unlettered." The significance of this is that what Muhammad was about to recite could not have come from him. He could not have made it up himself. It must have been given to him by God [Q. 10:37-38; 17:88; 45:2].

Jibril then embraced Muhammad. During this embrace, the heart of Muhammad, as the seat of wisdom and knowledge, was purified in receiving the revelation from God. After the embrace, when Jibril again said *iqra* to Muhammad, the first verses of the Qur'an just welled up from his heart and flowed from his lips [Q. 96:1-5]. This was the start of the process of revelation that would go on for the next twenty-two years [Q. 17:106; 25:32].

As Muhammad was a pure being, his heart was a fit resting place for the revelation which was sent down to him without any fear of corruption or interference [Q. 2:97]. As it came from Muhammad's heart to his lips, it was preserved from error by the angel Jibril acting as the 'Trusted Spirit' [Q. 26:192-195]. This process of revelation is called *wahy*, which is linked to the word *tanzil*, and refers to the 'sending down' of the Qur'an from God to our world in a human language, Arabic [Q. 12:2; 41:44].

It's important to try to understand that Muhammad is the receiver and conveyor of the revelation, not in any sense the author. Authorship lies with God and control over the transmission of the words of the Qur'an until they came from the mouth of the Prophet. There is no scope for distortion. The words of the Qur'an were given to him

by God [Q. 53: 3-6]. He did not have to memorise the Qur'an. It was simply 'there' in his heart and he knew it.

Muhammad told Khadija his wife what had happened. According to some sources, she asked her cousin Waraqa, who was a Christian, for his advice. After listening to Muhammad's account, he confirmed that in his Christian tradition such things are known when God calls a prophet to carry a message into the world. Khadija realised that Muhammad was God's messenger and became his first follower. At the same time, other sources stress that the Prophet knew and was certain about what happened; there was no room for doubt in his life [Q. 53:1-12].

This first revelation is celebrated each year on the odd-numbered nights in the last ten days of Ramadan, often the 27<sup>th</sup> night. It is called the Night of Power (*Laylat al-Qadr*). Muslims devote this night to worship and according to the Qur'an, angels are sent throughout the earth to bring God's blessings to all those who are in prayer and to convey their requests to God [Q. 97:1-5].

For a further twenty-two years, the Qur'an continued to come down to Muhammad in a series of revelations, with occasional intervals. These revelations came from God who has the capacity to communicate through the *kalam allah*; the speech or word of God from whom it cannot be separated. It exists beyond time with God and not here on earth. By tradition, the *kalam allah* is contained on the Preserved Tablet, *al-Lawh al-Mahfuz* in heaven [Q. 43:2-4, 85:21-22]. From here it has been sent down to prophets in various languages throughout human history. The Qur'an is the earthly deposit of the *kalam allah* expressed in Arabic.

The same process of revelation was used for all the earlier scriptures. So the Qur'an says that revelation was sent down to Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad. Jibril was the agent in those earlier revelations too [Q. 2:97]. The guidance sent in all the scriptures was essentially the same although there were differences in specific application. We do not know how many books were sent throughout human history or how many messengers there were. The Qur'an mentions these five scriptures by name and twenty-five prophets.

### **Recording the Qur'an**

Muhammad recited the Qur'an to his immediate group of companions, some of whom memorised it. In Muhammad's time, poets and storytellers would memorise hundreds of stories and long poems and then travel from one place to another reciting them for the entertainment and education of their listeners. These were the kind of men and women who memorised the Qur'an as Muhammad recited it. Muhammad checked them and they crosschecked one another. On several occasions Jibril came to Muhammad to hear him recite the verses of the Qur'an revealed so far. Thus, a reliable record of the Qur'an was established in the hearts of the memorisers.

As groups of verses were revealed, Muhammad was informed by God into which chapter of the Qur'an they should be placed. There are 114 chapters (*suras*) in total. They were given names, by which most Muslims know them, and later numbered. At a later period, the verses (*ayat*) in each chapter were given numbers for ease of reference. The chapters vary greatly in length from three to 286 verses. About eighty-six *suras* were revealed in Makka (610-622). The remaining twenty-eight were revealed in Madina (622-632).

Those amongst the early Muslims who could write began to build up their own collections of written verses. The Prophet organised this by nominating certain scribes to copy down revelations as they were revealed. The leaders amongst these were Ali, his cousin, and Zayd ibn Thabit. They wrote on pieces of parchment, leaves, stone tablets, and any other materials that were available.

By the time the revelation of the Qur'an came to an end with the death of Muhammad in 632, there were two records: one that the memorisers had learnt by heart and one written down. A few of the scribes had complete copies of the Qur'an but most people had only collections of verses.

### **Preserving the text**

The Qur'an itself teaches that the earlier scriptures had been partially lost or distorted. To avoid this, there was a desire that it should be written down in book form to preserve it intact. This need was reinforced when eighty of the memorisers were killed in the Battle of Yamama shortly after the Prophet's death. Caliph Abu Bakr (r. 632-634) ordered that Zayd should make a complete copy in book form. As he did so, he crosschecked the written records with that in the hearts of the memorisers to produce an accurate text. This "official copy" was put into the safekeeping of Hafsa (d. 667), one of Muhammad's wives and the daughter of the second Caliph, Umar (r. 634-644).

The third Caliph, Uthman (r. 644-656), was concerned that there were fragments of badly written Qur'anic verses in circulation. This was also a time of expansion of Muslim rule. There was the need for a "master copy" to be written, copied and circulated to various parts of the Muslim territories. This was drawn up in 647 from the copy kept by Hafsa and checked against the memorisers. Zayd was again involved in this and Ali approved the action, so there was unity amongst the parties of early Muslims. Once it was complete, Uthman ordered that all the earlier written records of the Qur'an be destroyed to avoid confusion. All except the copy in Hafsa's care, which was returned to her.

This "master copy" of the Qur'an was copied and sent to the five principal Muslim cities of that time. With each copy was sent a trained *qari* or reciter to show people how to pronounce it as the script was written without vowels. There developed a diversity of reading styles of the Qur'an, which can lead to a variation in the meaning

of some words. The earliest manuscripts we have now probably date from the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and are in museums in Tashkent, Sanaa, Mashhad and Istanbul.

God says that God will preserve the Qur'an intact for all time [Q. 15:9] and Muslims see this as a miracle. The primary record of the Qur'an is that which is in the hearts of people who memorise it. Hence great importance is attached to clarity and precision in memorising and recitation.

The linguistic style of the Qur'an is partly poetic but truly unique [Q. 2:23-24]. It is unlike any other form of literature in the Arabic language. Every piece of Arabic literature, before and after the Qur'an, is regarded as second-rate.

