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Fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford University and the Lokahi Foundation (London). He is the author of Western Muslims and the Future of Islam; Islam, the West, and the Challenges of Modernity; and To Be a European Muslim.

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amed by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most important innovators of the century, Tariq Ramadan is a leading Muslim scholar, with a large following especially among young European and American Muslims. Now, in his first book written for a wide audience, he offers a marvelous biography of the Prophet Muhammad, one that highlights the spiritual and ethical teachings of one of the most influential figures in human history.

Here is a fresh and perceptive look at Muhammad, capturing a life that was often eventful, gripping, and highly charged. Ramadan provides both an intimate portrait of a man who was shy, kind, but determined, as well as a dramatic chronicle of a leader who launched a great religion and inspired a vast empire. More important, Ramadan presents the main events of the Prophet's life in a way that highlights his spiritual and ethical teachings. The book underscores the significance of the Prophet's example for some of today's most controversial issues, such as the treatment of the poor, the role of women, Islamic criminal punishments, war, racism, and relations with other religions. Selecting those facts and stories from which we can draw a profound and vivid spiritual picture, the author asks how the Prophet's life can remain—or become again—an example, a model, and an inspiration. And how can Muslims move from formalism—a fixation on ritual—toward a committed spiritual and social presence?

In this thoughtful and engaging biography, Ramadan offers Muslims a new understanding of Muhammad's life and he introduces non-Muslims not just to the story of the Prophet, but to the spiritual and ethical riches of Islam.

### IN THE

# **FOOTSTEPS**

OF THE

# **PROPHET**



Lessons from the Life of Muhammad

Tariq Ramadan



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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc. 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016 www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Ramadan, Tariq.

In the footsteps of the prophet: lessons from the life of Muhammad / Tariq Ramadan.

p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-19-530880-8

1. Muhammad, Prophet, d. 632-Appreciation.

2. Muhammad, Prophet, d. 632—Ethics.

3. Muhammad, Prophet, d. 632—Teachings.

4. Muslims-Conduct of life.

Islamic ethics.

I. Title.

BP76.2R36 2007

297.6'3-dc22

[B] 2006026030

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#### To Najma

This book is a work of dawn
And you accompanied it, with your footsteps on the stairs,
Your mischievous, laughing, or sulky eyes.
You came to curl up in my arms.
I would then leave the screen through which I was immersed
In the infinite light of the Messenger's goodness and love,
To drown in the infinite warmth of your presence.
The Messenger taught me forgiveness, you offered me innocence.
May your path be bright, my daughter, and may He love you
Through your smiles and through your tears.
I love you.

#### To Muna Ali

An American encounter and a never-ending gift
Facing trials, accepting silences.
You have accompanied my thought and my questions,
And read and reread and rephrased, often better than I could have done.
Faithfulness of the heart and soul in the Light of the Most High
In the footsteps of His Messenger.
I forget nothing.

#### To Claude Dabbak.

To tell you here of my esteem and respect
For that deep modesty and constant humility.
Behind the translator, one senses deeply rich learning
And an immense gift offered to Western Muslims.
Your name too often hides behind authors' works.
Our debt is immense, mine in particular.
In the name of us all, truly, from the bottom of my heart,
Thank you!

# Acknowledgments

In the hours of dawn when this book was written, there was silence, meditative solitude, and the experience of a journey, beyond time and space, toward the heart, the essence of spiritual quest, and initiation into meaning. Moments of plenitude, and often of tears; of contemplation and vulnerability. I needed this.

As time went on, the list of the women and men who made it possible to complete this project grew longer. I am almost sure that some of these precious names are going to escape me, though this in no way lessens the importance of their presence and contribution. Others have been moved by discretion or other reasons to remain anonymous; I understand, and my heart thanks them beyond these pages with the affection and gratitude they know go out to them.

I would first of all like to thank Faris Kermani and Neil Cameron, who two years ago asked me to narrate a film, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad*, for a British television channel. Political considerations (two Arab governments having banned me from entering their territory) unfortunately made that project impossible. I then decided to do something entirely different and write a biography of the Prophet Muhammad, endeavoring to throw light on the spiritual and contemporary teachings in the life of the last Prophet. Many people around me encouraged me to carry out this work. I am indebted to Iman, Maryam, Sami, Moussa, and Najma for their constant accompaniment and support, and to my mother for some original ideas that came up here and there in our discussions. I would like to thank Cynthia Read, of Oxford University Press (New York), very warmly for her permanent enthusiasm, faithfulness, and humanity. In her Oxford-based collaborators, I have also found thoughtful and kind women and men.

During this academic year, my work has been accompanied by the presence of Gwen Griffith-Dickson and Vicky Mohammed of the Lokahi Foundation, based in London. At Saint Antony's College, Oxford University, Walter Armbrust and Eugene Rogan (Middle East Center) as well as Timothy Garton Ash and Kalypso Nicolaidis (European Studies Center) also enabled me to complete this work in the best possible conditions through their academic support and friendship. I do not forget Polly Friedhoff (who has now gone into well-deserved retirement), Franca Potts, and Collette Caffrey, who have been constantly available. To all of them, and to all those women and men who have surrounded me with their recognition and unobtrusive support, I would here like to express my deepest gratitude.

There is of course Yasmina Dif, my assistant, who manages my European office in such a warm and efficient manner. Shelina Merani, in Canada, has also undertaken difficult work with heart and solidarity. Muna Ali, more than an assistant based in the United States, keeps reading, commenting, and sharing ideas faithfully and seriously. Claude Dabbak has translated this book and has, with great humility, never failed to put her learning at the service of the necessary corrections. This book could not have been completed without the collaboration of this team, at once fraternal, demanding, and devoted. With all my heart, I thank them for being with me on this journey and making it possible for us to advance together, in His light, against wind and tide.

My final thanks and my last prayer go to the One, the Most Near, that He may accept and receive this life of the Prophet, that He may forgive me its possible errors or failings—which are due to none but myself—and that He may allow it to be a small landmark in the human enterprise of understanding and reconciliation: with oneself, with others, with His love. I learn daily that the quest for humility cannot justify any lapse from spiritual requirements or intellectual probity.

For myself, this book has been an initiation. I pray to the Most Gracious that it may be so for others. Long is the road of exile leading to oneself. . . .

London May 2006

# Introduction

Countless biographies of the Prophet Muhammad already exist. From classical sources (such as the works of Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham) to more recent accounts of the life of God's Messenger, as well as other renowned works by Muslim scholars over the course of history, it seems that everything must have already been said over and over again and that the subject matter must necessarily have been exhausted. So why should we undertake yet another attempt?

The present biography does not aim to compete with classical sources (which indeed are its source material), disclose any new facts, or provide an original or revolutionary reinterpretation of the history of prophet-hood and its context. The aims of the present study are far more modest, though it does not make them any easier to achieve.

The Prophet Muhammad occupies a particular place in the life and conscience of Muslims today, just as he did in the past. According to them, he received and transmitted the last revealed book, the Quran, which repeatedly insists on the eminent and singular position of the Messenger of God, all at once a prophet, a bearer of news, a model, and a guide. He was but a man, yet he acted to transform the world in the light of Revelation and inspirations he received from God, his Educator (ar-Rabb). That this man was chosen and inspired by God but also fully accepted his own humanity is what makes Muhammad an example and a guide for the Muslim faithful.

Muslims do not consider the Messenger of Islam a mediator between God and people. Each individual is invited to address God directly, and although the Messenger did sometimes pray to God on behalf of his X Introduction

community, he often insisted on each believer's responsibility in his or her dialogue and relationship with the One. Muhammad simply reminds the faithful of God's presence: he initiates them into His knowledge and discloses the initiatory path of spirituality through which he teaches his Companions and community that they must transcend the respect and love they have for him in the worship and love they must offer to and ask of the One, who begets not and is not begotten.

To those who, in his lifetime, wanted miracles and concrete evidence of his prophethood, Revelation ordered him to reply: "I am but a man like yourselves; the inspiration has come to me that your God is One God." This same Revelation also informs the believers, for all eternity, of the singular status of this Messenger who, while chosen by God, never lost his human qualities: "You have indeed in the Messenger of God an excellent example for he who hopes in God and the Final Day, and who remembers God much." These two dimensions—the man's humanity and the Prophet's exemplarity—serve as the focus of our interest in the present biography.

This is not going to be a detailed account of historical facts, great achievements, or famous wars. Classical biographies of the Messenger give abundant information about such matters, and we see no profit in dealing with them exhaustively. Our attention is mainly focused, throughout the narration of the story of his life, on situations, attitudes, or words that could reveal Muhammad's personality and what it can teach and convey to us today. When Aishah, his wife, was once questioned about the Prophet's personality, she answered: "His character [the ethics underlying his behavior] was the Quran." Since the Book addresses the believing consciousness through the ages, it seemed essential to observe how the man who best incarnated it in his behavior could "speak" to us, guide, us and educate us nowadays.

The initial idea was therefore to plunge into the heart of the Prophet's life and draw out its timeless spiritual teachings. From his birth to his death, his life is strewn with events, situations, and statements that point to the deepest spiritual edification. Adherence to faith, dialogue with God, observing nature, self-doubt, inner peace, signs and trials, and so on are themes that speak to us and remind us that basically nothing has changed. The Messenger's biography points to primary and eternal existential questions, and in this sense, his life is an initiation.

A second type of lesson can nevertheless be drawn from the historical events that filled the Prophet's life. In the seventh century, at the heart of a specific social, political, and cultural environment, God's Messenger acted, reacted, and expressed himself about human beings and events in the name of his faith, in the light of his morals. Studying his actions in this particular historical and geographical setting should enable us to throw light on a number of principles about the relation of faith to human beings, brotherhood, love, adversity, community life, justice, laws, and war. We have therefore endeavored to approach Muhammad's life from the perspective of our own times, considering how it still speaks to us and what its contemporary teachings are.

The reader, whether Muslim or not, is thus invited to look into the Prophet's life and follow the steps of an account that is strictly faithful to classical biographies (as far as facts and chronology are concerned) but which nevertheless constantly introduces reflections and comments, of a spiritual, philosophical, social, judicial, political, or cultural nature, inspired by the facts narrated. The choice to focus on certain events rather than others is of course determined by the wish to draw out teachings that speak to our lives and to our times. In each section of the (deliberately short) chapters that make up this book, the reader will notice constant movements between the Prophet's life, the Quran, and the teachings relevant to spirituality and the present-day situation that can be drawn from the various historical situations.

Our aim is more to get to know the Prophet himself than to learn about his personality or the events in his life. What is sought are immersion, sympathy, and, essentially, love. Whether one believes or not, it is not impossible to try to immerse oneself in the Prophet's quest and existence and recapture the pulse—the spirit—that infused his mission with meaning. This is indeed the primary ambition of this work: making of the Messenger's life a mirror through which readers facing the challenges of our time can explore their hearts and minds and achieve an understanding of questions of being and meaning as well as broader ethical and social concerns.

This book is intended for a large audience, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The text is academically rigorous in regard to classical Islamic sources, which we hope makes it useful to scholars and the Islamic sciences. By contrast, the narrative, interwoven with reflections and meditations, is

deliberately easy to follow and endeavors to convey Islam's spiritual and universal teachings. The Messenger's historical experience is clearly the privileged way to grasp the eternal principles shared by more than a billion Muslims throughout the world. This book is thus a living introduction to Islam.

The Messenger taught his Companions to love God, and the Quran taught them in return: "Say[, O Messenger]: If you love God, follow me: God will love you."5 They strove to follow his example, driven by a love for him that itself was animated by the intensity of their love for God. This love was such that when Umar ibn al-Khattab heard of the Prophet's death, he threatened to kill whoever dared claim that the Prophet was dead: he had only been raised to heaven and would assuredly come back. Another of Muhammad's Companions, Abu Bakr, asked Umar to be quiet, and declared: "O you people, let those who worshiped Muhammad know that Muhammad is now dead! As for those who worshiped God, let them know that God is alive and does not die."6 Then he recited the following verse: "Muhammad is no more than a messenger; many were the messengers who passed away before him. If he died or was killed, will you then turn back? If any did turn back, not the least harm will he do to God. But God will reward the thankful." Those words forcefully recall the finitude of the Messenger's life but in no way reduce the infinite love and deep respect Muslims have continued to show the Last Prophet through the ages.

This love finds expression in the permanent remembrance of his life in their hearts and memories, constantly offering prayers for the Messenger, and in the human and moral requirement to follow his example in daily life. The present biography endeavors to fulfill this requirement with love and knowledge. The Prophet's life is an invitation to a spirituality that avoids no question and teaches us—in the course of events, trials, hardships, and our quest—that the true answers to existential questions are more often those given by the heart than by the intelligence. Deeply, simply: he who cannot love cannot understand.



## Encounter with the Sacred

Islamic monotheism has always stood in continuity with the sacred history of prophethood. From the beginning, the One God sent humankind prophets and messengers entrusted with the message, the reminder of His presence, His commands, His love, and His hope. From Adam, the first prophet, to Muhammad, the Last Messenger, Muslim tradition recognizes and identifies with the whole cycle of prophethood, ranging from the most famous messengers (Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus, etc.) to the lesser known, as well as others who remain unknown to us. The One has forever been accompanying us, His creation, from our beginnings to our end. This is the very meaning of *tawhid* (the Oneness of God) and of the Quranic formula that refers to humankind's destiny as well as to that of each individual: "To God we belong and to Him we return." 1

### A Lineage, a Place

Of all messengers, the most important figure in the Last Prophet's lineage is undoubtedly Abraham. There are many reasons for this, but from the outset, the Quran points to this particular link with Abraham through the insistent and continuous expression of pure monotheism, of human consciousness's adherence to the divine project, of the heart's access to His recognition and to His peace through self-giving. This is the meaning of the word *Islam*, which is too often translated quickly by the mere idea of submission but which also contains the twofold meaning of "peace" and "wholehearted self-giving." Thus a Muslim is a human being who,

throughout history—and even before the last Revelation—has wished to attain God's peace through the wholehearted gift of him- or herself to the Being. In this sense, Abraham was the deep and exemplary expression of the Muslim:

He [God] has chosen you, and has imposed no difficulties on you in religion. It is the religion of your father Abraham. He has named you Muslims, both before and in this [Revelation]; so that the Messenger may be a witness for you [the new Muslim community], and you may be witnesses for humankind.<sup>2</sup>

Along with this recognition of the One, the figure of Abraham stands out most particularly among the line of prophets leading up to the Messenger of Islam for several other reasons. The book of Genesis, like the Quran, relates the story of Abraham's servant Hagar, who gave birth to his first child, Ishmael, in his old age. Sarah, Abraham's first wife, who in turn gave birth to Isaac, asked her husband to send away his servant and her child.

Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael away to a valley in the Arabian Peninsula called Bacca, which Islamic tradition identifies as present-day Mecca. The Islamic account, like Genesis, relates the questionings, suffering, and prayers of Abraham and Hagar, who were compelled to experience exile and separation. In both the Muslim and Judeo-Christian traditions, this trial is recounted with the certainty and intimate comfort that the parents and child were carrying out a command from God, who will protect and bless Abraham's descendants born of Hagar. To Abraham's invocations about his son, God answers in Genesis:

As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him . . . and I will make him a great nation.<sup>4</sup>

Then further on, when Hagar is helpless and without food and water:

And God heard the voice of the child, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the child where he is. Arise, lift up the child, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation." 5

### As for the Quran, it relates Abraham's prayer:

O my Lord! I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Your sacred House; in order, O our Lord, that they may establish regular prayer: so fill the hearts of some among men with love toward them, and feed them with fruits, so that they may give thanks. O our Lord! Truly You know what we conceal and what we reveal: for nothing whatever is hidden from God, whether on earth or in heaven. Praise be to God, Who has granted me in old age Ishmael and Isaac: for truly my Lord is He, the Hearer of Prayer!<sup>6</sup>

On a purely factual level, the Prophet Muhammad is a descendant of Ishmael's children and is therefore part of that "great nation" announced by the Scriptures. Abraham is hence his "father" in the primary sense, and Islamic tradition understands that the blessings of this father's prayers extend to his descendant the Last Prophet as well as to the place where he left Hagar and Ishmael, where, a few years later, he was to undergo the terrible trial of his son's sacrifice, and where he was finally to raise with him God's sacred House (the Kaba). Quranic Revelation recounts:

And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled. [God] said: "I will make you a guide for the people." [Abraham] said: "And also for my offspring?" [God] said: "But My promise is not within the reach of evildoers. Remember We made the House a place of assembly for men and women and a place of safety. And take the station of Abraham as a place of prayer. And We covenanted with Abraham and Ishmael, that they should sanctify My House for those who go round it, or use it as a retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves [there in prayer]." And remember Abraham said: "My Lord, make this a city of peace, and feed its people with fruits—such of them as believe in God and the Last Day."

This is the millenary teaching of Islamic tradition: there is a God and a line of prophets whose central figure is Abraham, the archetype of the Muslim, the blood father of this lineage of Ishmael leading up to Muhammad. Abraham and Ishmael sanctified this place in Bacca (Mecca) by building God's House (bayt Allah) with their own hands. And this is

precisely where the last of God's messengers to humankind was born: Muhammad ibn Abdullah, who bore the message reminding people of the One, of the prophets, and of the sacred House. A God, a place, a prophet.

#### The Trial of Faith: Doubt and Trust

These simple facts alone illustrate the remarkable bond linking Muhammad's life to Abraham's. Yet it is the spiritual lineage that even more clearly reveals the exceptional nature of this bond. The whole Abrahamic experience unveils the essential dimension of faith in the One. Abraham, who is already very old and has only recently been blessed with a child, must undergo the trial of separation and abandonment, which will take Hagar and their child, Ishmael, very close to death. His faith is trust in God: he hears God's command—as does Hagar—and he answers it despite his suffering, never ceasing to invoke God and rely on Him. Hagar questioned Abraham about the reasons for such behavior; finding it was God's command, she willingly submitted to it. She asked, then trusted, then accepted, and by doing so she traced the steps of the profound "active acceptance" of God's will: to question with one's mind, to understand with one's intelligence, and to submit with one's heart. In the course of those trials, beyond his human grief and in fact through the very nature of that grief, Abraham develops a relationship with God based on faithfulness, reconciliation, peace, and trust. God tries him but is always speaking to him, inspiring him and strewing his path with signs that calm and reassure him.

Several years after this abandonment in the desert, Abraham was to experience another trial: God asked him to sacrifice his first-born son, Ishmael.<sup>8</sup> This is how the Quran recounts the story:

So We gave him [Abraham] the good news: the birth of a sweet-tempered son. Then, when [the son] was old enough to walk with him, he said: "O my son! I have seen in a dream that I offer you in sacrifice. Now see what you think!" [The son] said: "O my father! Do as you are commanded; you will find me, if God so wills, one of the steadfast." So when they had both submitted [to God], and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead, We called out to him: "O Abraham! You have already fulfilled the dream!—

thus indeed do We reward those who do right. For this was a clear trial." And we ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice. And we left for him among generations [to come] in later times: peace and salutation to Abraham!

The trial is a terrible one: for the sake of his love and faith in God, Abraham must sacrifice his son, despite his fatherly love. The trial of faith is here expressed in this tension between the two loves. Abraham confides in Ishmael, and it is his own son, the object of sacrifice, whose comforting words to his father are like a confirming sign: "O my father! Do as you are commanded; you will find me, if God so wills, one of the steadfast." As was the case a few years earlier with Hagar, Abraham finds in others signs that enable him to face the trial. Such signs, expressing the presence of the divine at the heart of the trial, have an essential role in the experience of faith and shape the mode of being with oneself and with God. When God causes His messenger to undergo a terrible trial and at the same time associates that trial with signs of His presence and support (the confirming words of his wife or child, a vision, a dream, an inspiration, etc.), He educates Abraham in faith: Abraham doubts himself and his own strength and faith, but at the same time the signs prevent him from doubting God. This teaches Abraham humility and recognition of the Creator. When Abraham is tempted by deep doubt about himself, his faith, and the truth of what he hears and understands, the inspirations and confirmations of Hagar and Ishmael (whom he loves but sacrifices in the name of divine love) enable him not to doubt God, His presence, and His goodness. Doubt about self is thus allied to deep trust in God.

Indeed, trials of faith are never tragic in Islamic tradition, and in this sense, the Quran's story of Abraham is basically different from the Bible's when it comes to the experience of sacrifice. One can read in Genesis:

After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." [God] said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." . . . And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he

said, "Here am I, my son." [Isaac] said, "Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God Himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. 10

Abraham must sacrifice his son, and here he experiences this trial in absolute solitude. To his son's direct question, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham answers elliptically. He *alone* answers God's call. This difference between the two accounts may seem slight, yet it has essential consequences for the very perception of faith, for the trial of faith, and for human beings' relation to God.

### A Tragic Experience?

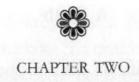
This tragic solitude of the human being facing the divine underlies the history of Western thought from Greek tragedy (with the central figure of the rebel Prometheus facing the Olympian gods) to existentialist and modern Christian interpretations as exemplified in the works of Søren Kierkegaard. The recurrence of the theme of the tragic trial of solitary faith in Western theology and philosophy has linked this reflection to questions of doubt, rebellion, guilt, and forgiveness and has thus naturally shaped the discourse on faith, trials, and mistakes. 12

One should nevertheless beware of apparent analogies. Indeed, the prophets' stories, and in particular Abraham's, are recounted in an apparently similar manner in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. Yet a closer study reveals that the accounts are different and do not always tell the same facts nor teach the same lessons. Hence, someone who enters the universe of Islam and strives to encounter and understand the Islamic sacred and its teachings should be asked to make the intellectual and pedagogical effort of casting away—for as long as this encounter lasts—the links she or he may have established between the experience of faith, trial, mistake, and the tragic dimension of existence.

Quranic Revelation tells the stories of the prophets, and in the course of this narration it fashions in the Muslim's heart a relationship to the Transcendent that continually insists on the permanence of communication through signs, inspirations, and indeed the very intimate presence of the One, so beautifully expressed in this verse of the Quran: "If My servants ask you concerning Me: I am indeed close [to them]. I respond to the prayer of every supplicant when he or she calls on Me." All the messengers have, like Abraham and Muhammad, experienced the trial of faith and all have been, in the same manner, protected from themselves and their own doubts by God, His signs, and His word. Their suffering does not mean they made mistakes, nor does it reveal any tragic dimension of existence: it is, more simply, an initiation into humility, understood as a necessary stage in the experience of faith.

Because Muhammad's life expressed the manifested and experienced essence of Islam's message, getting to know the Prophet is a privileged means of acceding to the spiritual universe of Islam. From his birth to his death, the Messenger's experience—devoid of any human tragic dimension—allies the call of faith, trial among people, humility, and the quest for peace with the One.

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# Birth and Education

According to Islamic tradition, the House of God (al-Kaba) had been built by Abraham and his son Ishmael in the name of pure monotheism, of the worship of the One God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the God of humankind and of all the prophets and messengers. Centuries went by and Mecca became a place of pilgrimage, but also mostly a marketplace and a trading center, giving rise to extensive cultural and religious blending. After some time, worship of the One gave way to the cult of tribal or local idols, to multiform polytheism. Islamic tradition reports that when Revelation began, more than 360 idols, images, or statues were housed and worshiped in the Kaba. Only a small group of believers remained attached to the worship of the One God and refused to join in the general idol worship. They were called the hunafa and identified with the Abrahamic monotheistic tradition.<sup>2</sup> The Quran itself qualifies Abraham and/or the nature of his worship as pure (hanif): "Who can profess a better religion than one who submits his whole self to God, does good, and follows the way of Abraham, pure monotheism [or the pure monotheist]? For God chose Abraham as beloved friend."<sup>3</sup>

The most famous of the *hunafa* at the time of Muhammad was called Waraqah ibn Nawfal and had converted to Christianity. With the other believers, the Jews and Christians living in the area, Waraqah ibn Nawfal represented the expression of a now marginal monotheism, which was spurned and sometimes fought over in and around Mecca.

#### A Birth

In his seminal book on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Ibn Hisham informs us that Ibn Ishaq has clearly and precisely established the Prophet's birth date: "The Messenger (God's peace and blessings be upon him) was born on a Monday, on the twelfth night of Rabi al-Awwal, in the year of the elephant." Other accounts mention other months of the year, but throughout history there has been broad acceptance of that date among scholars and within Muslim communities. The Muslim calendar being a lunar one, it is difficult to determine exactly the solar month of his birth, but the "year of the elephant" to which Ibn Ishaq refers corresponds to 570 CE.

The Last Prophet was born in one of Mecca's noble families, Banu Hashim, which enjoyed great respect among all the clans in and around Mecca.<sup>5</sup> This noble descent combined with a particularly painful and debilitating personal history. His mother, Aminah, was only two months pregnant when his father, Abdullah, died during a trip to Yathrib, north of Mecca. Fatherless at birth, young Muhammad was to live with the tension of the dual status implied in Mecca by a respectable descent, on one hand, and the precariousness of having no father, on the other.

Ibn Ishaq reports that the name Muhammad, quite unknown at the time in the Arabian Peninsula, came to his mother in a vision while she was still pregnant. This same vision is also said to have announced to her the birth of the "master of this people" (sayyid hadhihi al-ummah); according to the vision, when he was born she was to say the words "I place him under the protection of the One [al-Wahid] against the treachery of the envious." Torn between her grief at her husband's death and the joy of welcoming her child, Aminah said repeatedly that strange signs had accompanied the gestation, then the extraordinarily easy birth of her child.

#### The Desert

Aminah soon became aware that she was the mother of an exceptional child. This feeling was shared by Muhammad's grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, who took responsibility for him after his birth. In Mecca, it was customary to entrust infants to wet nurses belonging to the nomadic

Bedouin tribes living in the nearby desert. Because he was fatherless, one nurse after another refused to take the child into her care, fearing that his ambiguous status would bring them no profit. Halimah, who had arrived last because her mount was tired, decided with her husband that it was better for them to take the child, although he was an orphan, than to risk being mocked by their tribe when they went home. They therefore went back with the infant Muhammad, and Halimah, just like Aminah, tells of many signs that led her and her husband to think that this child seemed blessed.

For four years, the orphan was looked after by Halimah and lived with the Banu Sad Bedouins in the Arabian desert. He shared the nomads' life in the most barren and difficult natural environment, surrounded, as far as the eye could see, with horizons bringing to mind the fragility of the human being and spurring contemplation and solitude. Although he did not yet know it, Muhammad was going through the first trials ordained for him by the One, Who had chosen him as a messenger and was, for the time being, his Educator, his Rabb.<sup>8</sup>

The Quran would later recall his particular situation as an orphan as well as the spiritual teachings associated with the experience of life in the desert:

Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter? And He found you wandering, and He gave you guidance. And He found you in need, and made you independent. Therefore [for that reason], do not treat the orphan with harshness, nor chide him who asks. But the bounty of your Lord, proclaim!<sup>9</sup>

Those verses of the Quran carry several teachings: being both an orphan and poor was actually an initiatory state for the future Messenger of God, for at least two reasons. The first teaching is obviously the vulnerability and humility he must naturally have felt from his earliest child-hood. This state was intensified when his mother, Aminah, died when Muhammad was six. This left him utterly dependent on God, but also close to the most destitute among people. The Quran reminds him that he must never forget this throughout his life and particularly during his prophetic mission. He was orphaned and poor, and for that reason he is reminded and ordered never to forsake the underprivileged and the needy.

Considering the exemplary nature of the prophetic experience, the second spiritual teaching emanating from these verses is valid for each human being: never to forget one's past, one's trials, one's environment and origin, and to turn one's experience into a positive teaching for one-self and for others. Muhammad's past, the One reminds him, is a school from which he must draw useful, practical, and concrete knowledge to benefit those whose lives and hardships he has shared, since he knows from his own experience, better than anyone else, what they feel and endure.

#### An Education, and Nature

Life in the desert was to fashion the man and his outlook on creation and the elements of the universe. When Muhammad came to the desert, he was able to learn from the Bedouins' rich oral tradition and their renown as speakers to develop his own mastery of the spoken language. Later on, the Last Prophet was to stand out through the strength of his words, his eloquence, and above all his ability to convey deep and universal teachings through short, pithy phrases (jawami al-kalim). The desert is often the locus of prophecies because it naturally offers to the human gaze the horizons of the infinite. For nomads, forever on the move, finitude in space is allied to a sense of freedom blended, here again, with the experience of fleetingness, vulnerability, and humility. Nomads learn to move on, to become strangers, and to apprehend, at the heart of the linear infinity of space, the cyclical finitude of time. Such is the experience of the believer's life, which the Prophet was later to describe to young Abdullah ibn Umar in terms reminiscent of this dimension: "Be in this world as if you were a stranger or a wayfarer." 10

In the first years of the Prophet's life he developed a specific relationship with nature that remained constant throughout his mission. The universe is pregnant with signs that recall the presence of the Creator, and the desert, more than anything else, opens the human mind to observation, meditation, and initiation into meaning. Thus, many verses of the Quran mention the book of creation and its teachings. The desert, apparently devoid of life, repeatedly shows and proves to the watchful consciousness the reality of the miracle of the return to life: And among His Signs is this: you see the earth humble [because of drought]; but when We send down rain to it, it is stirred to life and yields increase. Truly, He who gives it life can surely give life to the dead, for He has power over all things.<sup>11</sup>

This relationship with nature was so present in the Prophet's life from his earliest childhood that one can easily come to the conclusion that living close to nature, observing, understanding, and respecting it, is an imperative of deep faith.

Many years later, when the Prophet was in Medina, facing conflicts and wars, a Revelation in the heart of night turned his gaze toward another horizon of meaning: "In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for all those endowed with insight." It has been reported that the Prophet wept all night long when this verse was revealed to him. At dawn, when Bilal, the muezzin, coming to call for prayer, asked about the cause of those tears, Muhammad explained to him the meaning of his sadness and added: "Woe to anyone who hears that verse and does not meditate upon it!"

Another verse conveys the same teaching, referring to multiple signs:

In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of humankind; in the rain that God sends down from the skies, and the life which He then gives to the earth after it had been lifeless; in the beasts of all kind that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between the sky and the earth; [here] indeed are signs for a people who are wise.<sup>13</sup>

The first years of Muhammad's life undoubtedly fashioned his outlook, preparing him to understand the signs in the universe. The spiritual teaching that can be drawn from them is essential, both for the Prophet's education and for our own education throughout history: being close to nature, respecting what it is, and observing and meditating on what it shows us, offers us, or takes (back) from us requirements of a faith that, in its quest, attempts to feed, deepen, and renew itself. Nature is the primary guide and the intimate companion of faith. Thus, God decided to expose His Prophet, from his earliest childhood, to the natural lessons of

creation, conceived as a school where the mind gradually apprehends signs and meaning. Far removed from the formalism of soulless religious rituals, this sort of education, in and through its closeness to nature, fosters a relationship to the divine based on contemplation and depth that will later make it possible, in a second phase of spiritual education, to understand the meaning, form, and objectives of religious ritual. Cut off from nature in our towns and cities, we nowadays seem to have forgotten the meaning of this message to such an extent that we dangerously invert the order of requirements and believe that learning about the techniques and forms of religion (prayers, pilgrimages, etc.) is sufficient to grasp and understand their meaning and objectives. This delusion has serious consequences since it leads to draining religious teaching of its spiritual substance, which actually ought to be its heart.

#### The Split Chest

Tradition reports that a most peculiar event took place when Muhammad was four, as he was playing with the children of the Banu Sad Bedouin tribe. Halimah says that her son came to her and her husband in fright and informed them that "two white-clad men grasped him [Muhammad] and laid him on the ground; then they opened up his chest and plunged their hands in it."<sup>14</sup>

Halimah and her husband ran to the spot indicated by their child and found Muhammad shaken and pale. He confirmed his foster brother's story, adding that after opening his chest, the two men "touched something there; I do not know what it is." <sup>15</sup>

Troubled by this story and fearing the child might have suffered some harm, the pair decided to take Muhammad back to his mother. At first, they concealed the main reason for their decision, but faced with the mother's insistent questions, they finally informed her of the event. She was not surprised, and even mentioned that she herself had witnessed signs indicating that a particular fate was being prepared for her child.

Many years later, the Prophet recalled the event and said that two men "split [his] chest, took out the heart, and opened it to take out a black clot, which they threw away. Then they washed [his] heart and chest with

snow."<sup>16</sup> In other traditions, he explained the spiritual meaning of those events; in a discussion with some Companions, reported by Ibn Masud, he said: "There is no one among you but is accompanied by a jinn or an angel specifically assigned to him.' They asked: 'Even you, Messenger?' 'Even me, but God has helped me and he [the jinn, here meaning the evil spirit] has submitted, so he only enjoins me to do what is good."<sup>17</sup>

Here, the Prophet guides our understanding of the event beyond the mere facts reported, to its essential spiritual dimension: from his earliest childhood, the Messenger was protected from the temptations of evil that plague everybody else's heart. The purification of his chest prepared him for his prophetic mission. About fifty years later, he was again to have a similar experience, when his heart was opened once more and purified to enable him to experience the Night Journey to Jerusalem, then the elevation to Sidrat al-Muntaha, the Lotus of the Utmost Boundary. Such spiritual experiences, singular and initiatory, prepared the Chosen One (al-Mustafa) to receive first the message of Islam and then the command to perform ritual prayer, the pillar of religious practice. 19

On a more general level, the Quran refers to this purification with these words: "Have We not opened your breast for you? And removed from you your burden which galled your back? And raised high the esteem in which you are held?" For most commentators on the Quran, those verses primarily refer to the threefold gift granted to the Prophet: faith in the One inscribed in his heart, election as the Prophet, and, lastly, the support of God Himself throughout his mission. From his earliest childhood, as we have seen, Muhammad was to be accompanied by signs and trials that educated and prepared him for that mission.

Now back in Mecca, young Muhammad stayed with his mother for two years. When he was six, she wanted her son to get acquainted with members of her family who lived in Yathrib (which would later be known as Medina). They went there, but on the way back, Aminah fell ill and died at Abwa, where she was buried. Now both fatherless and motherless, Muhammad was surrounded by signs of his election as well as by grief, suffering, and death. Barakah, who had traveled with them as Aminah's servant, took the child back to Mecca. His grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, immediately took him into his care. He was constantly to show deep love and particular respect for his grandson. However, he died two years later.

### The Orphan and His Educator

Muhammad's story is a difficult one, as is emphasized by the repetition in these verses from the Quran: "So verily, with every difficulty there is relief. Verily, with every difficulty there is relief."<sup>21</sup> At the age of eight, young Muhammad had experienced fatherlessness, poverty, solitude, and the death of his mother and then of his grandfather. Yet all along his path he continually encountered signs of a destiny that, through people and circumstances, accompanied and facilitated his evolution and education. On his deathbed, Abd al-Muttalib asked his son Abu Talib, Muhammad's uncle, to look after him; Abu Talib carried out this mission as a father would have done for his own child. Later, the Prophet constantly recalled how much his uncle and his uncle's wife, Fatimah, had loved and taken care of him. "Verily, with every difficulty there is relief."