The Qur'an, as the revealed Word of God, actually exists only in the Arabic language; so scholarly discussion must be based on the Arabic text alone. The Arabic in which it is written has become the standard classical language which is still understood throughout the Arabic-speaking world, in spite of the many different forms of spoken Arabic which have evolved through the centuries. As with any major language, Arabic contains many shades of meaning which resist translation. To translate it is to interpret it – just as it is with any translation of a great work of literature.

### **Interpretation of the Qur'an**

The Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-two years, and the revelations appeared within a particular social and historical context. To know these is of great importance in interpreting the Qur'an so they have been recorded in the early works of scholarship.

The first and best interpreter of the Qur'an was Muhammad himself. This means that careful attention is paid to the ways in which he put Qur'anic principles into practice in his life, teaching and judgements. These incidents are recorded in the biographies of Muhammad and his companions, and the great collections of Hadith, which contain what Muhammad said, taught, did and the things of which he approved.

For Shi'a Muslims, the Imams were also infallible interpreters of the Qur'an and were able to give guidance under divine inspiration. This means that the body of interpretation built up by them, especially by the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, is of great importance. Different schools of Muslims read the Qur'an with different emphases: some look for the outer explicit meaning and others have traditionally seen hidden meaning in the text.

The Qur'an rarely says all it has to say on a topic in just one place. There is a danger in taking one verse in isolation. To understand the teaching of the Qur'an one needs to take every reference on a particular topic and interpret it within its own context and in relation to the whole. Then we need to draw out from this the 'golden message' of the Qur'an. This golden message needs to be applied in every society as it engages with

Islam. In order to achieve this, scholars need to study the new context to make sure that we achieve an outcome in accordance with the guidance of God.

### **Pious use of the Qur'an**

The Qur'an is not just 'a book'; it is the Word of God. Therefore respect is to be shown to the Qur'an in any format, especially to any printed or written verses [Q. 7:204]. When the Qur'an is being read or recited, great respect is shown. Many Muslims follow the tradition of covering their heads whenever the Qur'an is spoken aloud or when the text is being studied.

Before a Muslim will handle a copy of the Qur'an, he or she will make the ritual washing or *wudu*. As it is intended for all humankind, non-Muslims are permitted to read and handle it. They are not required to do the ritual washing before doing so, but should treat it with great respect. It should never be laid on the floor or any other unclean place. In a pile of books, it should always be on the top.

Old and worn out copies of the Qur'an must be disposed of with respect, normally through burial. This also applies to any piece of paper or anything else on which a verse of the Qur'an in Arabic has been written, for example, by putting such pieces of paper through a shredder.

In many Muslim houses, a copy of the Qur'an will be wrapped in a special cloth or kept in a worthy box and then placed on a high shelf in a principal room.

Every Muslim learns some verses of the Qur'an by heart. But in every generation and society, some will make the effort to memorise the whole Qur'an under the guidance of a teacher. Someone who has completed this memorisation will be shown respect with the title *hafiz*, or *hafizah* for a woman, as they 'carry the Qur'an in their heart'.

To aid the process of recitation, the Qur'an has been divided into thirty parts called *juz*. During Ramadan, Muslims recite one *juz* each night so that the whole Qur'an is recited in the course of the month. Sunnis do this in a special congregational prayer called *tarawih*, whilst the Shi'a do their recitation in private or in groups with accompanying prayers.

In Arabic-speaking societies, the relationship to the words of the Qur'an is more immediate for the ordinary believer. Most educated people would be able to understand almost every word as it is read or recited. Only about fifteen per cent of Muslims worldwide are native Arabic-speakers. Those who do not understand Arabic learn the Qur'an phonetically. This reminds us that the Word of God does not just speak to the intellect but also to the heart. By memorising and reciting the Qur'an, Muslims develop a relationship with God that goes beyond linguistic understanding and takes them into a spiritual communion with God.

Most schools of Islam do not allow figurative drawing or painting and some don't permit photographs of animate objects. The art of calligraphy has been highly developed by Muslim artists; in this way the words of the Qur'an can be dignified in their actual writing. There are several different scripts used in such calligraphy. Calligraphy is often used in mosque decoration and on ceramic tiles, which beautify the homes and public places of Muslims.

## **Part Nine: What is the purpose of religion?**

This is a question that every religion has to answer, especially in a world in which many people have an underdeveloped notion of what religion might be about and in which many have given up on the idea of “being religious” at all, whatever they might mean by that. As regards Islam, we can begin by answering that it is a way of life that trains people to become fully human and draw ever closer to God.

We can begin with the question: What is this life all about? Islam does not see this life as something hard and burdensome. Excesses of asceticism are not part of Islam and there is no sense of the body being bad or somehow low or unworthy. This life should be something to be enjoyed and prosperity is a blessing from God. On several occasions in the Qur'an we read of God making things easy for those who follow the guidance [Q. 65:4] and indeed it becomes a principle of Islamic law that, faced with two equally possible outcomes, the easier one is to be taken. At the same time, the Qur'an does not promise that this life will be “a bed of roses” and one of the principal virtues of an Islamic way of life is patience (*sabr*) with which afflictions and hardships are to be born. Critical to an Islamic understanding is that this life is not all that there is but there is also the life hereafter. This life has something of the character of a test and preparation for that life [Q. 2:155]. In Paradise there will be no more suffering or want and thus it is a reward for those whose lives on earth have seen suffering patiently borne.

### **The treadmill of time**

The nature of being a creature with a beginning and an end is that we are caught up in time. Yesterday's resolution and dedication to do good will not automatically carry us through today. Every day, and indeed, every minute, must be dedicated to the service and worship of God. Imagine that one is on a moving walkway, such as we experience in airports, but we are trying to walk the wrong way along it, against the direction of movement. To stand still would mean to be carried backwards. We need to keep pressing on in order to make progress. Such is life. Time is always coming at us and demanding a fresh exertion in the way of God. Up until our last breath, we are to keep on obeying the commands of God and keeping clear of those things that have been prohibited. The histories record an episode in the last months of the life of Muhammad when he was ill, weak and rather frail. He was being helped into the mosque for prayers and some of the community suggested that he spare himself the effort but he rebuked them saying that he too, like them, should keep on living in the tension between hope of the reward promised by God for the obedient and fear of the punishment of God for the disobedient.

All human beings are born *muslim* and so Islam does not have a concept of Original Sin. Human beings are basically good but we have a natural tendency to forgetfulness and this is compounded by the ploys of the *Shaytan* to make us forgetful [Q. 6:68]. This means that we are engaged in a life-long struggle against our lower inclinations. This struggle is our principal *jihad*: to struggle and strive in the way of God against

temptations and forgetfulness. This is where the practices of the religion come to the aid of the Muslim:

- The regular routine of daily prayer, five times per day at set times, so that never more than a few hours go by without the believer being called back to stand again before God, to recollect sin and seek forgiveness, to hear afresh the guidance of the Qur'an and to prostrate in total humility before God in submission.
- The annual month-long fast of Ramadan teaches self-discipline, breaks the habits that control us ("I cannot function without regular coffee-breaks during the day!") and teaches us compassion for those who have to go without the food and drink that we take for granted.