Throughout the hardships of his life, Muhammad of course remained under the protection of the One, his Rabb, his Educator. In Mecca, tradition reports that he was persistently protected from idol worship and the festivals, feasts, or weddings where drunkenness and lack of restraint prevailed. One evening, he heard that a wedding was to be celebrated in Mecca and he wanted to attend. On the way there, he reported, he suddenly felt tired; he lay down to rest and fell asleep. The next morning, the heat of the sun woke him from his deep slumber. This seemingly trivial story is nevertheless most revealing as to the methods used by the Prophet's Educator to prevent His future Messenger from being tempted into lack of restraint and drunkenness. The One, always present at his side, literally put him to sleep, thus protecting him from his own instincts and not allowing His protégé's heart to develop a sense of wrongdoing, guilt, or any such moral torment as a result of an attraction that was, after all, natural for a boy his age. While gentleness and diversion were used to protect him, those events-which the Prophet was later to mentiongradually built in him a moral sense shaped through the understanding of those signs and of what they protected him from. This natural initiation into morals, remote from any obsession with sin and fostering of guilt, greatly influenced the kind of education the Prophet was to impart to his Companions. With a teaching method relying on gentleness, on the common sense of individuals, and on their understanding of commands, the Prophet also strove to teach them how to put their instincts to sleep, so to speak, and how to resort to diversion to escape evil temptations. For those Companions, as for us, in all ages and societies, this teaching method is most valuable and reminds us that a moral sense should be developed not through interdiction and sanction but gradually, gently, exactingly, understandingly, and at a deep level.

In the ensuing years, young Muhammad became a shepherd to earn his living, looking after flocks on the outskirts of Mecca. He later mentioned this experience to his Companions, portraying it as a common feature characteristic of prophets: "There was no prophet who was not a shepherd.' He was asked: 'And you too, Messenger of God?' He answered: 'And myself as well."

As a shepherd, young Muhammad learned solitude, patience, contemplation, and watchfulness. Such qualities were necessary to all prophets to carry out their missions among their people. He also acquired a deep sense of independence in his life and work, which enabled him to be most successful in the trader's calling he was soon to take up.

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# Personality and Spiritual Quest

Abd al-Muttalib, Muhammad's grandfather, had seen his riches dwindle during the last years of his life, and Abu Talib, who was now his nephew's guardian, was also going through particularly difficult financial and commercial circumstances. Therefore, Muhammad had started to earn his own living very early, and he was always trying to help the members of his family.

#### The Monk Bahira

When Muhammad was twelve years old, Abu Talib decided to take him along in a merchant caravan heading for Syria. They stopped in Busra, near the dwelling of a Christian monk called Bahira. Muslim tradition reports that the hermit Bahira, just like Waraqah ibn Nawfal and most of the Christians, Jews, and *hunafa* in the peninsula, was expecting the imminent coming of a new prophet and was continually watching for signs of this. When he saw the caravan approaching, it seemed to him that a cloud was accompanying the group and shielding them from the heat. Determined to learn more, he decided to invite all the travelers to partake of a meal, which was unusual among the hermits of the area. After carefully observing each member of the group, he fixed his gaze on young Muhammad; he went to him, took him aside, and asked him a number of questions about his family situation, his social position, his dreams, and so on. He finally asked if he could have a look at his back, and young Muhammad agreed. Between the boy's two shoulder blades, the monk

Bahira noticed a skin growth identified by his books as "the seal of prophethood" (*khatim an-nubuwwah*).<sup>2</sup> The monk hastened to warn Abu Talib that a particular fate awaited this boy and that he must protect him from adversity and from the attacks that would undoubtedly befall him, like all previous messengers of God.

We have seen that the first years of Muhammad's life were strewn with many signs. Everyone around him felt and thought that this child was different and that a particular fate lay in store for him. The monk Bahira confirmed this impression and integrated it into the sacred history of prophethood. At the age of twelve, the boy beloved of everybody was told that the human beings around him would later oppose him; while he could already feel that his uniqueness caused people to love him, now he knew that in the future it would give rise to hatred.

For several years, Muhammad continued to look after sheep in the hills around Mecca. Although he was young and somewhat removed from the active life of the settled inhabitants of Mecca, he would sometimes hear of or witness the ceaseless quarrels and conflicts among the various tribes, which resulted in constantly shifting alliances. In Mecca, interclan war was the rule rather than the exception, and some exploited this by dealing unfairly with traders or visitors whom they knew to be unprotected by any treaty or agreement and unable to rely on any alliance. This was what happened to a visiting merchant from Yemen; he had been wronged, but he decided not to let it pass, and so he publicly explained his situation and appealed to the nobleness and dignity of the Quraysh tribe to give him justice.<sup>3</sup>

### The Pact of the Virtuous

Abdullah ibn Judan, the chief of the Taym tribe and a member of one of the two great alliances of Meccan tribes (known as the People of the Perfume), decided to invite to his home all those who wanted to put an end to the conflicts and establish a pact of honor and justice that would bind the tribes beyond alliances based merely on tribal, political, or commercial interests.

Chiefs and members of numerous tribes thus pledged that it was their collective duty to intervene in conflicts and side with the oppressed against the oppressors, whoever they might be and whatever alliances might link them to other tribes. This alliance, known as *hilf al-fudul* (the Pact of the Virtuous), was special in that it placed respect for the principles of justice and support of the oppressed above all other considerations of kinship or power. Young Muhammad, like Abu Bakr, who was to become his lifelong friend, took part in that historic meeting.

Long after Revelation had begun, Muhammad was to remember the terms of that pact and say: "I was present in Abdullah ibn Judan's house when a pact was concluded, so excellent that I would not exchange my part in it even for a herd of red camels; and if now, in Islam, I was asked to take part in it, I would be glad to accept." Not only did the Prophet stress the excellence of the terms of the pact as opposed to the perverted tribal alliances prevailing at the time, but he added that even as the bearer of the message of Islam-even as a Muslim-he still accepted its substance and would not hesitate to participate again. That statement is of particular significance for Muslims, and at least three major teachings can be derived from it. We have seen that the Prophet had been advised to make good use of his past, but here the reflection goes even further: Muhammad acknowledges a pact that was established before the beginning of Revelation and which pledges to defend justice imperatively and to oppose the oppression of those who were destitute and powerless. This implies acknowledging that the act of laying out those principles is prior to and transcends belonging to Islam, because in fact Islam and its message came to confirm the substance of a treaty that human conscience had already independently formulated. Here, the Prophet clearly acknowledges the validity of a principle of justice and defense of the oppressed stipulated in a pact of the pre-Islamic era.

The second teaching is no less essential: at a time when the message was still being elaborated in the course of Revelation and of the Prophet's experiences, he acknowledged the validity of a pact established by non-Muslims seeking justice and the common good of their society. The Prophet's statement is in itself a blatant denial of the trend of thought expressed here and there throughout the history of Islamic thought—and to this day—according to which a pledge can be ethically valid for Muslims only if it is of strictly Islamic nature or/and if it is established between Muslims. Again, the key point is that the Prophet clearly acknowledges the validity of adhering to principles of justice and defending the oppressed, regardless of whether those principles come from inside Islam or outside it.

The third teaching is a direct consequence of this reflection: the message of Islam is by no means a closed value system at variance or conflicting with other value systems. From the very start, the Prophet did not conceive the content of his message as the expression of pure otherness versus what the Arabs or the other societies of his time were producing. Islam does not establish a closed universe of reference but rather relies on a set of universal principles that can coincide with the fundamentals and values of other beliefs and religious traditions (even those produced by a polytheistic society such as that of Mecca at the time). Islam is a message of justice that entails resisting oppression and protecting the dignity of the oppressed and the poor, and Muslims must recognize the moral value of a law or contract stipulating this requirement, whoever its authors and whatever the society, Muslim or not. Far from building an allegiance to Islam in which recognition and loyalty are exclusive to the community of faith, the Prophet strove to develop the believer's conscience through adherence to principles transcending closed allegiances in the name of a primary loyalty to universal principles themselves. The last message brings nothing new to the affirmation of the principles of human dignity, justice, and equality: it merely recalls and confirms them. As regards moral values, the same intuition is present when the Prophet speaks of the qualities of individuals before and in Islam: "The best among you [as to their human and moral qualities] during the era before Islam [al-jahiliyyah] are the best in Islam, provided they understand it [Islam]." The moral value of a human being reaches far beyond belonging to a particular universe of reference; within Islam, it requires added knowledge and understanding in order to grasp properly what Islam confirms (the principle of justice) and what it demands should be reformed (all forms of idol worship).

### The "Truthful" and Marriage

The Prophet's life itself, before and after the beginning of Revelation, illustrates the relevance of the above analysis: the recognition of his moral qualities preceded his prophetic mission, which confirmed a posteriori the need for such qualities. After being a shepherd, young Muhammad became a trader and built a reputation for honesty and efficiency acknowledged all over the area. People started to call him as-Sadiq al-Amin, "the

truthful, the trustworthy," when he was only about twenty. One of the wealthiest traders in Mecca was a woman called Khadijah bint Khuwaylid. Twice married, then finally a widow, she was a cousin of the Christian Waraqah ibn Nawfal. For some years already she had been hearing of a young man who was "honest, fair, and efficient," and she eventually decided to test him, asking him to take some goods of hers to Syria and sell them there; she would let him take along a young servant of hers called Maysarah, and promised to double his commission if he was successful. He accepted and set out with Maysarah. In Syria, Muhammad managed a commercial operation that more than doubled Khadijah's expectations.

They came back to report to Khadijah, who silently listened to Muhammad's explanations, carefully observing the appearance and behavior of the young man, who was now about twenty-five. A light seemed to emanate from his face. Later Maysarah told her that all along the journey he had noticed a series of signs—in Muhammad's attitude and behavior attesting that he was like no other man.6 Khadijah then asked one of her friends, Nufaysah, to approach Muhammad and ask whether he would be interested in marriage. Muhammad told Nufaysah that he could not afford marriage, and when she mentioned the name of Khadijah, with whom he would find "beauty, lineage, nobility, and wealth," he responded that he was interested but that because of his status, he could not contemplate such a union. Nufaysah did not say that she was already acting at Khadijah's request and suggested he leave things to her, that she could arrange the match. She informed her friend Khadijah of Muhammad's favorable frame of mind. Khadijah invited him to her home and made him a proposal of marriage, which he accepted. There remained the task of speaking to relatives in both clans in order to finalize the arrangements, but no obstacle—whether their respective statuses or the interests of the tribes—was able to prevent their marriage.

Tradition reports that Khadijah was forty years old when they married, but other opinions have it that she was younger: for instance, Abdullah ibn Masud mentions the age of twenty-eight, which does seem more likely considering that Khadijah gave birth to six children in the following years. The firstborn, a boy named Qasim, lived only two years; then came Zaynab, Ruqayyah, Um Kulthum, Fatimah, and at last Abdullah, who also died before he reached the age of two. During those years, the Prophet

decided to free and adopt as his son his slave Zayd ibn Harithah, gifted to him by his wife a few years earlier. Later, when his own son Abdullah died, he sought to help his uncle Abu Talib—in great financial difficulty and burdened with a very large family—by taking his young cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib into his home. Ali was later to marry Muhammad's youngest daughter, Fatimah.

#### Zayd

The story of Zayd, the adopted son, is interesting for many reasons. Captured during a battle, he had been sold several times before becoming Khadijah's slave, then Muhammad's. He remained in the Prophet's service for several years, during which time he learned that his parents were still alive, as news circulated from tribe to tribe through verse spread by merchants and travelers as they went from village to village. Zayd then composed some verse and arranged for several members of his tribe visiting Mecca to hear it and report it to his family. On hearing he was there, his father and uncle decided to leave for Mecca immediately to find Zayd and bring him back to his tribe. They heard he was at Muhammad's and came to him proposing to buy Zayd back. Muhammad in turn suggested they should let Zayd choose for himself: if he decided to go back with his father and uncle, Muhammad would let him go without asking for any compensation, but if on the contrary Zayd wanted to stay with his master, his relatives would have to accept his choice. They agreed, and they went together to ask Zayd what he wanted. He decided to stay with his master, and explained to his relatives that he preferred slavery with Muhammad to freedom away from him, so far did the qualities he had found in him exceed what he could expect of other men. He therefore remained with his master, who immediately freed him and announced publicly that Zayd was now to be considered as his son, that he would be called Zayd ibn Muhammad (Zayd, son of Muhammad), and that he would inherit from him.9

This story—Zayd's choice, while still a slave, of his master over his father—adds another dimension to the portrait of Muhammad that is gradually emerging, and it tells a lot about Muhammad's personality before Revelation. Simple, meditative, and courteous, but also honest and

efficient in business, he expressed constant respect toward all women, men, and children, who in turn showed him gratefulness and deep love. He was as-Sadiq, a man of truth and of his word; he was al-Amin, a trustworthy and dignified person; he had been surrounded with signs announcing his fate; he was rich with extraordinary human qualities that already pointed to his singularity.

# Rebuilding the Kaba

Another event shows that to his qualities of heart and his moral distinction must be added a sharp intelligence, which he used in the service of respect and peace between people and between clans. After protracted hesitation due to the interdiction against touching the sacred House, the Quraysh had finally decided to rebuild the Kaba. They destroyed the upper part of the walls, down to the foundations (which were those of the initial construction, built by Abraham and Ishmael, and which they left untouched). They rebuilt until they reached the place where the Black Stone was to be enshrined, in one corner of the Kaba. At that point bitter quarrels broke out among members of the different clans over who would have the honor of putting the Black Stone back in its place. Some were nearly ready to take up arms in order to determine to which clan the privilege would fall. An old man among them suggested that the first man who entered the sacred space be asked to judge the issue, and a consensus formed on that idea. Muhammad was the first to enter the sacred space, and clan elders were happy that chance had chosen him to arbitrate the dispute. He listened to them, then asked for a cloak; he placed the Black Stone on it and asked the chiefs of each clan to hold the cloak's edges and lift the stone together. Once they had lifted it to the desired height, he himself placed the Black Stone in the required space—to the satisfaction of all, since nobody had been wronged. This intuitive intelligence had immediately managed to reconcile the pride of each clan with their need for union. Later, during his mission, this characteristic feature of his mind was to be often illustrated by his ability to maintain the first Muslim community's unity despite the presence of very strong personalities with widely differing temperaments. In the quest for peace, he constantly strove to achieve again what he had done in this difficult situation

between the Quraysh clans: teach the heart not to give way to proud emotions and arrogant thinking; bring the mind to heart-soothing solutions that make it possible to control oneself gently and wisely. In the years before Revelation, the Messenger's Educator had granted him this particular quality, an alliance between a deep heart and a penetrating spirit, of knowing how to be reasonable in all circumstances, with oneself and among other people.

By the time Muhammad was thirty-five, he had built such a reputation for himself that many among the Banu Hashim thought that he would soon take up the mantle of his forefathers and restore the greatness of his clan by becoming its leader. With his marriage, his own activities, and his personal qualities, he became politically and financially prominent, and he was already starting to receive marriage proposals for his daughters, as for instance from his uncle Abu Lahab, who wished to marry his two sons, Utbah and Utaybah, to Ruqayyah and Um Kulthum. Clan ties were woven in the expectation of the benefits that would accrue should Muhammad become clan chief.

# The Quest for Truth

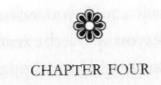
Muhammad himself, however, was not concerned with such matters and showed little interest in public affairs. During this time he started to spend periods of retreat in one of the caves near Mecca, as Mecca's hunafa and Christians already did. When the month of Ramadan came, he would go to the cave of Hira with some supplies and remain in seclusion, returning periodically for additional food, for a period of about a month. To reach that cave, he had to climb up a small mountain and go to the other side of a second small peak, following a narrow path. The cave itself was totally secluded and so small that it would have been difficult for even two people to be there together. From the mouth of the cave, one could see the Kaba far below and, a greater distance away, the barren plain stretching out as far as the eye could see.

Away from other people, facing nature, Muhammad was searching for peace and meaning. He had never taken part in idol worship, had not shared the beliefs and rites of the region's tribes, and had remained aloof from superstition and prejudice. He had been protected from false gods, whether the veneration of statues or the worship of power and riches. For some time already he had been telling his wife, Khadijah, about some dreams that turned out to be true and which troubled him because of the strong impressions they left when he woke up. It was indeed a quest for truth: dissatisfied with the answers offered by those around him, driven by the intimate conviction that he must search further, he decided to isolate himself in contemplation. He was nearing forty and had reached a point in his spiritual development that made deep introspection the necessary next step. Alone with himself, in the cave of Hira, he meditated on the meaning of his life, his presence on earth, and the signs that had accompanied him throughout his life. The spaces stretching out all around him must have reminded him of the horizons of his childhood in the desert, with the difference now that maturity had filled them with myriad fundamental existential questions.

He was searching, and this spiritual quest was naturally leading him toward the calling that signs had tacitly and inevitably pointed to throughout this life. The signs that had protected and calmed him, the visions that first appeared in dreams and then came to pass in waking life, and the questions asked by the mind and heart allied to the horizons offered by nature were insensibly leading Muhammad to the supreme initiation into meaning, to the encounter with his Educator, the One God. At the age of forty, the first cycle of his life had just come to an end.

It was when he was approaching the cave of Hira during the month of Ramadan in the year 610 that he first heard a voice calling and greeting him: "As-salamu alayka, ya rasul Allah! Peace be upon you, Messenger of God!" 10

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# Revelation, Knowledge

Alone in the cave of Hira, Muhammad continued to search for truth and meaning. Then the Angel Gabriel suddenly appeared to him and ordered: "Read!" Muhammad answered: "I am not of those who read." The angel held him so tightly that he could hardly bear it and again ordered: "Read!" Muhammad repeated: "I am not of those who read!" The angel held him tightly again, almost choking him, and repeated the order for the third time: "Read!" The same answer was repeated: "I am not of those who read!" The angel, maintaining his hold, recited: "Read in the name of your Lord [Rabb, "Educator"], Who created humankind out of a clinging clot. Read, and your Lord is most bountiful, He who taught by means of the pen, taught humankind that which they did not know."