There is always a human tendency towards hoarding money to use for ourselves at a later date. Muhammad here sets the example. It is reported that he made a practice of giving away whatever was given to him on the day that he received it, thus "going to bed with empty pockets" and relying on God's generosity for tomorrow. This is encapsulated in the Arabic term *sadaqa*, which we can translate as "bearing one another's burdens." When I arrive at the house of an African Muslim friend just as food is being prepared, I am greeted: "You must have a well-trained camel that brings you to our door at a time when we can have the blessing of sharing our food with you." When there were sudden and devastating floods in the far south-west of England, an area in which few Muslims live, that deprived them of drinking water, a Muslim charity responded by saying: "This is our chance to show them what Islam is about." And they loaded a lorry with as many bottles of water as possible and sped down the motorway to share it with those in need. A bishop in Africa appealed to a Christian friend in London for money to help build a road to open up the region and when the local mosque heard about it, they responded immediately with a gift to help suffering fellow human beings. A Christian lady was going to Palestine to help rebuild the house of a Muslim family that had been demolished to make way for the segregation wall and local Muslim women opened their purses to press money on her to help buy building materials. In Islamic understanding, one of the characteristics of Jesus was that he was "the tender-hearted Prophet," who followed a life of voluntary poverty and had a special capacity for compassion. In this way *sadaqa* is practised and those who have are trained to bear the burdens of those who have not.

### **A life of God-consciousness**

*Sabr* is one of the principal virtues of Islam and the other is *taqwa*, which we can translate as "God-consciousness." That we might be aware in every fibre of our being, in all that we do, say and are, that we are the creatures of God, given the high dignities of being servants and regents of God, that we stand in the sight of God at every moment and that ultimately we will be called to give an account of our lives on the Day of Judgement. There is a sense here of awe at standing in the presence of God and, as an earlier form of English would put it, "the fear of the Lord." Indeed, in modern Arabic, the word for vaccination is derived from the same root as *taqwa*, giving us the sense of protection in the awesome presence of God. The practices of

Islam, which we will explore more in the next two series, can be understood as a training ground in *taqwa*, to build and maintain that sense of being always in the presence of God.

An incident is recorded in the Qur'an in which a group of desert Arabs came to Muhammad to proclaim that they believed [Q. 49:14]. The Prophet was told to respond that so far they had only submitted to the way of Islam because faith had not yet entered into their hearts. This gave rise to a three-fold transition in the life of a human being, which was reinforced in an encounter between Muhammad and the angel Gabriel. This transition goes from *islam*, submission to the will of God, leading to *iman* or faith in God, and culminating in *ihsan* or "living constantly in the knowledge that one stands in the presence of God, knowing that even though we do not see God, God sees us." This can be seen as the goal of life-long growth in *taqwa*.

Living constantly in the state of *ihsan* is as close as a human being can come in this life to the life of Paradise, in which the people of Paradise will be near to God, ever-conscious of the presence [Q. 54:55]. Those human beings who attain this state in this life can be thought of as the saints or the Friends of God (*waliullah*). They are those who have submitted their wills and their whole lives to God and are thus, in an abiding sense, truly *muslim*. However, as the example of Muhammad already cited reminds us, as long as we are in this life we always have the potential to forget and slip from this state, thus even Friends of God must continue in the daily struggle until the last breath.

### **A beautiful model**

Muhammad himself serves as a beautiful model of a life lived in total submission to the will of God [Q. 33:21] and as a lamp that sheds light to guide his followers in that path [Q. 33:45-46]. His wife Ayesha is reported to have said of him that he was like a "living Qur'an;" to see the way in which he conducted himself was like reading the Qur'an and to read the Qur'an was to know the character of the Prophet. On this basis, we can say that the path of human growth in *taqwa* is the imitation of Muhammad. This requires Muslims to study his life and teachings and then to model their lives on his. Every incident that is recorded is an example of a Muslim way of life. We see him standing up out of respect as the body of a dead Jew from Madina was carried to its burial. We see him turning his face away from things that he need not see. He is reported to have mended his own clothes and sandals and given away things that he could well have used for his own family. His wives followed his example and were well-known for their concern for the poor and hungry. When he entered the assembly, he took a seat wherever there was a space with no special place reserved for him. He was fearless in standing up for those who had been wronged and did not hesitate to challenge the traditional ways when they went against the teachings of the Qur'an. He never claimed to be other than the servant of God and held himself subject to the divine revelation not above it. There is a memorable story of a woman who sat by the pathway and hurled abuse and worse at him every time that he passed by. When one day she was not in her usual place, he enquired after her and was told that she was

sick. He then went to visit her – to her amazement. When she encountered his example, she repented of her previous behaviour and became a Muslim and a changed woman. Such stories are numerous and recorded in the biographies, histories and Hadith. They give much material for Muslim character-building as Muslims model their lives on his in their quest for *taqwa*.

### **Manifestation of the beautiful names**

Part of being a beautiful model for humanity is summed up in the Muslim understanding of Muhammad as *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being, so those who seek perfection should follow his example in all things. The first step in following the Prophet is to align the human will with the will of God by obeying all the commands and prohibitions of God. The second step is through additional voluntary acts of service, worship and love. This is summarised in a saying of God placed on the lips of Muhammad (*hadith qudsi*):

My servant draws near to me through nothing that I love more than what I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases drawing near to me through additional voluntary works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks.

Muhammad is the embodiment of all the spiritual virtues. He more directly manifests the attributes of God than any other creature. He thus lives most fully in the state of *ihsan*. The path of human perfection, the path of love, is thus “doing the good and beautiful” in all things in this life.

The pure and sinless Muhammad acts like a perfectly polished mirror on which the qualities of God can radiate and be reflected. In this way he manifests those divine qualities in the fullest possible way. The importance here is that the qualities belong to God and are reflected from Muhammad; he does not contain them within himself – he is not divine. A useful model is that of the moon. When we look at it, we see it glowing with light and shedding it towards the earth. Yet we know that the moon is not the source of its light; the light comes from the sun and is reflected from the moon. If the sun were not to shed light on the moon, it would be engulfed in darkness as it has no independent source of its own light. Muhammad is thus, in this model, like the moon reflecting the light of God.