Those words were the first verses of the Quran revealed to the Prophet through the Angel Gabriel. Muhammad himself, then much later his wife Aishah, some Companions, and traditionists down to Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, reported this event and those that followed in generally similar terms, though with a few differences as to some (mostly minor) facts and their chronology.

After speaking these words, the Angel Gabriel went away, leaving the Prophet in a deeply troubled state. He was afraid and did not know whether he had had a devilish vision or whether he was simply possessed.

He decided to go back to his wife. He eventually arrived in great distress and said: "Cover me! Cover me!" Khadijah wrapped him in a cloak and asked what was the matter. Muhammad explained what had happened and expressed his fear: "What is happening to me? I fear for myself." Khadijah comforted him and whispered: "You have nothing to fear. Have

a rest and calm down. God will not let you suffer any humiliation, because you are kind to your kinsfolk, you speak the truth, you help those in need, you are generous to your guests, and you support every just cause."<sup>3</sup>

# Waraqah ibn Nawfal

Khadijah thought of seeking the opinion of her cousin, the Christian Waraqah ibn Nawfal. She went to him (whether alone or with the Prophet is not clear) and told him of Muhammad's experience. Waraqah recognized the signs he had been waiting for and answered without hesitation: "Holy! Holy! By He who holds Waraqah's soul, it is the sublime Namus [the friend of the secrets of Supreme Royalty, the angel bringing the sacred Revelation] who has come to Muhammad; the same who had come to Moses. Indeed, Muhammad is the prophet of this people."

Later, during an encounter with Muhammad near the Kaba, Waraqah was to add: "You will certainly be called a liar, ill-treated, banished, and attacked. If I am still alive then, God knows I will support you to bring His cause to victory!" Aishah reports that Waraqah also said: "Your people will turn you away!" This startled the Prophet, and he asked, "Will they turn me away?" Waraqah warned him: "Indeed they will! No man has ever brought what you have brought and not been treated as an enemy!"

The Prophet's mission had only just begun, and already he was allowed to grasp some of the fundamentals of the final Revelation as well as some of the truths that had been present throughout the history of prophecies among peoples.

# Faith, Knowledge, and Humility

The first verses revealed to the Prophet, who could neither read nor write, directly turn his attention toward knowledge. Though he is unable to read when relying on his own faculties, God calls on him to read "in the name of your Lord" (Rabb, "Educator"), immediately drawing a link between faith in God and knowledge. The following verses confirm this relation-

ship: "He who taught by means of the pen, taught humankind that which they did not know." Between the Creator and humankind, there is faith that relies and feeds on the knowledge granted to people by the Most Bountiful (al-Akram) to allow them to answer His call and turn to Him. The first verses establish an immediate correspondence with what Revelation was later to recount about the creation of humankind: "He [God] taught Adam the names of all things." Reason, intelligence, language, and writing will grant people the qualities required to enable them to be God's khalifahs (vicegerents) on earth, and from the very beginning, Quranic Revelation allies recognition of the Creator to knowledge and science, thus echoing the origin of creation itself.

Numerous traditions report that the second Revelation corresponded to the beginning of the surah "Al-Qalam" (The Pen): those verses confirmed the divine source of this inspiration as well as the necessity of knowledge. They also mentioned the Messenger's moral singularity, as witnessed by the first forty years of his life:

Nûn. By the pen and by that which they write. You [Muhammad] are not, by the grace of your Lord [Rabb, "Educator"], possessed. Verily, yours is an unfailing reward. And surely you have sublime morals. You will soon see, and they will see, which of you is afflicted with madness.<sup>10</sup>

Nún is one of the letters of the Arabic alphabet; in the same way, various other letters introduce some surahs (chapters) of the Quran, while no commentator—nor even the Prophet himself—is able to say exactly what they mean or what their presence at the beginning of a chapter symbolizes. Thus, at the very moment when the Creator swears "by the pen" and confirms the necessity of the knowledge conveyed to human beings, He opens the verses with a mysterious letter, nûn, expressing the limits of human knowledge. The dignity of humankind, conferred by knowledge, cannot be devoid of the humility of reason aware of its own limits and thereby recognizing the necessity of faith. Accepting, and accepting not to understand, the mysterious presence of the letter nûn requires faith; understanding and accepting the unmysterious statements of the verses that follow require the use of a reason that is active but necessarily—and indeed naturally—humbled.

# Faith, Morality, and Persecution

To the essential teaching of Islam that knowledge exists only with human awareness of its limits, the surah quoted above, "Al-Qalam," adds another dimension when it speaks of the Prophet's "sublime morals." This verse, recalling what we already knew of the Prophet's exceptionally noble behavior since his birth, draws a specific link between knowledge, faith, and action. In the light of faith, knowledge must be based in and rely on the individual's moral dignity; indeed, it is the nobleness of the Prophet's behavior that confirms to him, a posteriori, that he is not possessed, that he is in the right, and that his reward will be endless. Faith in God and knowledge, in the light of the divine, must have as their immediate consequence a behavior, a way of acting, that respects an ethic and promotes good.

Those verses convey another teaching, predicted by Waraqah ibn Nawfal as by the monk Bahira before him: there were to be insults, adversity, hatred, and even banishment by his own people. The Prophet was warned that he would certainly be rejected, but for the moment, after the first Revelations, he had to face his own doubts: he had been comforted by his wife, then by Waraqah ibn Nawfal's confirmation, but he had received nothing from the Angel Gabriel himself to reassure him thoroughly. Sometimes, when the Prophet was walking, he would see the image of Gabriel filling the horizon, and if he turned away he would still see Gabriel facing him.

There are no precise data as to the number of Revelations the Prophet received during this first phase, but Aishah reports that the Prophet said that one day he heard a noise and suddenly "the angel who had come to me in the cave of Hira appeared to me, sitting between the sky and the earth; I was frightened, and [as had happened on the occasion of the first Revelation] I rushed home and said: 'Cover me! Cover me!' which was done." This was when the following verses were revealed: "O you wrapped up in a mantle! Arise and deliver your warning! And your Lord [Rabb] glorify! And your garments purify! And all abomination shun!" 12

In each of these initial Revelations, God presents Himself to His Messenger as "your Rabb" (Rabbuk), or Educator, who has chosen him, raised him, then called him to bear the final Revelation of the One God. It was not without purpose that Muhammad had been orphaned and poor and that he had gone through a period of contemplation, even though at

that particular moment worry and distress prevailed over the awareness of his election and mission.

# Silence, Doubt

The situation was to get even worse, for during the following months Revelation stopped. This period of silence (al-fatra), which lasted between six months and two and a half years, depending on the tradition cited, caused the Prophet great doubt and suffering. He thought that he was no longer worthy of receiving Revelation, that he had been forsaken, or that he had merely been bewitched. Aishah reports how intensely he suffered:

Revelation stopped for some time, so the Prophet was hurt; his sorrow was such that on several occasions, he left home to go and throw himself from a steep mountain. But each time he reached the top of the mountain to throw himself into the chasm, the Angel Gabriel would appear to him and say: "O Muhammad, you are truly God's Messenger." Those words would calm his heart and bring peace to his soul.<sup>13</sup>

Those apparitions and signs around him helped the Prophet resist the feelings of doubt and solitude. He was actually undergoing the same experience as Abraham: in the ordeal of this silence, he doubted himself, his capacities, and his power, but God was constantly strewing his path with signs and visions that prevented him from doubting God. This trial of silence was an initiation shaping the Messenger's spiritual quest. Revelation had verbally told him about the necessity of humility, but God's silence was now teaching it to him practically. God had revealed His presence to him, and in the course of those long weeks empty of His word, He was fostering the need for Him in His Messenger's heart. God at last spoke to him again, invoking the rising day and the spreading night as much for their physical reality, which is a sign of the Creator's power, as for their symbolism, which expresses the fragility of being and the heart between the rising light of Revelation and the obscure emptiness of silence:

By the morning light! By the night when it is still! Your Lord [Rabb, "Educator"] has not forsaken you, nor is He displeased. And verily the

Hereafter will be better for you than the present. And soon will your Lord give you that with which you will be well pleased.<sup>14</sup>

This was good news, and Revelation was not to stop again for over twenty years.

#### Khadijah

It is important to stress here the role played by Khadijah throughout those years ridden with events, some extraordinary and others deeply painful. She was the one who had first noticed and then chosen Muhammad for his honesty, his fairness, and the nobleness of his character. Widely courted in Mecca because of her wealth, she had been able to measure the disinterested and reserved attitude of that young man, who was nonetheless so enterprising and efficient. And against usual practice, she had the courage to propose marriage to him through her friend Nufaysah. Their union was to bring them their lot of happiness, sorrow, and grief: they lost their two sons, Qasim and Abdullah, in infancy and only their four daughters survived. This family destiny was difficult enough, but among the Arabs, the birth of a daughter was considered shameful; tradition reports how much, on the contrary, Muhammad and his wife surrounded their daughters with deep love and constant care, which they never hesitated to express in public.

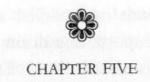
When at the age of forty Muhammad received the first Revelation, it was to his wife he immediately turned, and she was the first to stand by him and comfort him. During all the previous years, she observed a man whose nobleness of character was a distinctive feature. When he came back to her from the cave of Hira, troubled and assailed with deep doubt as to what he was and what was happening to him, she wrapped him in her love, reminded him of his qualities, and restored his self-confidence. The first Revelations were both an extraordinary gift and a terrible trial for a man who no longer knew whether he was possessed or the prey of devilish delirium. He was alone and confused; he turned to his wife, who immediately lent him comfort and support. From that moment on, there were two of them facing the trial, trying to understand its meaning and then, after the silence of Revelation had ended, answering God's call and

following the path of spiritual initiation. In this respect, Khadijah is a sign of God's presence at the heart of Muhammad's trial; she is to the Prophet Muhammad's spiritual experience what Ishmael and Hagar were to Abraham's trial. Both women and the son were the signs sent by the One to manifest His presence and His support in their trial, so that they should never doubt Him. Khadijah was to be the first to accept Islam, and throughout the first ten years of Muhammad's mission, she was to remain at his side, an unfailingly faithful companion. This woman's role in the Prophet's life was tremendous. She was, for twenty-five years, his only wife, whose presence alone protected the Prophet but who also underwent with him rejection by his kin, persecution, and isolation.<sup>16</sup> He loved her so much. This was so obvious that, many years after Khadijah's death, Aishah-who later married the Prophet-was to say that Khadijah was the only woman of whom she had ever been jealous. Khadijah received the good news of his election by God; she was a woman, independent, dignified, and respected, then a wife, strong, attentive, faithful, and confident; she was a pious Muslim, sincere, determined, and enduring. Muhammad, the Last Prophet of the One, was not alone, and one of the clearest signs of God's bounty and love for him was a woman in his life, his wife.

# A Revelation, Truths, a Book

God had manifested Himself. The first Revelations oriented the Prophet's consciousness toward His supreme, educating presence, since He constantly spoke to him as Rabbuk, Muhammad's Educator, his Lord. The Angel Gabriel had transmitted the first fundamentals of the message and of the recognition of God—the essence of faith—while expressing the centrality of knowledge (reading and writing) allied to good behavior. The announcement of good tidings was also accompanied by a warning about others' future opposition to Muhammad, for never did a person of truth appear on earth without giving rise to a fury of hatred, lies, and calumny. Even some of his own kin, who had loved him, came to hate him so much as to want to kill him.

The Angel Gabriel appeared to him several times. The Prophet was later to report that the angel sometimes appeared to him in his angelic persona and sometimes as a human being. At other times, Muhammad would hear a bell-like sound and Revelation would come suddenly, requiring of him such extreme concentration that he came close to asphyxiation. This last mode was particularly painful, even though at the end of the process he was able to repeat word for word the contents of Revelation he had received. For twenty years, the Angel Gabriel was to accompany him and reveal, irregularly and as the situation warranted, the verses and surahs that would ultimately constitute the Quran. Revelations were not placed chronologically in the book that was taking shape; they followed an order that the Angel Gabriel indicated to the Prophet each time and which the latter scrupulously respected. Every year, during the month of Ramadan, the Prophet would recite to the Angel Gabriel all that he had received of the Quran so far in the order the angel had indicated. Thus was effected a regular verification of the contents and form of the Book that was slowly being constituted over a period of twenty-three years.



# The Message and Adversity

After recovering from the distress caused by the initial experience of Revelation, and as he began to receive the subsequent Revelations, the Prophet began to share the message with those closest to him. He had not yet received instructions on how to present the message to his people, but he anticipated fierce opposition, as had been foretold by Waraqah ibn Nawfal.

#### The First Conversions

After Khadijah, his wife and the first convert to Islam, the circle of those who accepted the message was to widen to include members of his close family, then his friends. Ali ibn Abi Talib, who was the young cousin in his charge; Zayd, his adopted son; Um Ayman, the nursemaid who had cared for him after he returned to Mecca at age four; and his lifelong friend Abu Bakr were thus among the first to recognize the truth of the message and to pronounce the profession of faith (ash-shahadah) expressing their adherence to Islam: "I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His Messenger." The number of converts slowly grew as a result of the Prophet's own discreet preaching and the very determined involvement of Abu Bakr, who was always ready to speak about the new faith and take action for its sake: he would buy slaves from their masters and set them free in the name of Islam's principles stressing the equality of all human beings. During those years, Muhammad's presence in Mecca, his action, and his example were to attract a large number of women and men who were gradually to embrace the new faith.

The number of conversions nevertheless remained small during the first few months. Tradition reports that during the first three years, only thirty to forty Quraysh became Muslims. They would meet with the Prophet at the home of one of the converts, al-Argam ibn Abi al-Argam, and learn the basics of their religion while new Revelations kept arriving. The surrounding atmosphere was becoming more and more hostile as the inhabitants of Mecca learned about the essentials of this new message and took stock of its impact on the poor and the young. The Prophet, aware of those upheavals and of the dangers ahead, decided to concentrate on discreetly giving a solid education to a small group, who he knew would face criticism, rejection, and most probably exclusion. It was this very group who were later, thanks to the quality of their spiritual education and the sincerity of their involvement, to remain steadfast in the face of difficulties and persecution. From the beginning, the Prophet had given priority to quality over quantity, and preferred to concern himself with the nature of the hearts and minds he addressed rather than their number. For three years, he quietly built up the first community of believers, whose particular feature was that it gathered, without distinction, women and men of all clans and all social categories (although the bulk were young or poor).

#### The Public Call

After those years, Muhammad received a Revelation enjoining him to make his call public: "And admonish your nearest kinsmen." The Prophet understood that he now had to convey his message to the members of the clans to which he was linked by kinship ties. He began to call them to Islam. One day, he climbed up Mount as-Safa and called the tribal chiefs one by one. Thinking he had an urgent or important announcement to make, they gathered at the foot of the hill to listen to him. From where they stood, they could not look into the valley, whereas Muhammad was facing it. He called out to them: "If I warned you that down in this valley, armed horsemen are closing in to attack you, would you believe me?" They answered, almost with one voice: "Certainly—you are trustworthy and we have never heard you tell lies!" The Prophet then went on: "Well, I am here to forewarn you of violent torments! God has ordered

me to admonish my nearest kinsmen. I have no power to protect you from anything in this life, nor to grant you blessings in the life to come, unless you believe in the Oneness of God." He added: "My position is like that of he who sees the enemy and runs to his people to warn them before they are taken by surprise, shouting as he runs: 'Beware! Beware!"

His uncle Abu Lahab's response was immediate and scathing: "Woe to you [taban laka]! Is this why you have gathered us?" He turned away instantly, taking the assembled chiefs with him: he was thus to come to epitomize those who rejected Muhammad's message and opposed him most fiercely. Later on, when the Prophet organized two meals to present the same message, the first was a failure because Abu Lahab again intervened to prevent his nephew from speaking. During the second meal, Muhammad was able to convey the substance of his message, which was heard and secretly accepted by some members of the clans he had invited.

His kinsmen and the tribe's elders had reacted in a rather cold and distant manner because they understood that the nature of Muhammad's message threatened the age-old balance in their society. Both their gods and their power could be challenged, and the danger was serious. Muhammad continued to speak to his kinsfolk until he received another Revelation ordering a forthright, determined attitude: "Therefore expound openly what you are commanded, and turn away from those who join false gods with God."

The prophetic mission was entering a new phase. Now the message was addressed to all and required a clear-cut distinction between *tawhid*, faith in one God, and the polytheism of the Quraysh. The Prophet had gathered around him a solid core of trustworthy women and men; some were his relatives, but many came from different social categories and tribes, and he had been providing them spiritual and religious education for the previous three years. With steadfastness and forbearance, they were to face rejection, persecution, and exclusion in a Meccan society that was beginning to split apart.

#### The Message

During the first years of Revelation, the Quranic message had gradually taken shape around four main axes: the oneness of God, the status of the

Quran, prayer, and life after death. The first Muslims were called to a profound and radical spiritual conversion, and this had been well understood by opponents within their own clans, who feared the considerable upheavals the new religion was bound to bring about in the beliefs and organization of their society.

#### The Oneness of God

The Quranic message primarily focused on asserting the oneness of God (at-tawhid). Together with the notion of God as Rabb, or Educator, which we saw emerge in the first Revelations, the divine name Allah was of course to appear, as well as phrases associating His being with peace and mercy. Thus, the Angel Gabriel addressed the Prophet with the phrases "Peace be upon you, Messenger of God" (as-salam alaykum, ya rasul Allah) and "God's peace and mercy be upon you" (salam Allah wa rahmatuhu alayk). Those phrases have been used by Muslims since the beginning to greet one another and invoke God through His two names: Peace (as-Salam) and the Most Merciful (ar-Rahman, also translated as the Most Gracious or the Most Kind). Furthermore, each chapter of the Quran begins with a phrase of sanctification with which the speaker recalls the presence of the One and His supreme qualities: "In the name of God [I begin with the name of God], the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful." Very early on, the Quran made the name ar-Rahman equivalent to the name Allah: "Call upon God [Allah] or call upon the Most Kind, the Most Merciful, the Most Gracious [ar-Rahman]: by whatever name you call upon Him, to Him belong the most beautiful names."5

This omnipresence of the reference to the One and His different names is essential. Indeed, it was to shape the type of relationship the first believers established with God: the recognition of His Presence and the assurance that His benevolence is a gift as well as a promise of peace. This is most aptly illustrated by the surah "Ar-Rahman," which addresses both human beings and jinns and enjoins them to observe nature and recognize His Being and His beneficence:<sup>6</sup>

The Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the Quran. He has created humans. He has taught them intelligent speech. The sun and the moon follow courses exactly computed. And the stars and the trees bow in adoration. And the firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the balance

[of justice] in order that you may not transgress [due] balance. So establish weight with justice and do not fall short in the balance. It is He Who has spread out the earth for [His] creatures: in it are fruit and date palms, producing spathes; also corn, with its leaves and stalk for fodder, and sweet-smelling plants. Then which of the favors of your Lord will you [humans and jinns] deny?<sup>7</sup>

# The Status of the Quran

From nature to the requirement of ethics and equity in human behavior, everything points to remembrance of the Creator, whose primary manifestation is goodness and mercy. Indeed, He has revealed the text itself in the name of His benevolence toward people. Revelation is both a gift and a burden, and this, from the very beginning, introduces the second axis of early Islamic teachings. The status of the Quran—which in the verses quoted above establishes the link between God and humankind—is one of the essentials of the Muslim creed (*al-aqidah*). The Quran is the divine word revealed as such to humankind—in "Arabic pure and clear"—and it is all at once a reminder, a light, and a miracle. It is a reminder of the monotheistic messages of the past, the light of divine guidance for the future, and the miracle of the eternal and inimitable word conveyed to human beings at the heart of their history.

From the outset, the Quran presents itself as the mirror of the universe. The term that the first Western translators rendered as "verse"—referring to biblical vocabulary—literally means, in Arabic, "sign" (ayah). Thus, the revealed Book, the written text, is made up of signs (ayat), just as the universe, like a text spread out before our eyes, is teeming with signs. When the heart's intelligence, and not only analytical intelligence, reads the Quran and the world, then the two texts address and echo each other, and each of them speaks of the other and of the One. The signs remind us of what it means to be born, to live, to think, to feel, and to die.

By its highly evocative form and contents, as well as by its spiritual power, the Quran is Islam's miracle. It also represents a huge, twofold responsibility for Muslims: both on the level of the ethical demands that Quranic teachings impress upon them and in their capacity as witnesses of those same teachings before humankind. This dimension is present from the earliest Revelations: thus, the surah "Al-Muzzammil" (The

Enshrouded One), one of the first revealed, contains the warning "Soon We shall send down to you a weighty Word." Another verse uses a powerful image to express the spiritual status of the Quran: "Had We sent down this Quran on a mountain, verily, you would have seen it humble itself and cleave asunder in awe of God." The revealed text, God's Word (kalam Allah), presents itself both as a benevolent reminder and as a particularly demanding moral injunction that spreads spiritual inspiration as much as it structures the definite form of religious ritual.

#### Prayer

While he was walking in the surroundings of Mecca, the Prophet received a visit from the Angel Gabriel, who taught him how to perform ablutions and practice ritual prayer. This teaching came very early on, immediately associating the act of purification through water with the injunction to perform prayer based on reciting the Quran and on a precise, cyclical series of gestures (raka). The Prophet followed the Angel Gabriel's instructions one by one, then went home and taught his wife, Khadijah, how to pray. During those early years, ritual prayer was performed only twice a day, in the morning and in the evening.

The surah "Al-Muzzammil," quoted above, also refers to the night prayer, which became an obligation for all Muslims at the beginning of the Meccan period and remained so until the duty to perform five daily prayers was finally established. The spiritual training and the ritual were particularly demanding:

O you enshrouded one! Stand [to prayer] by night, but not all night—half of it, or a little less, or a little more; and recite the Quran in slow, measured rhythmic tones. We shall soon send down to you a weighty Word. Truly the rising by night is a time when impression is more keen and speech more certain. True, there is for you by day prolonged occupation with ordinary duties. But keep in remembrance the name of your Educator [Rabb] and devote yourself to Him [commune with Him] wholeheartedly.<sup>13</sup>

At the heart of Mecca, in an increasingly hostile environment, the women and men who had accepted Islam were training unsparingly, quietly: they rose at night to pray to God lengthily, reciting by heart the signs (ayat) of the Quran, which the One has established as the privileged link

between His infinite Kindness and the heart of each being. This deep and intense spiritual training determined the most significant characteristic of the first believers: pious, discreet, and determined, they prayed to the God of mercy and peace; kept reciting His Revelation, which is a reminder (dhikr) and a light (nur) and followed the example and teachings of the Last Prophet. The essence of the Islamic message is wholly expressed in this intimate relationship of trust and love with the Most High, establishing a direct link between the individual and his or her Creator, Who has chosen to demonstrate exemplary behavior through a Messenger, a human being, whom He has set as a model. Three verses were later to synthesize the exact substance of this teaching:

When My servants ask you concerning Me, I am indeed close [to them]: I respond to the prayer of every supplicant when he or she calls on Me.<sup>14</sup>

The Prophet, at the heart of this intimate relationship, opens the way:

Say: If you love God, follow me: God will love you and forgive you your sins. 15

He is the epitome of the human being aspiring to the divine beyond the finitude of life:

You have indeed in the Messenger of God an excellent example for the person who hopes in [aspires to get close to] God and the Final Day and who remembers God intensely.<sup>16</sup>

The initial group of believers lived on this teaching: in their prayers, they faced Jerusalem, thus expressing the clear linkage of this message to the Jewish and Christian monotheisms, which share the same aspiration to the eternal and life in the hereafter.

# The Hereafter and the Last Judgment

The verses repeatedly express the theme of life after death. In the face of people's incredulity, the Quran relies, as we have seen in preceding chapters, on examples drawn from nature, specifically the desert, a seemingly dead land that comes back to life after a rain. Very early on, the Prophet's

attention was turned toward the priority of this other life: "And verily the Hereafter will be better for you than the present." <sup>17</sup>

In reality, the message is meant very clearly not to appease doubts and fears about inescapable death but to impress on the believers' minds and hearts the firm belief that this life has a meaning and that to God we shall return. This constant presence of the reminder of the hereafter does indeed convey the idea of the Last Judgment, for which God will establish the balance of good and evil that each being has been responsible for during his or her earthly life. Thus, consciousness of the Last Judgment points to the relationship between faith and morals, between contemplation and action: the "straight path" that pleases the Most High is the way of those who "believe and do righteous deeds" (al-ladhina amanu wa amilu as-salihat). 18

Being with God, being for God, giving oneself, thus involves "enjoining what is right" (al-maruf) and "forbidding what is wrong" (al-munkar); it is opting to meet the ethical demand.<sup>19</sup> Being with God necessitates changing one's behavior and deciding to be part of "a community inviting to all that is good."20 Islam, like other monotheistic traditions, insists on the return to God, on His judgment, on heaven and hell, and numerous verses associate the meaning of life with the hereafter. In the spiritual experience that determines the meaning of life and links it to the requirement to behave ethically, this initiatory phase is essential, even though it is not the ultimate teaching of the relationship with God. Beyond the hope for His paradise and the fear of hell, the pinnacle of the relationship with the Most Near is primarily to love Him and to aspire to contemplating His face (wajh) for eternity, as the Prophet was later to teach his Companions with this invocation: "O God, offer us the grace and pleasure of looking upon Your infinitely bounteous face [wajhika]." The moral demand constitutes the necessary path toward the intimate and loving presence of God.

# Adversity

The call was now public, and even though the training new converts received at al-Arqam's home was discreet, they did not hesitate to speak to their relatives and to the people around them. Day after day, clan chiefs

became increasingly aware of the danger the new religion posed: this was a straightforward rebellion against their gods and their customs, and it was eventually bound to endanger the chiefs' power. They first decided to send a delegation to the Prophet's uncle, Abu Talib, who had so far been protecting his nephew. They asked him to speak to Muhammad and make him stop spreading his message, which they considered dangerous and unacceptable because it directly attacked their gods and their ancestors' heritage. Abu Talib took no action after their first visit, so they came back and insisted that the matter was urgent. Abu Talib then sent for his nephew and tried to convince him to terminate his activities in order not to embarrass him. Muhammad's answer was firm: "O my uncle, I swear to God that, should they place the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand in order for me to abandon this cause, I would not abandon it before He [God] had made it triumph or I had perished for its sake!"<sup>21</sup> In the face of such determination, Abu Talib did not insist; in fact, he assured his nephew of his permanent support.

A new delegation came to the Prophet and offered him goods, money, and power. He refused their offers one by one and confirmed that he was interested only in his mission: calling people to recognize and believe in God, the One, whatever the price might be.

I am not possessed, nor do I seek among you honors or power. God has sent me to you as a messenger, He has revealed me a Book and has ordered me to bring you good news and warn you. I have conveyed to you my Lord's message and I have given you good advice. If you accept from me what I have brought, this will cause you to succeed in this world and in the hereafter; but if you reject what I have brought, then I shall wait patiently until God judges between us.<sup>22</sup>

With those words, Muhammad was setting the limits of possible compromise: he would not stop conveying his message, and he would trust in God and be patient as to the consequences of this decision in this world. In practice, hostilities had now begun: clan chiefs kept insulting the Prophet and saying that he was insane, possessed, or a sorcerer. Abu Lahab, his uncle, pressured his two sons to divorce the Prophet's daughters, whom they had married, while his wife relished tossing the household garbage out into the street as Muhammad passed by.

Rumors spread that Muhammad was actually a sorcerer, that he broke up families, separated parents from their children and husbands from their wives, and was a troublemaker. When the time for the annual market period grew near, the clan chiefs, fearing that Muhammad might spread his message among visitors, had men posted at the various entrances of Mecca: they were to warn arriving visitors of the mischief caused by Muhammad and his Companions. The isolation strategy worked fairly well, although some people did not allow themselves to be influenced, such as the highway robber Abu Dharr, from Banu Ghifar. Having heard of this new message calling for faith in one God, he came to the Prophet in spite of the Quraysh people's warnings. He found Muhammad lying in the shade near the Kaba. He called the Prophet's name and asked about his message: he listened, then immediately pronounced the profession of faith, surprising the Prophet, who said, looking at him: "God guides whom He will!" Abu Dharr al-Ghifari was to become one of the Prophet's most famous Companions; he was known for his devotion, his rigor, and his criticism of luxury and laziness.

The Prophet was facing humiliation and mockery. People asked him for miracles and proofs, and he tirelessly answered by quoting the Quran and saying, "I am but a messenger!" The pressure grew, and increasingly violent manifestations of opposition started to appear. Clan chiefs particularly attacked poor Muslims and those who were not protected by any clan. Thus the slave Bilal had been tied up by his master in the desert, in the sun. His master placed a boulder on his stomach to force him to abjure his faith, but Bilal kept repeating: "He is One, He is One." Abu Bakr later bought Bilal (as he did for many other slaves) and set him free. Bilal was later to become the muezzin of Medina, unanimously respected for the sincerity of his faith, his devotion, and the beauty of his voice. 23

A man from the Makhzum tribe, named Amr, was to express his opposition to Islam in the most cruel manner. His kin called him Abu al-Hakam (father of wise judgment), but the Muslims, confronted with his refusal to see and his coarseness, called him Abu Jahl (father of ignorance). He once went to meet the Prophet and insulted him with such hatred that those who heard him, even though they were not Muslims, considered he had transgressed the honor code by humiliating Muhammad in this way. Hearing this, Hamzah, the Prophet's uncle, intervened. He went up to Abu Jahl and threatened him with reprisals if he behaved

in that way again; at the same time, he announced that he himself had become a Muslim and that he would now personally take on his nephew's protection.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Abu Jahl stopped abusing Muhammad: instead, he started to mistreat the Prophet's poorest and most vulnerable Companions. Ammar, a young man of Yemeni origin, had adhered to Islam's message very early and received training from the Prophet in al-Argam's home. His father, Yassir, and then his mother, Sumayyah, became Muslims shortly after he did, and assiduously learned the new religion. Abu Jahl chose them as the object of his vengeful hatred: he took to beating them, tying them up in the sun, and torturing them. The Prophet could not do anything because of the still complex nature of clan alliances; he witnessed this debasing treatment without being able to intervene. One day, as he passed by Yassir and his wife, who were being ill-treated, the Prophet called out to them: "Be strong, Yassir's family, our meeting point is in paradise." Despite those tortures, which went on for weeks, Sumayyah and Yassir refused to abjure their faith. Sumayyah even shouted at Abu Jahl what she thought of him and his cowardly behavior. Infuriated, he stabbed her to death, then, in the same raging anger, he turned to her husband and beat him to death as well. Sumayyah and Yassir were the first martyrs (shuhada) of Islam: persecuted, tortured, then killed for refusing to deny God, His Oneness, and the truth of the last Revelation.<sup>25</sup>

The situation was getting increasingly difficult for Muslims, particularly for the most vulnerable among them as far as social status and clan affiliation were concerned. The Prophet's protection was ensured by his uncles Abu Talib and Hamzah, but this protection by no means extended to the first spiritual community of Muslims. Insults, rejection, and illtreatment became the rule, and Muhammad began looking for a solution to alleviate the trials and suffering endured by the first Muslims. He thought of approaching Walid, the chief of the Makhzum clan, to which Abu Jahl belonged; Walid wielded considerable power over the whole of Meccan society. If the Prophet could convince him of the truth of his message, or at least bring him to intercede and stop the persecutions, this would be an important achievement for himself and his Companions. But while he was setting forth his arguments and trying to win Walid's support, the Prophet was interrupted by a blind man, poor and old, who had already converted to Islam and was asking him to recite some surahs from the Quran for him. Muhammad first turned aside calmly, but he soon

became irritated by the insistence of this old man, who was preventing him from presenting his case to Walid. The chief, full of contempt, eventually refused even to hear the matter. A surah was to be revealed as a result of this incident, requiring Muslims to draw a lesson from it for eternity:

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. He [the Prophet] frowned and turned away, because the blind man came to him. But what could you tell but that perhaps he might grow in purity? Or that he might receive admonition, and the reminder might profit him? As to one who regards himself as self-sufficient, you attend to him, though it is no blame to you if he does not grow in purity. But as to he who came to you striving earnestly, and with fear [in his heart], of him you were unmindful. By no means [should it be so]! For it is indeed a message of remembrance. Therefore let who will, keep it in remembrance!<sup>26</sup>

The Prophet, moved by his desire to protect his community, is here reproached by his Educator, who teaches him never to turn away from a human being, regardless of whatever difficult circumstances the Prophet might be facing, even though the person might be poor, old, and blind. Seeking the protection of a person of distinction, socially and politically useful, Muhammad had neglected a poor man, apparently of no significance to his cause, who was asking for spiritual solace; this mistake, this moral slip, is recorded in the Quran, which through this story teaches Muslims never to neglect a human being, never to turn away from the poor and needy, but rather to serve and love them. The Prophet was never to forget this teaching, and he repeatedly invoked God, saying: "O God, we implore You to grant us piety, dignity, [spiritual] wealth, and love of the poor."<sup>27</sup>

Thus the Prophet is a model for Muslims not only through the excellence of his behavior but also through the weaknesses of his humanity, revealed and mentioned by the Quran so that Muslim consciences may never forget this message through the ages. No one must ever let power or social, economic, or political interests turn him or her away from other human beings, from the attention they deserve and the respect they are entitled to. Nothing must ever lead a person to compromise this principle of faith in favor of a political strategy aimed at saving or protecting a community from some peril. The freely offered, sincere heart of a poor, powerless individual is worth a thousand times more in the sight of God than the assiduously courted, self-interested heart of a rich one.

The Prophet constantly strove to be the example of and witness to this message, but in the course of their history, Muslims have often forgotten and neglected this injunction to treat the needy with respect and dignity. Even while the Prophet was still alive, his Companion Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, mentioned above, spoke out in a forceful and determined manner against the failings of some Muslims increasingly attracted by power, comfort, and riches. He saw in this the beginning of an inversion of the spiritual order, evidence of deep alienation, and the first signs of foretold disasters. History, with its many examples of how the thirst for power and wealth has led individuals to compromise their principles, has since taught us how true this intuition was. In this respect, another of the Prophet's warnings echoes in our minds, addressing his spiritual community for the centuries to come: "For every [spiritual] community there is an object of discord, tension, and disorder [fitnah], and for my community, this object is money."<sup>28</sup>

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# Resistance, Humility, and Exile

The clan chiefs kept mocking Muhammad and encouraging others to criticize and humiliate him. The man who claimed to be a prophet was asked for miracles and tangible evidence. People questioned God's choice in electing a man who held no particular power, who went about in market-places without any sign setting him apart from other men. They mocked the man and his claims as much as the message.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the Prophet stood his ground. When one of the Quraysh leaders, Utbah ibn Rabiah, came to see him to offer him money and power, the Prophet's response was first of all to quote the Quran at length:

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Hâ, mîm. A Revelation from the Most Gracious, Most Merciful. A Book, of which the messages are clearly explained; a Quran in Arabic, for people with inner knowledge, giving good news and admonition: yet most of them turn away, and so they do not hear. They say: "Our hearts are under veils, [concealed] from that to which you invite us, and in our ears is a deafness, and between us and you is a screen: so do [what you will]; as for us, we shall do [what we will]." Say [O Prophet]: "I am but a man like you: it is revealed to me by inspiration, that your God is One God. So take the straight path unto Him and ask for His forgiveness. And woe to those who associate other gods with Him, those who do not pay the purifying social tax [zakat] and who even deny the hereafter! For those who believe and work deeds of righteousness

is a reward that will never fail." Say: "Do you deny He Who created the earth in two days [cycles], and do you join equals with Him? He is the Lord of [all] the worlds. He set on the earth mountains standing firm, high above it, and bestowed blessings on the earth, and measured therein its sustenance in four days [cycles] alike for those who seek."