Muhammad is not only the purest of beings in Muslim understanding but he also possesses knowledge directly from God that cannot be obtained except by this direct transfer. This is sometimes called “the knowledge of the unseen” or esoteric knowledge. This knowledge was given to Muhammad by God on his ascent to heaven (*mi'raj*), some of which he shared with a group of people who sought his company and teaching on the inner journey of their own purification; these are the people who we know as the sufis. They in turn passed on these techniques of spiritual purification to their own students and so on down through the centuries. In Shi'a understanding, the divinely-appointed Imams shared in this esoteric knowledge and thus were privileged

in their interpretation of the Qur'anic message so that they could guide humankind on the path of purification and seeking wisdom.

Just as Muhammad was the pure manifestation of the qualities or beautiful names of God, so Muslims work with those beautiful names by recitation and meditation, thus seeking to purify themselves better to reflect them too. As with Muhammad, such growth in spiritual wisdom must always find expressing in outer works and not just inner piety.

We will return to the centrality of *taqwa* as we come in the second and third series of Understanding Islam to look more closely at the practices of prayer and pilgrimage and the reform of society through ethical economics and politics.

## **Part Ten: The Arabian Peninsula in the 7<sup>th</sup> century**

The two great powers in the Middle East at the start of the seventh century were the Byzantine and the Sasanian Empires. The Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire was centred on Constantinople or Byzantium (modern Istanbul). It was what remained of the Roman Empire, which had begun to decline from the fourth century and in the fifth moved its capital eastwards from Rome to Constantinople. By the seventh century, its territory was confined to the Mediterranean seaboard to the west, the coastal regions of North Africa, Egypt, Syria, and modern Turkey, Greece and most of Italy. When the Qur'an speaks of "the Romans" [Q. 30 is called *al-Rum*, the Romans], the reference is to this Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantines were Greek-speaking and looked down on their non-Greek subjects (Barbarian means those who do not speak Greek). Damascus was their administrative centre in the Arab lands. They were a formidable force and controlled much of the Mediterranean Sea through their navy. Religiously, they were Byzantine (modern Greek Orthodox) Christians with the Emperor having both a religious and a political role.

The Sasanian Empire controlled Persia and Mesopotamia as far north as the Caucasus Mountains (including modern Iraq). They also held the south-west corner of the Arabian peninsula at this time (including part of modern Yemen). Religiously they were Zoroastrians, followers of the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra), a monotheistic religion worshipping God under the name of Ahura Mazda. The Sasanians had been in conflict with the Byzantines for decades and from 607 to 628, they controlled the coastal region from Egypt through Palestine to Syria. The Byzantines took back these lands in 628, which is the context for the revelation of Chapter 9 of the Qur'an, when Muhammad was preparing to send an army towards their territory for the Battle of Tabuk. This is the only chapter of the Qur'an that does not begin with: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." Some scholars have linked this with the fact that this chapter speaks in harsh terms of subjugating these enemies and strongly urges the backsliders within the Muslim community.

Both of these great empires had Arab tribes on their borders who affiliated with them to create buffer kingdoms between the rest of the peninsula and their directly controlled lands. A good proportion of these tribes had become Christians through their contact with Christians from the empires, both in Syria and in Iraq.

### **Jews and Christians in the area**

After the dispersal of Jewish tribes from Palestine, especially after the expulsions by the Romans in the first and second centuries, some of them had settled in the Arabian peninsula. There were Jewish settlements in the northern part, notably in Khaybar and Madina itself, and also in the far south-west, in modern Yemen. They were engaged in trade and probably had their own trading networks between their various settlements. We do not know too much about the Judaism that they practised but they

knew themselves to be different from their neighbours. At times, they became the agents of the Sasanian Empire especially, exercising a degree of control in the region on their behalf.

The early centuries of Christianity saw the formation of various different groups. Often the differences centred on what they understood about the person of Jesus. The Byzantines followed the classical orthodox position of eastern and western Christianity on this question as defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 in which they held that Jesus Christ and God the Father were of one single substance, in other words, both were fully divine, being with the Holy Spirit, one divine Being. The earthly Jesus, they said, had two natures that were united in him, one human and one divine.

To the east of the peninsula, centred on Iraq, there was the great “Church of the East,” which followed a Nestorian understanding of Jesus. This position said that the *logos* or Word of God dwelt in Jesus but that this did not make him divine. His human nature was perfected through the presence of the *logos*. He was a prophet “filled with the Holy Spirit,” a human being adopted to the position of Son of God (following and developing upon the theological school of Antioch). After the disputes surrounding the Council of Ephesus in 431, they insisted on speaking of Mary as the “Christ-bearer” and not the “God-bearer” (*theotokos*). The Nestorians were energetic missionaries, carrying their form of Christianity along the trade routes up the Tigris River into Central Asia and along the Silk Road into China, in one direction, and south into India, in the other. They would later play an important part in conveying Greek wisdom to the Arabs and Muslim missionaries would follow their path in taking Islam to the east. They also had no doctrine of Original Sin and this, combined with their understanding of Jesus, made it an easier step for the eventual conversion of a good number of them to Islam.

To the west of the peninsula, in Egypt and Ethiopia, another form of Christianity was dominant. These are normally called Monophysites, that is those who followed and developed the other early theological school, that of Alexandria, to stress the single divine nature of Jesus. In him, the Word of God or *logos* was incarnate, so that he was fully divine. They upheld the doctrine of the Council of Ephesus 431 to use of Mary the name “God-bearer.” The Coptic Church in Egypt and Ethiopia would belong to this Monophysite school today. At the extreme end of this spectrum would be found the Docetists, who held that the humanity of Jesus was illusory, some of whom went to the extent of saying that Jesus escaped crucifixion and a substitute was crucified in his place. Further still to the west, along the coast of North Africa, another group was dominant, the Arians, who held the *logos* to be a creature of God and Jesus a human super-prophet. It was throughout this region that conversion to Islam would later make rapid strides, facilitated in part by this Arian doctrine of Jesus.

There were some Christian settlements in the Arabian peninsula itself, notably in the Yemen in Sana'a and Najran. We are not sure to which form of Christianity they belonged, except that we know that they were not Byzantine. It may well have been

that they followed the Ethiopian Monophysite school as that was their nearest neighbour. Both Sana'a and Najran were on the trade routes running up the western side of the peninsula to Damascus, so there could have been some cross-fertilisation.

### **The Arabs of the peninsula**

The Arabs at this time comprised various tribes with their sub-groups, often referred to as clans. Each tribe had its own identity, which was reinforced by memorised genealogies and a strong emphasis on oral history. Sometimes tribes banded together into federations but always the loyalty and identity was essentially tribal. There was a general unwritten legal code that emphasised mutual protection within the clan or tribe, in which any attack on a member was likely to result in concerted action to revenge any deaths, injuries or losses on the perpetrators. There was a high code of honour, by which someone who did not defend himself or exact revenge was unworthy of respect. It was common for one tribe to raid the encampments or flocks of another with a view to carrying off their livestock, slaves and women rather than shedding blood. This raiding mentality was so strong that there was a general agreement that four months of the year were declared to be a period of truce, in which no raiding was permitted and trade and religious rites and pilgrimages were conducted. The position of women within this society was akin to being another possession of the men of the tribe. Many dialects were spoken amongst the tribes but there was a great emphasis on poetry, which was recited in such a way that it could be understood commonly on an inter-tribal basis. One of the places in which such common recital took place was in Makka; as a centre of pilgrimage it was a great supra-tribal meeting place.

We can see three styles of life amongst these tribes: they were nomads, semi-nomads and settled peoples. The nomads tended to breed camels, which could travel with them. Those who lived on the more fertile margins had flocks of goats and sheep and a more restricted range of travel. In the settled communities, agriculture was likely to take the form of wheat, date plantations or fruit orchards. People from different tribes would live together in mixed settlements but still tribal identity and living in clan clusters was the norm. Settled communities would employ different battle tactics to the nomads. Leadership was tribal and thus based on a mixture of age, proven ability and lineage. In settlements and federations, a council of elders or *shura* was the supra-tribal norm. These leaders would give their patronage and protection to their clan members and, if they so chose, to people outside. This can be seen in the way that Abu Talib, the uncle of Muhammad (whether he was a Muslim or not is unclear), gave his protection to Muhammad when he was head of the clan. When he died, the next clan leader withdrew that protection, thus leaving Muhammad exposed to threats and even assassination attempts. In these circumstances, he sought the protection of the head of another clan to ensure his safety.

The religious culture of the Arabs was structured around the worship of many gods in a broadly hierarchical system or *henotheism*. Families would have family gods, generally carved of wood or stone, which would have a place of honour where they

could be greeted and a blessing received as members came and went from the dwelling. Then there would be clan gods, who were usually known by a name and placed in a sanctuary where sacrifices could be offered. There were three great sanctuaries for the supra-tribal goddesses: Lat in Ta'if, Uzzah east of Makka, and Manah between Makka and Yathrib [Q. 53:20]. These three feminine deities were known as the “daughters of god.” There is some evidence of a concept of a supreme god called Allah. Within this context, the *Ka'ba* in Makka had a pre-eminence. It was primarily the shrine of the god Hubal but additionally, many clans and tribes had brought one of their gods to reside there and at the time of Muhammad's youth, it is reported that there were some 360 gods in, on and around the *Ka'ba*. People would make pilgrimage there during the months of truce and engage in their ritual practices as well as trade with the merchants.

### **The trade routes**

The Arabian peninsula was strategically placed for trade from East Africa, India and other eastern countries seeking to send their goods to the lucrative markets around the Mediterranean. Ivory, rhino-horns and coconut oil would be sent from East Africa. Spices, pepper, precious stones, cotton, gum resin and tortoise shells would come from India and modern Indonesia. These were unloaded on the coast of Yemen, at modern Aden, and then taken by camel train merchants along a well-defined “spice road” that ran through such cities as Sana'a, Najran, Ta'if and Makka until eventually reaching the Mediterranean coast mainly at Damascus. The journeys were long, arduous and dangerous, therefore the caravans kept to the frequented routes and used to travel in numbers for the sake of security. The Makkan caravans would journey south to Aden in winter and then collect to travel north to Damascus in summer. The caravan merchants often played a role in making pacts with various peoples along the routes so that they could be sure of safe passage. At times of the involvement of the great empires, these could be political pacts too.

The customary practice was that camel train merchants took goods on trust to sell in the markets of Damascus and then returned with the proceeds. They earned their living by a system of profit-sharing with the original owners. The nomads would bring tanned hides and carvings to trading centres like Makka and entrust them to a merchant for onward shipment and sale. The potential for corruption is obvious. This is the context to understand the nick-name given to Muhammad in his early manhood as a trader, *al-Amin*, the Trustworthy. When Muhammad began to preach his egalitarian proclamation of mutual welfare with the rich taking care of the poor, this was an unwelcome message in such circles.

### **The cities**

The key significance of Makka has already been noted. Its prosperity was built on the combination of trade and pilgrimage. Ta'if was a short journey to the south-east but it stood in a much more fertile area where it was possible to grow wheat, grapes, vegetables, roses and all manner of fruits. Sometimes in the literature it is called “the

garden of Makka” because its larger neighbour provided a ready outlet for its produce, which could not be grown in the much more arid climate around Makka. To the north, the city of Yathrib, which was to become Madina, was really a cluster of tribal villages with some agriculture, especially date palms. There were significant Jewish clans that had settled there and over the years there had been Arab converts to Judaism. There were also lesser trade routes that crossed the peninsula towards the Gulf and the Sasanian lands, which passed through important trading cities such as Yamama and Hira.

## **Part Eleven: What happened after Muhammad: the Sunni view?**

There are some questions in the lives of all societies that appear not to have a resolution but which require us to understand the different positions of all parties. The question of what should have happened about the leadership of the Muslim community after the death of Muhammad is one of them. Do not ask me to solve a question that has divided Muslims far more intelligent than me for centuries! In this article, I will discuss the Sunni view and in Part Twelve, the Shi'a view.

The word Sunni is derived from the term *sunna* or the customary practice of Muhammad. All Muslims will say that they follow the *sunna* but the term Sunni relates to the largest group amongst Muslims worldwide, who are found throughout the world. They comprise some 85 to 90 per cent of all Muslims. Central to their position is that God does not decree in the Qur'an who was to follow Muhammad, what kind of a leadership that should be or how the question of selecting a new leader should be organised. Further, they hold that Muhammad did not nominate his successor or say how the new leader should be selected. God and Muhammad were silent on the question; therefore it was left up to the community to resolve.

Some things were clear. The most important is that Muhammad was the last prophet and so there was no question of someone taking his place directly as God's messenger amongst them. The community was to be led according to the Qur'an and the lived example of Muhammad. The revelation of the Qur'an ended with the death of Muhammad. Muhammad had been the single head of the community but this did not mean that there was no other form of leadership amongst the Muslims; in Arab tribal pattern, the hereditary leaders still had respect and the system of *shura* – seeking wisdom by consultation – was still in place. Much of Muhammad's authority came from the recognition by his followers that he was the Messenger of God and from his strong personality and charisma. This style of leadership paved the way for a single head of the community after the Prophet but this did not imply a dictator who held all the power in his own hands.

There are sayings reported from Muhammad that indicate that leadership should be based on piety and wisdom; one such records: "Even if he be a black Abyssinian slave, if he is the most wise and pious amongst you, then he should be your leader." There is no reference here to a hereditary principle or socio-political position within the society; the way is open for a meritocracy based on these two qualities. The Arabs valued age and experience, so they would be unlikely to choose a young or untested man as their leader. In the society of that time and place, it was unthinkable that the leader should not be a man and it would be expected that, like Muhammad, he should be ready to lead the men into battle if necessary.