The Prophet went on reciting up to verse 38, which mentions those who prostrate themselves; when he reached it, he prostrated himself in reverence to the One God. Utbah had come to him to offer him the riches and power of this world, and he was now faced with a man prostrated in the name of his faith in the Eternal and thereby expressing his clear rejection of the proposal that had just been made to him. Utbah was very strongly impressed by the form and content of the Quranic message, and he went back to his kin and suggested that they should not oppose this message. But they, persuaded that he had been bewitched by the magic of those words, paid no heed to this advice and carried on with their persecutions.

# Jihad

As for the Prophet, he also persevered: whenever his opponents attacked him, he used the Quran to answer, protect himself, and resist. This is what Revelation clearly taught him with this verse, which marks the first occurrence of the word *jihad* in the Quran:

Therefore do not obey the negators, but strive against them [jahidhum] with the Quran with the utmost resistance [jihadan kabira].<sup>3</sup>

Confronted with pressures of all sorts, from the mildest to the most violent, Muhammad received a verse that pointed to the way and means of the resistance—of the *jihad*—he was to undertake. What we find here is the initial and essential meaning of the concept of *jihad*, the root of which, *ja-ha-da*, means "making an effort" but also, in this instance, "resisting" (that is, resisting oppression and persecution). God orders His Messenger to resist the Quraysh's ill-treatment of him by relying on the Quran. The text is actually his spiritual and intellectual weapon against their aggression. To those who sneer, insult, and humiliate, to those who

attack, torture, and kill, to those who want miracles and proofs, the Prophet invariably answers with the weapon and shield of the Quran, which in itself constitutes, as we have seen, the miracle and the proof. The text liberates the real strength in people, that which has the power to resist and overcome all the persecutions in this world, because it calls for the Life beyond the illusions of this life: "The life of this world is but amusement and play. But verily, the home of the hereafter—that is Life indeed, if they but knew."

The essence of the notion of *jihad fi sabiliLLah* (resistance in the way of God) is wholly circumscribed in this first occurrence of the word at the heart of the surah "The Criterion." It is a matter of distinguishing, through the miracle of the two Revelations (the universe and the text), the presence of the One, and of resisting the lies and terror of those who are moved only by the desire to protect their own interests, powers, or pleasures. The first attitude this requires is to stay aloof:

Therefore shun those who turn away from Our message and desire nothing but the life of this world. That is their attainment of knowledge. Verily, your Lord knows best those who stray from His path, and He knows best those who receive guidance. To God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: so that He rewards those who do evil, according to their deeds, and He rewards those who do good with what is best.<sup>5</sup>

The criterion also has an ethical dimension, as we can see in the above verses, since what distinguishes the believer in this life is not only faith but also a way of being and behaving. Armed with this knowledge, the Prophet and his Companions first of all tried to convey their message freely while avoiding confrontation. The Quraysh leaders did not want it to be so, and they intensified their persecutions as Revelations followed upon each other in rapid succession. The first Muslims, like the Prophet, engaged in resistance—in *jihad*—reminding people of the existence of the One God, of Life after life, of the Last Judgment, and of the necessity for good, and the Quran was always the weapon of their spiritual discernment and their shield in the face of physical brutality.

However, the persecution was so violent and continuous that this *jihad* was sometimes difficult to bear. One day, a group of Muslims came to the Prophet while he was lying in the shade near the Kaba. They asked him:

"Won't you invoke God for us, that He may help us?" The Prophet firmly answered: "Among the believers who came before you, many were thrown into ditches dug for them and were sawed in two from head to foot, and this did not turn them away from their religion; their flesh was torn apart from their bones and sinews with iron combs, and this did not turn them away from their religion. By God, this cause will certainly prevail, so it will be possible for a lone traveler to go from Sanaa to Hadramout [regions in Yemen] without fearing anything but God, or the wolf for his sheep. But you are too impatient!"

They therefore had to be patient, endure, persevere, and never despair of God and of His will. The Prophet was teaching his Companions the difficult association of trust in God with pain. The experience of physical and moral suffering made it possible to reach the state of faith where one accepts adversity, where one can doubt oneself without doubting God. In this respect, young Ammar's story is edifying: he had seen his mother, then his father, being executed because they refused to deny God. Then Ammar himself was tortured in the cruelest manner. One day while he was being tortured, unable to bear any more, he denied God and praised the gods of the Quraysh. His tormentors let him go, satisfied that they had achieved what they wanted. Ammar was alive, but he was besieged and undermined by a feeling of guilt he could not get rid of, as he was convinced that his denial could not be atoned for. He went to the Prophet in tears and confessed to him the cause of his misery and his doubts as to his own value and fate. The Prophet asked him about his innermost beliefs, and Ammar confirmed to him that they were unchanged, firm, and solid, and that he harbored no doubt as to his faith in God and his love. Muhammad calmed and reassured the young man, for he had done what he could and need not be angry with himself. Revelation even mentioned "one who, after accepting faith in God, utters unbelief . . . under compulsion, his heart remaining firm in faith." He advised Ammar that if he ever again underwent the same unbearable torture, in order to save his life he should say with his lips what his torturers wanted to hear, keeping his faith and his prayers to God firmly in his heart.

Thus the Prophet recognized and accepted both attitudes: that of those who never denied their faith and who went so far as to die for it, and that of those who, under unbearable torture, escaped death by verbally denying their belief while it remained unshakeable in their mind and heart. Later on, Muslim scholars were to rely on this example, among others, in asserting that Muslims could, in an extreme situation where their lives were at risk at the hands of an unjust power, say with their lips what their torturers wanted to hear. This refers to the notion of *taqiyyah* (implying the act of dissimulating) and has been legitimated, as here in Ammar's case, only when an individual has to save his or her life in an extreme situation involving unbearable torture. In any other situation, as we shall see, Muslims were to say the truth, whatever the price might be.

#### Stakes

The Quraysh's opposition was not merely to a man and a message. Indeed, if all of God's messengers have met with the same reception—the same opposition and hatred from a considerable part of their own community—it is because the contents of what they brought meant a radical revolution in the order of things in society.

The Quran reports the words that greeted the messengers, in different ages, when they came to convey the message to their respective peoples. The first response was most often a rejection of change mingled with the fear of losing power, as in the answer given to Moses and Aaron by Pharaoh's people: "Have you come to us to turn us away from the ways we found our fathers following, in order that you and your brother may have greatness in the land? But we shall not believe in you!"8 Understanding this relationship to memory, ancestors, and habits is essential to understanding how different peoples reacted when confronted with the transformations that were bound to come in the wake of a new belief and, consequently, of a new presence in the social body. The reaction is always reflexive and passionate, because what is at stake has to do with the identity and stability on which the society involved relies. The Prophet Muhammad, with his message and the increasingly visible development of his community, elicited the same reactions most intensely, and the Quraysh, carried away by the fear of what seemed to threaten their landmarks, opposed him fiercely and relentlessly.

The issue of power is obviously a crucial one: all the peoples who received prophets initially believed that they sought nothing but power and status, and Muhammad's case was no exception. People obviously use

their own standpoint to try to interpret and understand the messengers' intentions and objectives: in the human order, one does not upset traditions, and consequently a social and political order, unless one seeks power. The logic of human relationships imposes this interpretation, and this explains the doubts and deafness of leaders faced with a message that, although its content is in itself far removed from such considerations, has explicit consequences for their power.

By calling for recognition of the One God, for the rejection of former idols, for Life after life, for ethics and justice, Muhammad initiated an outright revolution in mentalities as much as in society. It mattered little, all things considered, whether he sought power for himself or for anyone else; what remained self-evident was the fact that the inversion of perspectives contained in his message, which was oriented toward the hereafter, shook the underpinnings of worldly power.

Recognition of the One God and consciousness of Eternity allied to the ethical teaching appeared to the new believers as elements of their spiritual, intellectual, and social liberation. The Quraysh leaders' insight was, after all, lucid and to the point: the stakes underlying their radical opposition to a message of radical liberation were far-reaching and had essential implications for their fate. They sensed, without always being able to hear or understand it, the significance of the essential affirmation of faith in the One, which all at once expresses an intimate conversion and a general transmutation of order:

Say: "He is God, the One; God, the Absolute; he does not beget, nor is he begotten; and there is none like Him."

This statement points to the existence of a frontier:

Say: "O you who reject faith [whose hearts are veiled]! I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship! I am not a worshiper of that which you worship, nor are you worshipers of what I worship. To you be your religion, and to me mine." 10

#### Questions

The Quraysh were at a loss about how to prevent Muhammad's message from spreading further. They decided to send a delegation to Yathrib to ask Jewish dignitaries about the nature and truthfulness of this new Revelation. The Yathrib Jews were known to profess this same idea of the One God, and Muhammad often referred to Moses, their prophet; they were therefore best suited to express an opinion or even to suggest a strategy.

Consulted about the new prophet, the rabbis suggested the people of Mecca should ask him three key questions in order to find out whether what he said was actually revealed or whether he was a fraud. The first question involved the knowledge of a story about a group of young men's exile from their people; the second was about a great traveler who had reached the confines of the universe; the third was a direct request to define *ar-ruh* (the soul). The Quraysh delegation left, convinced that they now had the means to entrap Muhammad. Back in Mecca, they went to him and asked him the three questions. He replied almost instantly: "I shall answer your questions tomorrow!"

But the next day, the Angel Gabriel did not appear. There was no Revelation. Nor did the angel come the day after, or during the next four-teen days. The Quraysh gloated, certain they had at last managed to prove the duplicity of the so-called prophet, who could not answer the rabbis' questions. As for Muhammad, he was sad, and as the days went by, he was increasingly afraid of having been forsaken: without doubting God, he again underwent the experience of self-doubt amplified by his opponents' sneers. Two weeks later, he received a Revelation and an explanation:

Never say of anything, "I shall do that tomorrow," except: "If God so wills," and remember your Lord [Rabb, "Educator"] when you forget, and say: "I hope that my Lord will guide me ever closer than this to the right course." 12

This Revelation once again involved a reproach and a teaching: it reminded the Prophet that his status, his knowledge, and his fate depended on his Rabb, on the One and Sovereign God, and that he must never forget it. This is how one should understand the meaning of the phrase in sha Allah, "if God so wills": it expresses the awareness of limits, the feeling of humility of one who acts while knowing that beyond what he or she can do or say, God alone has the power to make things happen. This is by no means a fatalistic message: it implies not that one should not act but, on the contrary, that one should never stop acting while always

being aware in one's mind and heart of the real limits of human power. For the second time, the Prophet was called to account by the Transcendent. Whatever adversity one faces, one's strength and freedom on earth consist in remaining constantly aware of one's dependence on the Creator.

Only later was the Prophet to receive the answers to the three questions he had been asked. The delay was paradoxically to strengthen the believers' conviction and to baffle the Prophet's interlocutors: his initial inability to answer and then the belated communication of Revelation proved that Muhammad was not the author of the Book that was being constituted and that he did actually depend on his *Rabb*'s will.

The answer to the question about *ar-ruh* (the soul) directly referred—in the same way as the requirement of humility he had previously been reminded of—to the One's superior knowledge:

They ask you concerning the soul [ar-ruh]. Say: the soul is of the command [the exclusive knowledge] of my Lord [Rabb, "Educator"]; of knowledge, it is only a little that is communicated to you. 13

As for the two stories (that of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and that of the traveler Dhu al-Qarnayn), they are also told in surah 18, "The Cave." The stories are teeming with information and details the Quraysh and the Yathrib rabbis could not have expected and of which the Prophet knew nothing before Revelation. The same surah also tells the story of Moses, who in a moment of forgetfulness and oversight had lapsed into saying that because of his status as a prophet, "he knew." God then tried him by confronting him with one who knew more than he did, the character of al-Khidr in the Quran, who initiated him to understanding God's superior knowledge, to patience, and to the wisdom of remaining humble and refraining from asking too many questions. 14

From the experience of Moses (who was so impatient) to that of Muhammad (who forgot his dependence) as well as the teaching addressed to all human beings (who, of knowledge, have received "only a little"), everything reminds Muslims of their own fragility and of their need for God, whatever their status, and this teaching is present throughout the surah "The Cave." Later, the Prophet was to recommend that every Muslim should read this surah in its entirety every Friday so as to remember, week after week, that they must not forget—forget themselves, forget Him.

## Abyssinia

The humiliations and persecutions increased as Revelation of Quranic verses went on. Now they were no longer aimed only at the most vulnerable among Muslims but also at men and women whose status normally would have protected them, such as Abu Bakr. Muhammad, protected by his uncle Abu Talib, was the butt of jeers and ridicule, but he was not physically harmed. Seeing that the situation in Mecca was getting worse, the Prophet suggested: "If you went to the land of the Abyssinians, you would find there a king under whose command nobody suffers injustice. It is a land of sincerity in religion. You would remain there until God delivered you from what you suffer at present." <sup>15</sup>

The Prophet was referring to the king of Abyssinia, the Negus, who was a Christian and who was reputed to be respectful and fair with his people. Part of the community therefore started to prepare for departure, and eventually a number of individuals and families discreetly left Mecca to undertake the first emigration (*al-hijrah al-ula*): there were in all about a hundred people, eighty-two or eighty-three men and close to twenty women.

This took place in the year 615, five years after the beginning of Revelation and two years after the beginning of the public call. The situation had become particularly difficult, so much so as to prompt those Muslims to take the risk of going into exile very far from Mecca. Uthman ibn Affan and his wife, Ruqayyah, the Prophet's daughter, were part of the group; so was Abu Bakr, but he came back when, on the way, he met a Meccan dignitary who granted him his protection. It also included Um Salamah, who was later to become the Prophet's wife, and through whom accounts of the various episodes of the emigration to Abyssinia have come down to us.

The Quraysh leaders soon found out that some Muslims—paradoxically, not the most vulnerable—had left Mecca. It was not long either before they knew where the Muslims had gone. They had some reason to worry: if this small group of Muslims managed to settle elsewhere, they were bound to tarnish the Meccans' reputation and perhaps arouse animosity toward them or even try to constitute an alliance against them with a king who they knew shared that faith in one God. After the Muslims had been gone some time, the Quraysh leaders decided to send the Negus two

emissaries, Amr ibn al-As and Abdullah ibn Rabiah, in order to dissuade him from granting those immigrants his protection and to convince him to send them back to Mecca. The two emissaries went to the Negus's court, carrying many presents that they knew to be particularly valued by Abyssinian dignitaries. They met the dignitaries one by one, gave them the gifts, and received assurances of their support when the Meccans submitted their request to the king.

# Facing the Negus

Amr ibn al-As and Abdullah ibn Rabiah would have liked the king to agree to send the Muslims back without even hearing the migrants' case. The Negus refused, arguing that those who had chosen him to protect them had the right to present their case. He called for an audience that would include the emissaries from Mecca and a delegation of Muslim immigrants. The latter group chose Jafar ibn Abi Talib, who was wise and a good speaker, to represent them and answer the king's questions. The king asked them about the cause of their exile and particularly about the contents of the new message brought by the Prophet. Jafar explained to the king the basic principles contained in Revelation and embodied in Muhammad's teaching: faith in one God, the rejection of idol worship, the injunction to respect kinship ties, to say the truth, to oppose injustice, and so on. Jafar added that it was because of this message that the Quraysh people persecuted the Muslims, and this was why they had decided to seek refuge in Abyssinia near the Negus, who was reputed to be a just and tolerant ruler.

The king asked Jafar whether he had a copy of or could recite a passage from the text of Revelation brought by the Prophet. Jafar answered in the affirmative and started to recite some verses from the surah "Maryam" (Mary):

Relate in the Book [the story of] Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a screen [to screen herself] from them: then We sent to her our angel, and he appeared to her as a man in all respects. She said: "I seek refuge from you in the shelter of the Most Gracious, if you fear Him." He said: "I am only a messenger from your Lord [to announce] to you the gift of a pure son." She said: "How shall I

have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and that I am not unchaste?" He said: "So [it will be]; your Lord says: 'That is easy for Me and [We wish] to appoint him as a sign to men and a mercy from Us': it is a matter decreed." 17

The king and his dignitaries were moved by the beauty of the text recited in Arabic, and they were even more so when the text was translated for them and they understood that it announced the miraculous birth of Jesus. The Negus exclaimed: "Indeed, this comes from the same source as what Jesus brought." And he turned to the two Meccan emissaries to reject their request and inform them that he would not hand over the Muslim immigrants, to whom he would continue to grant refuge.

Amr and Abdullah went out, most annoyed, but Amr rapidly decided that he would go to the Negus again to inform him about what this new message actually said of Jesus, and which by no means coincides with Christian beliefs. He did so the next day, and after listening to him, the king again sent for Jafar and his delegation and demanded to know more about what the Prophet said about Jesus. The Muslims were aware of the dangers this encounter involved: an explanation of the differences between the two religions might lead the Negus to send them back. They nevertheless decided to keep to the contents of the message and explain what it said truthfully. To the Negus's direct question, "What do you profess about Jesus, son of Mary?" Jafar answered no less directly: "We say what our Prophet has taught us: he is God's servant, His messenger, His Spirit, His Word that He has breathed into Mary, the Holy Virgin." There was no reference to his status as "son of God," yet the Negus responded by taking hold of a stick and exclaiming: "Jesus, son of Mary, does not exceed what you have just said by the length of this stick." The religious dignitaries were surprised at this answer and expressed it by coughing discreetly, but the Negus ignored them and required that the two emissaries from Mecca be sent back and that they take all their presents with them. To the Muslims he renewed his welcome, assuring them that they would find protection and security in his land.