### **The emergence of Abu Bakr (r632-634)**

As soon as rumours began to spread that Muhammad was dead there was consternation in Madina. Some refused to believe it and offered violence to anyone

who should say it was true. Some felt that their faith was shattered as it was built on Muhammad and he was dead. Some acted as though they thought that he was immortal. A decisive move was taken to quieten the crowd by Abu Bakr, one of the closest companions of Muhammad. He examined the body, confirmed death and then declared this to the crowd reminding them that Muslim faith was built on God and not on a mortal man. This subdued them but it was clear that strong leadership would be needed to see them through this turbulent time. A group of the leading members of the community, in good Arab fashion, went into a huddle together to discuss the question; thus forming a *shura*. When their deliberations were over, Abu Bakr had emerged as their choice as the head of the community. He was put to the assembly and, as might be expected in Arab society, the people affirmed the choice of their leaders.

Abu Bakr was around the same age as Muhammad, so he possessed the seniority of age and wisdom so highly favoured in that culture. He was one of the first Muslims and had been a close companion of Muhammad throughout his prophetic ministry, so he was steeped in the ways of Islam. He had migrated with Muhammad from Makka to Madina and been someone to whom Muhammad turned to lead the congregational prayers when he was away or ill. On one occasion, it is reported that Muhammad joined the congregation behind Abu Bakr. His daughter, Ayesha, had married Muhammad and so he was in this way related. He was not from one of the dominant clans of Makka or Madina and thus was acceptable to a wide grouping as a supra-tribal leader. He emerged on the basis of his own personal authority rather than any position that he might have held.

Abu Bakr did not see himself as being divinely-appointed, like the Byzantine religio-political leaders, who in a sense stood above the law, but rather one who was to lead within the confines of the Qur'an and *sunna* and therefore was open to be challenged by members of the community if he should stray from these sources. He had to continue to earn his living in the first half-year after his appointment until it was agreed to pay him a subsistence stipend from the communal funds.

One of the things that Abu Bakr had to do was to deal with the revolt that almost inevitably followed the death of Muhammad. Some of the desert clans felt that the treaties that they had made with Muhammad were no longer binding after his death. They objected to paying the annual *zakat* contribution to the poor and needy. This *ridda* or breaking out threatened to destabilise the delicate balance between nomads and settled peoples and jeopardise the all-important trade routes and markets. It linked a political end – treason – with a religious means – apostasy. Abu Bakr sent out armies in all directions to crush this rebellion and bring the clans back to their earlier agreements. Such activism also helped to bind the Muslim community together after the death of Muhammad. It was at this time that the great general of the expansion of the Muslim Empire came to the fore, Khalid ibn al-Walid. One of the characteristics of Abu Bakr's time was that former rebels, who had been brought back under authority, were not trusted to take part in the expansionary expeditions that took place during his reign.

Abu Bakr was marked by his valour in the cause of Islam and by his generosity in buying slaves to set them free; in this way he expended a good deal of his personal fortune. He was noted for his humility and for visiting the sick. He took the responsibility of making the first collected edition of the Qur'an. He is credited with giving drawing up a set of "standing orders" for the conduct of troops in battle, based on the Qur'an and *sunna*, which he sent to Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan as the commander of the army sent to Syria:

- Do not kill a woman, a child or a feeble old man
- Do not cut down a fruitful tree
- Do not ruin cultivated land
- Do not slaughter a camel or a sheep except for its owner
- Do not destroy the date palm or burn it
- Do not conceal plunder
- Do not be cowardly.

### **The nomination of Umar (r634-644)**

Before Abu Bakr died, after only two years in office, he nominated Umar ibn al-Khattab to take his place. This was an innovation in Arab custom but the nomination was subject to the general agreement of the community. Umar was the first to use the title of Caliph: he was the *khalifa* of the *khalifa* of the Prophet, in other words, the successor to Abu Bakr. In time the simpler title *Amir al-Mu'minin*, "Commander of the Faithful" was introduced. The term "Commander" should not be taken in too authoritarian a sense; there was no real centralised government amongst the Arabs at this time but a commonwealth of local rulers with Caliph Umar as the counsellor and guide rather than the absolute military commander.

Umar was a man of proven ability and presided over a two-directional expansion of the community. He sent men to Iraq to conquer the Sasanians and another army to Syria to claim territory off the Byzantines. Both campaigns were successful and modern Iraq and Syria came under Muslim rule. Crucial in this development was Umar's decision to reverse Abu Bakr's policy and enlist the former rebels, which added substantial numbers of armed men and effectively united the settled and nomadic communities. In Iraq, the garrison towns of Basra and Kufa became important centres of power in the region.

Umar originally had been a noted opponent of Islam and his conversion is related to an incident in which he heard his own sister and her husband, who had become Muslims, reading a portion of the Qur'an. When he eventually read this too, it led to his making his *shahada* in front of Muhammad. He was renowned for his austerity of life and there are several records of his going around in patched clothing. He was a noted warrior and defender of the faith. He had a wide knowledge of the teachings of the Qur'an and *sunna*. He established many institutions in the infant Muslim community, which set things in order for the expanding empire, for example, he established *qadis* or judges for the provinces.

### **The *shura* chooses Uthman (r644-656)**

Prior to his death by an assassin's knife, Umar appointed a *shura* to act as an electoral college to decide on the appointment of his successor between themselves. It comprised of six leading members of the Makkan community. They took soundings from other leaders in Madina and short-listed two of their number: Ali ibn Abi Talib and Uthman ibn Affan. A critical precondition that they made was that the chosen candidate should continue with the policies of Abu Bakr and Umar. Ali refused to accept this requirement and thus ruled himself out. Uthman agreed to it and so was chosen to succeed Umar as Caliph. Uthman was a leader of the Umayyad clan of the tribe of Quraysh and thus can be thought of as belonging to the Makkan aristocracy. He was a natural conservative leader and knew well the social structure and trading interests of the Makkans.

The scholars generally speak of "two halves" of Uthman's reign. In the first six years, he carried on much as his predecessors but in the second six years, he attempted to assert his authority more directly over the expanding empire. To this end, he appointed Umayyad clan members as provincial governors. They owed their allegiance to him through the clan system. On the whole, they were competent and effective governors.

The next development was to use the provincial structures to send out armies; from Egypt into North Africa, and from Iraq into the remaining Sasanian territories. During this time a flood of wealth came into Muslim hands. Four-fifths of this wealth was distributed locally and one-fifth was sent to the Caliph's treasury in Madina. The way that Uthman distributed this wealth in Madina, according to the clan patronage model, led to accusations of nepotism.

Uthman's desire to impose centralised authority over the districts led to tensions with the leadership in Kufa and also with the Egyptians. Eventually the Egyptians sent a delegation to Madina to argue their case with Uthman. They were joined by some disgruntled people from Kufa. In the end, the discussions became heated and one of the Egyptian delegation killed Uthman.

Uthman had the distinction of being married to two of Muhammad's daughters: first to Ruqayyah, then, after her death, to Umm Kulthum. He also migrated twice: first with the group to Abyssinia and then later to Madina. He is recorded as one of the first four male converts to Islam and as someone who had memorised the entire Qur'an.

### **Ali by popular acclaim (r656-661)**

There was chaos in the Muslim community after the assassination of Uthman. Eyes turned towards Ali as the natural choice and after a few days he was persuaded to

accept the Caliphate. He had wide support amongst the people of Madina but some of the leading members of the Makkan Quraysh tribe opposed him for fear of his radical egalitarian ideas. This Makkan group enlisted the support of Ayesha, one of Muhammad's widows, and it came eventually to civil war, resulting in the Battle of the Camel, so called because Ayesha sat on her camel to the rear of the fighting and encouraged the troops. Ali won a decisive victory, the Makkan leaders who opposed him were killed in the battle and Ayesha withdrew from public life.

Ali began to interpret the teaching of the Qur'an and *sunna* in ways that were applicable to the contemporary circumstances. In addition to the support of the people of Madina, Ali had support from the leaders of Kufa and Basra in Iraq, as well as from Egypt but not from the province of Syria under the Umayyad governor, Mu'awiya. He wanted the death of his kinsman, Uthman, to be more energetically investigated and revenge to be taken on the perpetrators. This opposition led to the Battle of Siffin in 657. It is recorded to have lasted for three months but most of this time was taken up in negotiation and occasional skirmishes. When battle proper was entered, the Syrians put copies of the Qur'an on the ends of their lances and thus sought arbitration. When Ali agreed to arbitration, a group from his side objected as they argued that this usurped the right of God to judge between them on the battlefield. They left Ali's camp and were known as the Kharijites, or "those who go out." They set up their own little republics in opposition to Ali, who eventually crushed them. It was one of these Kharijites seeking revenge, who assassinated Ali in Kufa in 661.

In addition to being the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, Ali is recorded as one of the first male converts to Islam. He was outstanding in battle, often being sent out into initial single combat with the enemy and being entrusted with bearing the Muslim standard in battle. He was widely respected for his knowledge of Qur'an and *sunna*, and for being a wise judge.

### **The rise of the dynasties**

After Ali's death, Egypt sided with Syria and Mu'awiya became the Caliph, which brought in the first dynasty amongst the Muslims, with his Umayyads keeping the power amongst themselves until they were overthrown in 750. They moved their capital to Damascus and this period saw a substantial expansion of the Islamic Empire: north, east and west. This resulted in huge wealth flowing to the centre, which helped to keep the Umayyads in power.

## **Part Twelve: What happened after Muhammad: the Shi'a view?**

In Part Eleven, we looked at what happened after the death of Muhammad according to the Sunni view; here we look at the same question according to the Shi'a view. It is not my place to attempt to reconcile these perspectives or to give a judgement as to which view is right. If we want to understand Islam, then we need to understand both perspectives, each from within their own understanding. Being a minority does not render the Shi'a wrong; any more than being a majority renders the Sunnis right. It is not part of the Shi'a understanding that this was the path laid down by God for a group within the Muslim community but rather that this was God's plan for the whole Muslim community.

It is crucial to remember that there is one common text of the Qur'an, to which all Muslims defer. Differences of interpretation lead to the range of positions taken by Muslims and not a difference of Qur'anic text. In the same way, many of the critical incidents in the life of Muhammad are commonly agreed to have happened but they are given different meanings by various groups. A central question, as will become clear as we progress, is who has the authority and necessary capacity correctly to interpret texts and events. Is such interpretation restricted to those with God-given privileged knowledge or open to any believer with the necessary intellectual tools?

The Shi'a today are geographically concentrated in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, where they form the majority of the Muslims. They also form significant minorities in the Lebanon, Syria, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. They are also present in those countries to which Muslims have migrated, such as East Africa, Britain, Canada and the United States of America. In total, they form between ten and fifteen per cent of the worldwide Muslim population. They are sub-divided into various groups but those sub-divisions do not form part of our discussion here. We will concentrate on the majority school amongst the Shi'a, who recognise a line of twelve divinely-appointed Imams, the Ithna Ashari.

### **An established pattern**

The Qur'an speaks of Abraham as not only a prophet but also an Imam [Q. 2:124]; the latter term is understood in Shi'a usage to indicate that, in addition to his spiritual role, he had political, legal and military leadership as well. Moses was given his brother Haroun (Aaron) as a co-worker and minister (*wazir*), who was to take over the leadership of the community after his death [Q. 28:33-35; 19:53; 25:35; 7:142]. Haroun however was a prophet in his own right. Jesus had his inner circle around him under the leadership of Simon Peter. It seems that there is a divinely-ordained pattern of successors to certain prophets being charged with leadership after them, to carry on their work and apply their message. In the case of Muhammad, he was the last of the prophets, so there is no question of another prophet to succeed him, but what about a *wazir* or minister to carry on his work?

## Muhammad and Ali

After the start of the revelation of the Qur'an, Muhammad told only his wife Khadija and his cousin Ali, who became the first Muslims. Later Muhammad was told to summon his family, tell them about his prophethood and ask them to follow him. The decisive step was taken by Ali, who declared his faith in the prophethood of Muhammad. Muhammad announced that from that time onwards, Ali was to be his brother, successor, *wazir* and the executor of his will. The Qur'an says that Muhammad spoke not out of his own will but by the will of God [Q. 53:3]. Here then was Muhammad declaring in the name of God at the start of his mission that Ali was to succeed him. He was to be to Muhammad as Haroun was to Moses, except that he was not a prophet. From that time onwards, Ali was his constant companion, imbibing the message of the Qur'an from the life and words of the Prophet.

This divine appointment (*nass*) of Ali is also confirmed in an episode reported in the Qur'an. A poor man entered the mosque in Madina to beg for alms whilst some people were doing voluntary prayers. The only one to respond to his request was Ali, who was bowing in prayer when he was approached and held out his hand to the man indicating that he should take his ring as charity. A verse of the Qur'an was revealed at this time [Q. 5:55] that spoke of the “guardian with authority” (*wali*) in the community being God, then Muhammad, then “the faithful one who maintains the prayer and gives charity whilst bowing down.” Muhammad confirmed that this was God’s designation of Ali as his successor.