This was a major setback for the Meccans, whose revenge was soon to come with the stepping up of reprisals against Muslims after the two emissaries' return. As for Jafar and his community, they had found a predominantly Christian country where, although they were exiles and did not

share the population's faith, they were received, protected, and tolerated. They had decided to say the truth: at the most hazardous moment of the encounter with the Negus, they had neither tried to evade the question nor lied about what the Prophet Muhammad said of Jesus, son of Mary. They indeed risked being sent back and extradited, but they were not in the same situation as Ammar, who under torture had verbally denied his faith to save his life. In this case, then, in spite of the dangers involved, there was no way out: the Muslims kept to their beliefs, which they expressed with sincerity and honesty. They had no other choice but to say the truth, and so they did.

Besides, it should be noted that Jafar had at first set forth the similarities between the two Revelations. The first verses he had recited clearly showed that the source of the message was the same and that Muslims, when accepting the new Revelation, worshiped the same God as Christians and recognized their prophet. It was the Meccan emissaries who had tried to point out the differences in order to make trouble, but Jafar was just as quick to staunchly explain the message of his faith with its distinctions and differences. The mere presence of the Muslims in Abyssinia basically sent the Christians another message: that the Muslims had recognized in the Negus a man of principle and justice, and this was why they had decided to seek refuge in his land. The Negus was not a Muslim, but he had perfectly heard the twofold meaning, explicit and implicit, of the message brought by the Muslims: their God is the same, whatever the differences between their texts and our beliefs; their values, of respect and justice, are the same whatever the discrepancies between the religions' texts. The king heard and welcomed those believers of another faith.

Subsequently, the Negus converted to Islam and remained in continuous contact with the Prophet Muhammad. He represented the latter at a wedding ceremony, and the Prophet performed the prayer for the absent deceased (salat al-ghaib) when he learned of the Negus's death. The majority of the Muslims exiled in Abyssinia stayed there for about fifteen years, until the Khaybar expedition (in 630), at which time they joined the Prophet in Yathrib, which had by then become Medina. Others had gone back to Mecca earlier upon receiving positive news from there (though some of these returned yet again to Abyssinia), but none ever met with any trouble in the Negus's kingdom.



# Trials, Elevation, and Hopes

In Mecca, the situation was getting worse. Islam's fiercest opponents, along with Abu Lahab and the so-called Abu Jahl, included Umar ibn al-Khattab. The last of these had already stood out by violently beating a newly converted woman.

## Umar ibn al-Khattab

Umar was exasperated by the turn of events. He decided the only thing that could be done was to kill the Prophet. This was the surest means of putting an end to the disorder and sedition that were welling up and endangering Meccan society as a whole.

He went out of his house, his sword in his hand, to look for Muhammad. On the way, he met Nuaym ibn Abdullah, who had secretly converted to Islam. Nuaym asked him why he looked so angry, and Umar told him about his intention to kill the Prophet. Nuaym quickly thought of a means to divert him from his plan: he advised Umar to restore order in his own family before setting upon Muhammad. He informed him that his sister Fatimah and his brother-in-law Said had already converted to Islam. Astonished and infuriated, Umar changed his plans and made straight for his sister's home.

She and her husband were reading and studying the Quran with a young companion, Khabbab, when they heard someone approaching their house. Khabbab stopped reading and hid. Umar had heard the sound of the recitation inside, and he accosted them coldly, bluntly asking what they had

been reciting. They both denied the fact, but Umar insisted that he definitely had heard them reciting a text. They refused to discuss the matter, which caused Umar's anger to flare. He sprang to his brother-in-law to strike him, and when his sister tried to intervene, he struck her, causing blood to gush out. The sight of blood on his sister's face produced an immediate effect and Umar stopped short. At that very moment, his sister exclaimed with spirit: "Yes, indeed, we are Muslims and we believe in God and His Messenger. As for you, you can now do as you please!" Umar was taken aback; he was torn between remorse at having hurt his sister and bewilderment at the news he had just received. He asked his sister to give him the text they had been reading when he arrived. His sister demanded that he should first perform ablutions to purify himself. Sobered but still upset, Umar accepted, performed ablutions, then started reading:

Tâ, bâ. We have not sent down the Quran to you to [cause] your distress, but only as an admonition for those who fear [God]. A Revelation from Him who created the earth and the heavens on high. The Most Gracious is firmly established on the throne. To Him belongs what is in the heavens and on earth, and all between them, and all beneath the soil. Whether [or not] you speak aloud, verily He knows what is secret and what is yet more hidden. He is God! There is no God but Him! To Him belong the most beautiful names.<sup>2</sup>

Those were the first verses, and Umar went on reading the rest of the text, which was an account of God's call to Moses on Mount Sinai, until he reached this verse:

Verily, I am God: there is no God but I: so serve Me, and establish regular prayer for My remembrance.<sup>3</sup>

Umar then stopped reading and expressed his enthusiasm about the beauty and nobleness of those words. Khabbab, encouraged by Umar's apparent good disposition, then came out of his hiding place and informed him that he had heard the Prophet praying to God to grant his community support through the conversion of Abu al-Hakam or of Umar ibn al-Khattab. Umar asked him where Muhammad was, and when told he was at al-Arqam's dwelling place, Umar went there. When he

reached the door, the occupants were afraid because Umar was still carrying his sword in his belt. But the Prophet told them to let him in, and Umar immediately announced his intention of becoming a Muslim. The Prophet exclaimed, "Allahu akbar!" (God is the Most Great) and received this conversion as an answer to his prayer.

The Prophet knew he had no power over hearts. In the face of persecution, in great difficulty, he had turned to God, hoping that He would guide one or the other of those two men who he knew possessed the human qualities as well as the power necessary to reverse the order of things. The Prophet of course knew that God alone has the power to guide hearts. For some individuals, conversion was a long process that required years of questioning, doubt, and steps forward and backward, while for others conversion was instantaneous, immediately following the reading of a text or responding to a particular gesture or behavior. This cannot be explained. The conversions that took longest were not necessarily the most solid, and the reverse was not true either: when it comes to conversion, the heart's dispositions, faith, and love, there is no logic, and all that remains is the extraordinary power of the divine. Umar had gone out of his home determined to kill the Prophet, blinded by his absolute negation of the One God; there he was, a few hours later, changed, transformed, as the result of a conversion induced by a text and the meaning of God. He was to become one of the most faithful Companions of the man he had wished dead. Nobody among the Muslims could have imagined that Umar would recognize the message of Islam, so forcefully had he expressed his hatred for it. This heart's revolution was a sign, and it carried a twofold teaching: that nothing is impossible for God, and that one should not pronounce final judgments on anything or anybody. This was a new reminder of the need for humility in all circumstances: for a human being, remembering God's infinite power should mean healthy self-doubt as to oneself and suspending one's judgment as to others. Thus, the more he moved forward with God, every day becoming more of a model for his Companions and for eternity, the more the Prophet was attaining humility and modesty as expressed in being, knowledge, and judgment.

Umar, with his spirit and courage, had decided to make his conversion public. He immediately went to Abu Jahl to tell him the news, and he suggested to the Prophet that they should pray publicly at the Kaba.<sup>5</sup> This certainly involved risks, but it was also a matter of showing the Quraysh

clan chiefs that Muslims were present among them and were determined. Umar and Hamzah, both known for their strong personalities, entered the Kaba enclosure ahead of the group, and the Muslims prayed in a group without anyone daring to interfere.

### Banishment

Nevertheless, things had gone too far. The tension was rising daily, and the Quraysh leaders, meeting to try to put an end to this slow expansion, felt it necessary to take more radical measures. The first converts came from all tribes, and this situation made it impossible to resort to a strategy based on the usual alliances. After protracted discussions and heated arguments, which themselves divided clans from within, they decided to banish all the Banu Hashim, which was Muhammad's clan, and set up a total boycott directed at the clan and its members.

A covenant was signed by about forty Quraysh leaders and hung up inside the Kaba to signal the solemnity and finality of the decision. Abu Lahab, who himself belonged to the Hashim clan, decided to disavow his clan and support the banishment, a move that violated the traditional honor code. Abu Talib adopted the opposite attitude and continued to support his nephew, thus obliging the Quraysh to de facto include the Muttalib clan in the boycott. The decision was a radical one, for it meant avoiding any contact with members of the clan—they would no longer marry their daughters and sons, trade with them, establish any other type of contract, and so forth. The boycott was to be comprehensive and last as long as the two clans allowed Muhammad to go on preaching his message; they wanted him to put an end to his mission and never again refer to the One God.

Fearing for their security, the Banu Hashim and Muttalib clans decided to move together to the same area in the Mecca valley. Even though the boycott was not total—relatives covertly had food and goods brought to the Banu Hashim—the situation became serious, and more and more of them suffered from sickness and hunger. The banishment lasted for more than three years, and it economically weakened the two clans. Abu Bakr had lost most of his fortune as a result of the boycott, and the social and psychological pressures were unbearable.

Among the Quraysh, many thought that this boycott was unnecessary, if not useless. Some of course were linked to the clan by kinship ties, which were impossible to forget or disown. There were numerous attempts to put an end to the banishment in the course of those three years, but they never succeeded because a number of key figures, such as Abu Lahab and Abu Jahl, refused to discuss the matter. Finally, change came through the initiative of a few individuals seeking allies in each of the clans. While the people were gathered near the Kaba, one of them addressed the others, objecting to the boycott on the Banu Hashim; another man in the crowd joined him, then another, then a fourth. Abu Jahl attempted to intervene, but the assembly, many of whom were of the same opinion but dared not speak out, was overwhelmingly opposed to the boycott. One of the members of the group who had initiated this little uprising went into the Kaba, took hold of the text stipulating the boycott decision, and tore it up. The hard-liners felt there was no point in resisting, and the ban was lifted. The relief was palpable in the two clans excluded, so intolerable had the situation become.

#### The Year of Sorrow

For several months after the boycott ended, the situation improved for the small Muslim community. They again were able to develop ties of friendship and working relationships with the Quraysh people. The Prophet continued to convey his message, and the visibility sought by Umar ibn al-Khattab had become an everyday reality in Mecca, although the insults and persecutions had not stopped.

Things were soon to change dramatically, however. Khadijah, the Prophet's wife, died shortly after the boycott was lifted. She had been Muhammad's wife, companion in faith, and most reliable support for over twenty-five years, and God called her back to Him nine years after the beginning of the mission, in 619 CE. The Prophet's grief was very deep: he had, at a very early stage, received from the Angel Gabriel the news of his wife's election, and he knew that Khadijah's presence by his side had been one of the signs of God's protection and love. In the light of her presence and of the role she played in his life, one can grasp the multiple possible meanings in a verse that was to be revealed much later, which

describes the relationship between husband and wife: "They are your garments as you are their garments." She had been the garment that protects (emotionally as much as physically), conceals (weaknesses and doubts as well as riches), and brings warmth, strength, status, dignity, and modesty.

It was not long before the Prophet's uncle, Abu Talib, thanks to whom he had so far enjoyed immunity among the Quraysh, fell seriously ill as well. Muhammad visited him just as he was about to breathe his last. Abu Talib confirmed that he had been happy to protect his nephew, who had always been moderate and just. Muhammad invited him to pronounce the profession of faith before departing, so that he could intercede for his uncle with God. Abu Talib, prompted by his clan's honor code, said that he feared the Quraysh would think he had uttered the profession of faith out of fear of death. They did not have the time to discuss the matter any further: Abu Talib died with the Prophet by his side. This man who, with dignity and courage, had granted the younger man his protection, as well as his love and respect, had not embraced Islam. Muhammad loved and respected him, and his sorrow was all the more intense. From this sorrow and powerlessness, a verse, revealed in relation to this event, draws an eternal teaching as to the disposition and the secrets of hearts: "You will not be able to guide [toward faith] everyone whom you love; but God guides those whom He will, and He knows best those who receive guidance."7

In the space of a few months, the Prophet seemed to have become doubly vulnerable: he had lost the person who had offered him love and the person who had granted him protection. In spite of his grief, he needed to react quickly and find the means to protect the community of Muslims who had remained in Mecca. Muhammad decided to seek support outside the city.

# At Taif, a Slave

The Prophet went to the town of Taif and spoke to the leaders of the Thaqif tribe, hoping that they would hear the message of Islam and agree to protect the Muslims from their enemies. He met with a very cold reception, however, and the chiefs mocked his claim to be a prophet. If he was, they asked, how could God allow His Messenger to beg for the support

of strange tribes? Not only did they refuse to discuss the matter, but they mobilized the population against him: as he was leaving, insults followed him and children threw stones at him. More and more people gathered and jeered at him as he passed; he finally had to seek refuge in an orchard in order to escape his pursuers. Alone, having found no protection among his fellow human beings, he turned toward the One and prayed:

O God, to You alone I complain of my weakness, the meagerness of my resources and my insignificance before men. O Most Merciful of the Merciful, You are the Lord of the weak and You are my Lord [Rabb, "Educator"]. Into whose hands do You entrust me? To some remote stranger who will ill-treat me? Or to an enemy to whom You have granted authority over my affairs? I harbor no fear so long as You are not angry with me. Yet Your gracious support would open a broader way and a wider horizon for me! I seek refuge in the light of Your face, by which all darkness is illuminated and the things of this world and the next are set aright, so that I do not incur Your anger and am not touched by Your wrath. Nevertheless, it is Your prerogative to admonish as long as You are not satisfied. There is no power nor strength but in You. 8

It was toward the One, his Protector and Confidant, that he turned when there appeared to be no way out. His questions did not express doubt about his mission, but it clearly voiced his helplessness as a human being as well as his ignorance of God's purposes. At that particular moment, away from other people, in the solitude of his faith and of his confidence in the Most Gracious, he literally and wholly put himself in God's hands; in this sense, this prayer reveals all the confidence and serenity Muhammad drew from his relationship to the Most Near. This prayer, which has become famous, tells of humanity's helplessness and of the Messenger's extraordinary spiritual strength. Seemingly lonely and without support, he knew that he was not alone.

The two owners of the orchard had seen Muhammad from a distance as he entered, and they had observed him as he raised his hands and prayed to God. They sent their slave Addas, a young man who was a Christian, to take him a bunch of grapes. When Addas gave him the grapes, he heard the Prophet say the formula: "BismiLLah!" ("In the name of God," "I begin with God"). Addas was most surprised and inquired about the identity of this man, who said words that he, a Christian, had

never heard polytheists say. Muhammad asked him where he was from, and Addas answered that he came from Nineveh. The Prophet added: "The land of Jonah the Just, son of Matta!" The young man was puzzled and wondered how this man could know of that. After informing him that he was a Christian, Addas in turn asked Muhammad who he was and how he had received his knowledge. The Prophet told him: "Jonah is my brother. He was a prophet and I am a prophet."

Addas gazed at him for a while, then kissed his head, hands, and feet; his masters were shocked at this, and when he went back to them he told them that only a prophet could know what that man knew. Addas accepted Islam immediately, after a few minutes' discussion. The Christian king of Abyssinia had immediately recognized the linkage between the two messages, and now it was a young slave, also a Christian, who shared the same intuition. Twice already, in sorrow and isolation, Muhammad had encountered on his path Christians who offered him trust, respect, and shelter: a king welcomed Muslims and granted them security, a slave served their Prophet when everybody else had rejected him and his message.

The Prophet then set off back toward Mecca. On his way, he met a horseman and requested that he ask a Meccan dignitary who was a relative of the horseman whether he would agree to grant Muhammad his protection. The horseman complied, but the dignitary refused, as did another leader whose support Muhammad sought. The Prophet did not wish to enter Mecca in such circumstances and sought refuge in the cave of Hira, where he had received the first Revelation. It was finally the third person he approached, Mutim, the leader of the Nawfal clans, who agreed to grant Muhammad his protection, greeting the Prophet in the Kaba enclosure to publicize the fact.

# The Night Journey

The Prophet liked to go to the Kaba enclosure at night. He would stand there in prayer for long hours. One evening, he suddenly felt deeply tired and in great need of sleep. <sup>10</sup> He therefore lay down near the Kaba and fell asleep.

Muhammad has related that the Angel Gabriel then came to him. Gabriel shook him twice to awaken him, but Muhammad slept on; the third time the angel shook him, Muhammad awoke, and Gabriel took him to the doors of the mosque, where a white animal (looking something like a cross between a mule and a donkey, but with wings) was waiting for them. He mounted the animal, which was called al-Buraq, and started with Gabriel toward Jerusalem. There Muhammad met a group of prophets who had preceded him (Abraham, Moses, and others), and he led a group prayer with them on the Temple site. When the prayer was over, the Prophet was raised with the Angel Gabriel beyond space and time. On his way, rising through the seven heavens, he again met the various prophets, and his vision of the heavens and of the beauty of those horizons permeated his being. He at last reached the Lotus of the Utmost Boundary (Sidrat al-Muntaha). This was where the Prophet received the injunction of the five daily prayers and Revelation of the verse that established the elements of the Muslim creed (al-aqidah):<sup>11</sup>

The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, as do the believers. Each one believes in God, His angels, His books, and His Messengers. We make no distinction between one and another of His Messengers. And they say: "We hear, and we obey: [we seek] Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the end of all journeys." 12

Muhammad was taken back to Jerusalem by the Angel Gabriel and al-Buraq, and from there to Mecca. On the way back, he came upon some caravans that were also traveling to Mecca. It was still night when they reached the Kaba enclosure. The angel and al-Buraq left, and Muhammad proceeded to the home of Um Hani, one of his most trusted Companions. He gave her an account of what had happened to him, and she advised him not to tell anybody about it, which Muhammad refused to do. Later on, the Quran was to report this experience in two different passages. One is in the surah whose title, "Al-Isra" (The Nocturnal Voyage), directly refers to the event:

Glory to He Who took His servant for a journey by night from the most sacred mosque to the farthest mosque, whose precincts We blessed, in order that We might show him some of Our signs: for He is the One Who hears and sees [all things].<sup>13</sup>

It is also in the surah "An-Najm" (The Star):

It is no less than inspiration sent down to him: he was taught by one mighty in power, endowed with wisdom. For he appeared in angelic form while he was in the highest part of the horizon. Then he approached and came closer, and was at a distance of but two bow lengths or nearer. So did God convey by inspiration to His Servant what He meant to convey. The heart in no way belied that which he saw. Will you then dispute with him concerning what he saw? For indeed he saw him at another descent, near the Lotus of the utmost boundary—near it is the Garden of Abode—when that which covered the Lotus covered it. His sight never swerved, nor did it go wrong. For truly did he see, of the signs of his Lord, the Greatest! 14

The Night Journey and ascension were to give rise to many comments, both when the Prophet recounted the facts and later among Muslim scholars. When Muhammad went to the Kaba and reported his experience, jeers, sniggers and criticisms quickly followed. The Quraysh believed that at last they had proof that this so-called prophet was indeed mad, since he dared claim that in one night he had made a journey to Jerusalem (which in itself required several weeks) and that he had, furthermore, been raised to the presence of his One God. His madness was obvious.