About three months before the death of Muhammad, he led the Muslim community on the only Hajj pilgrimage that he performed. By this time, almost all the Qur'an had been revealed and the Muslim practice of the community was well established. All the practices and teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet had been conveyed to the community. On the way back from this pilgrimage, on the journey from Makka to Madina, the Angel Gabriel (Jibril) appeared to Muhammad with the command to “convey what has been conveyed to you or else you have done nothing” [Q. 5:67]. What could this definitive command be at this late stage of Muhammad’s mission, when the message had been so comprehensively conveyed? Muhammad halted the community at an oasis called Ghadir Khumm. This was the point at which the roads separated and some had already gone on their way; Muhammad called them back. The whole pilgrim body was thus assembled; by tradition some 72,000 Muslims. Muhammad mounted a rock so that he could be seen and heard. He raised the hand of Ali and said that all those who accepted him as their master or leader (*maula*) should take Ali as their *maula* after his death.

This was the clear designation by the infallible Prophet that Ali should be his successor. All the Muslims who were present pledged their allegiance to Ali at this time as the Commander of the Faithful (*Amir al-Mu'minin*). On this occasion, the verse of the Qur'an “this day I have perfected your religion” was revealed [Q. 5:3]. Muhammad then spoke this prayer: “My Lord, be the friend of whoever is Ali’s friend, and the enemy of whoever is Ali’s enemy; love whoever loves him and hate

whoever hates him; help whoever helps him and abandon whoever abandons him, whoever he may be. Let those who are present convey this to those who are absent.” This day is commemorated annually on 'Id Ghadir Khumm.

### **The Family of the Prophet**

Ali was not alone in being set aside by God in a special way. When Muhammad challenged the Christian delegation from Najran to mutual cursing to determine who was telling the truth, they were to bring their families with them [Q. 3:61]: their women, their sons and their souls (*nafs*). When Muhammad appeared, he was accompanied only by Fatima (his daughter), Hasan and Husayn (the grandsons of Muhammad and children of Fatima and Ali), and Ali. These five are then seen to comprise the Family of the Prophet or Ahl al-Bayt. The term *nafs* is important here as someone's *nafs* refers to their inner self, or their soul. Ali is here identified with the *nafs* of Muhammad; thus Ali was the bearer of the inner light that dwelt also in Muhammad. As Muhammad himself put it: “I am the city of knowledge and Ali is the gate.”

In another incident recorded in the Qur'an, Muhammad was covered by a cloak or blanket, under which he called successively Hasan, Husayn, Fatima and Ali. The following verse of the Qur'an was then revealed: “Indeed God desires to repel all impurity from you, O Ahl al-Bayt, and purify you with a thorough purification” [Q. 33:33]. This incident is understood by the Shi'a as God's designation of these five people as the highest of all creation, those “drawn close to God” [Q. 56:7-11] and thus that all ultimate earthly leaders within the Muslim community must descend exclusively from this family. The descendants were the line of the later Imams. This “verse of the purification” is understood as God's declaration that the Ahl al-Bayt were without sin from their birth and throughout their lives. From this comes the theological term the *ma'sum* or “sinless ones” (more technically, we can say “the impeccables,” which includes the concept of being infallible or without error in their lives and teaching). This status is extended to all of the nine impeccable Imams that followed on; thus we often read of the Fourteen Impeccables, being Muhammad, Fatima and the twelve Imams.

### **The on-going Imamate**

As Muhammad was sinless and infallibly declared God's designation of Ali as his successor, so Ali in turn infallibly designated his first son, Hasan, to succeed him as Imam or the divinely-appointed leader of the community. Hasan in turn infallibly designated his brother Husayn as the third Imam, and so on through the generations until the twelfth Imam, who went into a hidden existence in 941 and remains alive today as the Hidden Imam. He is the Imam of the Present Age, still present and active “like the sun hidden behind the clouds.” It is this twelfth Imam who will return in the last phase of earth's existence as Imam al-Mahdi, at which time he will rid the earth of injustice and rule for a period of time in uprightness and truth.

In Shi'a understanding, the Imams shared in the inner light of purity and knowledge that dwelt within Muhammad. They are not prophets but they are the closest to them. They do not receive direct revelation from God (*wahy*), as did the prophets, but they are the bearers of divine inspiration (*ilham*). Just as Muhammad was given knowledge that can only come directly from God, esoteric knowledge, so too the Imams share in this knowledge, which enables them to interpret the Qur'an and Islamic way of life infallibly and thus give guidance to the community with an authority that no other people possess. They are able to report and interpret the Hadith of the Prophet with an assurance that is unique.

There are many Hadith of the Prophet in which he spoke about the role of the Ahl al-Bayt after his death. He said, "Stars save people from being drowned and my household saves people from disagreements and conflicts." Again, "Be aware that surely the parable of my household amongst you is like the ship of Noah, whoever embarked on the ship of Noah was saved and whoever refused to do so was drowned." Finally, "Whoever enters by their association with the Ahl al-Bayt will be forgiven by God." These Hadith make it clear that the Ahl al-Bayt are to have the role of guiding the Muslim community, interpreting the Qur'an and authentic *sunna* of the Prophet and being a blessing leading to forgiveness and Paradise after the Prophet's death. He spoke of them as "his trust" and "a partner for the Qur'an."

The most explicit Hadith of Muhammad in this regard is called the Hadith of the Two Most Precious Things. Muhammad said, "I am leaving amongst you two most precious things, the Book of God and the Ahl al-Bayt, as long as you hold fast to them you will not go astray. These two things will not separate from each other until they reach me near the fountain (in Paradise) on the Day of Judgement." The Qur'an and the Ahl al-Bayt are like the two rails of a railway track to lead humankind through this life to Paradise. They run in parallel; if the rails separate from each other, then the train could not run along the track. If only one rail is present, then the train cannot run at all. This was God's plan for humanity. As the Qur'an says, "A faithful man or woman may not, when God and his Prophet have decided on a matter, have any option in their decision, and whoever disobeys God and his Prophet has certainly strayed into manifest error" [Q. 33:36].

### **What happened after the death of Muhammad?**

Ali, as the closest male relative and executor of the Prophet's will, was occupied with the funeral arrangements when the elders of the community met to decide that Abu Bakr should take on the leadership of the community. Although Ali and other members of the Prophet's wider family reminded them of God's and the Prophet's designation of Ali to succeed him, they did not avail. To have pressed the cause would have led to bloodshed and so Ali withdrew from the dispute. Similarly when Abu Bakr nominated Umar to succeed him. Ali was part of the electoral college that was appointed to decide on the successor to Umar but, as the others insisted on a precondition that the practices of Abu Bakr and Umar must be followed by the successor, a precondition that Ali could not accept as certain practices established by

the Qur'an and *sunna* had already been changed by these two, Ali had to decline to accept a nomination. It was only when Uthman was assassinated that Ali came into his rightful position as the Imam of the Muslim community. Those who supported Ali's rightful succession were called the Party of Ali, the *Shi'a-t Ali*, or the Shi'a.