The Night Journey experience, presented in classical accounts of the Prophet's life as a gift from God and a consecration for the Messenger, the Elect (al-Mustafa) was a real trial for Muhammad and those around him. It marked the boundary between those believers whose faith radiated in their trust in this Prophet and his message and the others, who were taken aback by the improbability of such a story. A Quraysh delegation hastened to go and question Abu Bakr about his mad and senseless friend, but his immediate, forthright answer surprised them: "If he says such a thing, it cannot but be true!" Abu Bakr's faith and trust were such that he was not in the least disturbed, even for a second. After that, he personally went to question the Prophet, who confirmed the facts; as a result, Abu Bakr repeated forcefully: "I believe you, you have always spoken the truth." From that day on, the Prophet called Abu Bakr by the epithet As-Siddiq (he who is truthful, who confirms the truth).

The trial that Muhammad's Night Journey presented for his fellow Muslims occurred at a moment when they were struggling with a most difficult situation. Tradition reports that a few Muslims left Islam, but most trusted Muhammad. A few weeks later, facts confirmed some elements of his account, for instance the arrival of caravans whose coming he had announced (having seen them on his way back) and of which he had given a precise description. Thanks to the strength of this faith, the community of Muslims would be able to face future adversity. From then on, Umar ibn al-Khattab and Abu Bakr were always to stand in the front line of this spiritual force.

Muslim scholars have, from the outset, pondered the question of whether the Night Journey was of a purely spiritual nature or whether it was also physical. The majority of scholars consider that the journey was both physical and spiritual. All things considered, however, this question is not essential in the light of the teachings that can be drawn from this extraordinary experience undergone by the Messenger. There is first of all, of course, the centrality of the city of Jerusalem: at the time, the Prophet prayed facing the holy city (the first qibla, or direction of prayer), and during the Night Journey it was on the site of the Temple that he led the prayer together with all the prophets. Jerusalem thus appears at the heart of the Prophet's experience and teaching as a dual symbol, of both centrality (with the direction of prayer) and universality (with the prayer of all the prophets). Later, in Medina, the gibla (direction of prayer) was to change—from Jerusalem to the Kaba—to distinguish Islam from Judaism, but this by no means entailed a diminution of Jerusalem's status, and in the abovementioned verse the references to the "most sacred mosque" (the Kaba, in Mecca) and the "farthest mosque" (al-Aqsa, in Jerusalem) establish a spiritual and sacred link between the two cities.

The other teaching is of a purely spiritual essence: all Revelation reached the Prophet in the course of his earthly experience, with the exception, as we have seen, of the verses that establish the fundamental pillars of faith (al-iman) and the duty of prayer (as-salat). The Prophet was raised to heaven to receive the teachings that were to become the foundation of Islamic worship and ritual, al-aqidah and al-ibadat, which require that believers should accept their form as well as their substance. Unlike the field of social affairs (al-muamalat), which calls for the creative mediation of people's intellect and intelligence, human rationality here submits, in the name of faith and as an act of humility, to the order imposed by Revelation: God has prescribed requirements and norms that the mind must hear and implement and the heart must love. Raised to receive the injunction of ritual prayer, the Prophet and his experience reveal what

prayer must in essence be: a reminder of and an elevation toward the Most High, five times a day, in order to detach from oneself, from the world, and from illusions. The *miraj* (the elevation during the Night Journey) is thus more than simply an archetype of the spiritual experience; it is pregnant with the deep significance of prayer, which, through the Eternal Word, enables us to liberate our consciousness from the contingencies of space and time, and fully comprehend the meaning of life and of Life.

#### **Toward Exile**

It was 620, a year after the deaths of Muhammad's wife, Khadijah, and his uncle Abu Talib, and the time of the yearly pilgrimage to the Kaba and Mecca's annual market period was drawing near. Muhammad was still dispensing his teachings in a climate of rejection, exclusion, and persecution. About a hundred Muslims now lived under protection in Abyssinia, but no solution seemed to present itself for the faithful who lived in Mecca. The pilgrims, coming from all areas of the peninsula, started to settle in the Mina area, to remain there throughout the festival period. Muhammad often went there and conveyed his message to women and men who, in their distant dwelling places, had heard about it but did not know its actual contents. He was far from always receiving a favorable response.

At al-Aqabah, not far from Mina, the Prophet met a group of people from Yathrib. They were from the Khazraj tribe, one of the two great rival tribes in Yathrib (the other being the Aws), and he began to deliver his message to them. They had already heard of the message from the Jewish tribes who lived in their city, and they wished to know more about it. They listened to the Prophet and eventually accepted the message of Islam: they promised to inform the members of their tribe of the substance of the message and to keep in permanent contact with the Prophet. They went back home and started preaching in Yathrib.

In Mecca, conversions kept increasing, and Muhammad carried on with his public call. As far as his private life was concerned, many advised him to think of remarrying. Proposals had been made, but the Prophet had never pursued the matter. He had, however, had two dreams in which the very young Aishah, Abu Bakr's daughter, who was then six years old,

was offered to him in marriage. When Khawlah, who had taken care of the Prophet's needs since Khadijah's death, advised him to remarry and suggested two names-Sawdah, a widow in her thirties who had very recently come back from Abyssinia, and Aishah, Abu Bakr's daughter-Muhammad saw in this strange coincidence a sign of the truthfulness of his dreams, and he asked Khawlah to do what was necessary to find out whether the two unions were possible. Polygamy was the norm in Arabia then, and the Prophet's situation was the exception, since he had remained monogamous for twenty-five years. The union with Sawdah was particularly easy to concretize: Sawdah immediately, and most favorably, answered the proposal made to her, and they married a few months later. Aishah had already, in keeping with Arabian customs, been promised by Abu Bakr to Mutim's son, and her father had to negotiate with Mutim in order to break the engagement. Aishah then officially became Muhammad's second wife, though the union would not be consummated for several years.

A year later, pilgrims and traders were again flocking to Mecca for the celebrations of 621. A second meeting was organized at al-Aqabah between the Prophet and the Yathrib delegation that had come to report on the evolution of the situation in their city. Twelve people from Yathrib, two of whom belonged to the Aws clan, took part in the meeting: they pledged allegiance to the Prophet, stipulating that they would worship only the One God, no others, and that they would honor the duties and interdictions of Islam. They were therefore to constitute the first Muslim community in Yathrib. Muhammad sent back with them a Companion, Musab ibn Umayr, who had just returned from Abyssinia and who was known for his calm, his wisdom, and the beauty of his recitation of the Quran.

Back in Yathrib, the delegation kept spreading the message and Musab taught Islam, recited the Quran, and answered questions. In spite of ageold and still very sharp divisions between the Aws and Khazraj, members of both tribes converted to the new religion and realized that their former rivalries had become pointless: Islam's message of brotherhood united them. Clan chiefs nevertheless remained very reluctant to embrace Islam. Musab never reacted to their attacks nor to their aggressive attitude; rather, he invariably answered: "Sit down and listen to the message: if you like it, accept it, if you do not, leave it." As a result, the number of conversions was high, even among leaders.

During the following year's pilgrimage, the Prophet met an important delegation of Yathrib Muslims, composed of seventy-three people, two of them women. They belonged to both the Aws and the Khazraj, and they had come to bring the Prophet the good news of their commitment to Islam. After a few discussions about the nature of their future relationship, they concluded a second covenant stipulating that the Yathrib Muslims pledged to protect the Prophet, as well as Mecca's Muslim women and children, against any aggression. This second covenant, granting refuge and protection and a commitment of Yathrib Muslims to support their Meccan brothers, opened before the Prophet the prospect of a promising future. From then on, Muhammad encouraged Muslims to emigrate to Yathrib discreetly, while his closest Companions still remained by his side.

#### With Non-Muslims

Muhammad had always retained very strong ties with the members of different clans and with his kin who had not accepted Islam. His uncle Abu Talib, whom he loved so much and whom he accompanied until he breathed his last, was one such example. Another uncle, Abbas, remained by the Prophet's side even though he had not yet converted. Muhammad's trust in him was tremendous, and he did not hesitate to confide in him or have him take part in private meetings involving the future of the community (later, Abbas would be present when the second covenant of al-Aqabah was concluded; the Prophet would also keep him informed of the highly confidential preparations for his emigration to Yathrib). His remaining a polytheist never prevented the Prophet from showing him the greatest respect and deepest confidence in situations where his very life was at risk.

It was a similar attitude of trust that had made it possible for Muslims to emigrate to Abyssinia, under protection of a king whom the Prophet trusted even though he was not a Muslim. This attitude is to be found throughout the Prophet's life: he established his relationships in the name of trust and the respect of principles, and not exclusively on the basis of similar religious affiliation. His Companions had understood this as well, and they did not hesitate to develop solid ties with non-Muslims in the

name of kinship or friendship, on the basis of mutual respect and trust, even in perilous situations. Thus, Um Salamah, who had been separated from her husband, found herself alone with her son on her way to Medina. Uthman ibn Talhah, who was not a Muslim, offered to escort and protect her until she reached the place where her husband was. She did not hesitate to trust him: he accompanied her and her son to their destination, then took leave of them in the most respectful manner. Um Salamah was often to tell this story, always praising Uthman ibn Talhah's noble character.

Examples of this nature abound, and neither the Prophet nor the other Muslims ever restricted their social and human relations to their coreligionists. Later, the Quran was to establish the rightfulness and the principle of such relationships formed on the basis of mutual respect:

God does not forbid you, with regard to those who do not fight you for [your] faith, nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly [showing affection] and justly with them: for God loves those who are just. God only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for [your] faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support others in driving you out, from turning to them [for friendship and protection]. It is those who turn to them [in these circumstances] who do wrong.<sup>19</sup>

The Prophet himself was a model of equity toward those who did not share his faith. Through all the years of his mission, he had continued to receive important deposits from non-Muslim traders who went on dealing with him and wholly trusted him. On the eve of his departure for Medina, Muhammad asked Ali to give back one by one to their respective owners the deposits he still held; he scrupulously applied the principles of honesty and justice that Islam had taught him, whomever he dealt with, be they Muslims or non-Muslims.

During the same period, the Prophet also showed a most understanding attitude toward those who, under persecution or pressure from their families, had left Islam. This was the case with two young Muslims, Hisham and Ayyash, who abjured Islam after prolonged resistance. No particular decision or sanction was taken against them. Later on, Ayyash again came back to Islam, full of remorse and sadness. Revelation was subsequently to ease his exceedingly harsh vision and judgment about himself:

Say: "O those who have transgressed against themselves! Do not despair of God's mercy: for God forgives all sins; for He is the All-Forgiving, the Most Merciful. Turn to your Lord and submit to Him, before the chastisement comes on you: after that you shall not be helped."<sup>20</sup>

On hearing those verses, Hisham also came back to Islam. Yet one who did not return was Ubaydallah ibn Jahsh, who had gone to Abyssinia with the first group of emigrants and who had then converted to Christianity and abandoned his wife, Um Habibah bint Abi Sufyan.<sup>21</sup> Neither the Prophet, from Mecca, nor any of the Muslims who lived in Abyssinia took any measure against him: he remained a Christian until he died without ever being harassed or ill-treated. This attitude of respect for everyone's freedom remained constant throughout the Prophet's life, and the authoritative accounts of his life contain no mention whatsoever of a different attitude. Later on, in Medina, he was to speak out harshly and take firm measures against those who falsely converted to Islam for the sole purpose of gathering information about the Muslims, then denied Islam and went back to their tribes to bring them the information they had managed to obtain. These were in fact war traitors, who incurred the penalty of death because their actions were liable to bring about the destruction of the Muslim community.

# Permission to Emigrate

The Prophet's most recent protector, Mutim, had just died. The situation was becoming particularly difficult, and the Quraysh, who had noticed that the Muslims were beginning to leave Mecca, were in their turn becoming more and more violent in their opposition. The clan chiefs decided to unite, and at Abu Lahab and Abu Jahl's instigation, they resolved that the Prophet must be done away with. Their plan was to mandate an executioner from each clan in order to prevent the Banu Hashim from taking revenge and asking for blood money. They agreed that no time must be lost and that they must get rid of the Prophet as soon as possible.

The Angel Gabriel had come to confirm to the Prophet the meaning of a dream he had had a few days before, when in a vision he had seen a flourishing city appear and welcome him. The angel announced to him that he must prepare to emigrate to Yathrib and that his companion was to be Abu Bakr. Muhammad went to impart the news to Abu Bakr, who wept with joy; however, they still had to organize the final details of their departure. They had heard that the Quraysh had devised a plan to get rid of the Prophet. Muhammad asked Ali to take his place in his bed the following night, and not to leave Mecca until he ordered him to.

The Prophet's would-be murderers hid in front of his home and waited for him to go out, as he usually did, to attend prayer before sunrise. When they heard some noise inside the house, which they took to be Muhammad arising and preparing to leave, they were almost ready to launch their attack when they realized that they had been deceived and that the man inside the house was his cousin Ali. Their plan had failed. In the meantime, the Prophet had gone to Abu Bakr's and had already finalized the last details of his departure for Yathrib.

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# Hijrah

The Prophet Muhammad was neither fatalistic nor reckless. His trust in God was absolute, but that had never caused him to drift with the tide of events. Revelation had reminded him that he must never forget to say "in sha Allah" (if God so wills) when he planned to act, and that the memory of God must be associated with humility (especially in regard to his own powers as a human being). Still, this by no means implied that he should forget to show responsibility and foresight in his choices in the world of human beings. Thus, Muhammad had been planning an emigration to Medina (hijrah) for almost two years, and nothing had been left to chance. Only after making intelligent and thorough use of his human powers had he trusted himself to the divine will, thereby clarifying for us the meaning of at-tawakkul ala Allah (reliance on God, trusting oneself to God): responsibly exercising all the qualities (intellectual, spiritual, psychological, sentimental, etc.) each one of us has been granted and humbly remembering that beyond what is humanly possible, God alone makes things happen. Indeed, this teaching is the exact opposite of the temptation of fatalism: God will act only after humans have, at their own level, sought out and exhausted all the potentialities of action. That is the profound meaning of this Quranic verse: "Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."1

## With Abu Bakr

Muhammad and Abu Bakr decided to leave Mecca during the night and head toward Yemen to avoid attracting attention. Abu Bakr provided Muhammad with a camel named Qaswa; the Prophet insisted on paying for it, since he wished this emigration to belong to him alone, and he wanted to be debtless when he departed for Yathrib. Similarly, he would refuse the gift of a patch of land that two orphans wanted to make him when he arrived in the city that was henceforth to be known variously as al-Madinah (Medina, meaning "the city"), Madinah ar-Rasul (the city of the Messenger), or al-Madinah al-Munawwarah (the enlightened city).

Having headed south, they went into hiding for a few days in the Thawr cave (ghar Thawr). Abu Bakr's son, Abdullah, was to gather intelligence about the Quraysh's intentions and bring it to his father and Muhammad. As for Abu Bakr's daughters, Asma and Aishah, they would prepare food and secretly carry it to the cave at night. Thus Abu Bakr mobilized all his children, the girls as well as the boy, to protect his and the Prophet's escape, despite the serious danger the situation posed for his daughters in particular. He constantly showed such an equitable attitude in his dealings with his sons and daughters, in the light of the Prophet's teachings.

Notwithstanding all those arrangements, a group of Quraysh men, suspecting a trick, went south to look for the Prophet. They arrived in front of the cave and prepared to enter. From where he stood, Abu Bakr could see them, and in alarm he told the Prophet that should the men happen to look down they could not fail to see the two of them. Muhammad reassured him and whispered, "Have no fear, for God is with us." Then he added, "What do you think of two [people] whose third is God?" Those words soothed Abu Bakr. In the front of the cave, the group noticed that a spiderweb covered the entrance and also that a dove had nested there: it seemed obvious that the fugitives could not be hiding in the cave, and they decided to look for them somewhere else.

Once again, in spite of their carefully planned strategy, the Prophet and his Companion were going through the trial of vulnerability. Their lives had been preserved by nothing but that fragile spiderweb; trust in God (at-tawakkul ala Allah), of which the Prophet reminded Abu Bakr at that particular moment, thus took on its full meaning and strength. God alone had the power to save His Messenger. When Muhammad emigrated, he took care to owe nothing to anyone (he refused gifts, settled his debts, and gave back the deposits he held), but he also knew that he owed everything to the One, that his indebtedness and obligation to Him were infinite.