

## QUESTION 1

# Where Did Islam Come From?

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*Today I have perfected your religion for you, and  
have completed my blessing on you, and I have  
approved Islam for you as a religion.  
~Qur'an 5:3*

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Recently I found myself walking down a popular street in a well-known town in the southeast of the United States. Curio shops filled with trinkets and T-shirts lined the streets, and smells of various fried foods and candies wafted out to the sidewalks, enticing customers to enter and indulge. Some might call this a tourist trap.

While I was walking, an image in one of the shops caught my eye. It was one of several pictures of celebrities on display, but this one was unique in that it appeared to be moving. Upon closer inspection, I discovered that it was a poster including three images of the same celebrity at different points in his career. Depending upon what angle the viewer was approaching the poster, this celebrity showed up as either a young, up-and-coming heartthrob, a middle-aged success, or an aging, overweight has-been. Thus, as passersby glanced toward the window, their changing perspectives caused the images—and consequently, their impressions of the celebrity—to change.

Much like tourists passing by this poster, the angle of our approach to the study of Islam will determine the image produced by our inquiries. This is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in giving an answer to our first question, “Where did Islam come from?” On the surface this appears to be merely a historical inquiry with but one basic answer, providing a suitable introduction to the book. Yet, as we consider three different angles of approach

common among scholars, a more robust impression forms, allowing us to better answer subsequent questions.

For a Christian motivated to understand and minister to their Muslim friends, then, this tri-perspectival approach will provide an orientation to a more holistic investigation of Islam and its adherents. This chapter will treat these three approaches under the following headings: (1) an Orientalist approach, (2) a critical approach, and (3) a confessional approach. Like the tourists viewing the poster of the celebrity from several perspectives, these three angles of approach to Islamic origins will provide distinct yet helpful windows into the whole picture.

### **An Orientalist Approach: Muhammad's Ministry**

The first image of Islam to confront us comes by approaching the question of Islamic origins from the perspective of Orientalist scholars. This nomenclature developed in the eighteenth century to describe scholars and artists involved in depicting eastern lands, including the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Much of the popular material available in English takes this perspective, describing the religion of Islam as a cultural artifact of the East.

In contrast to confessional approaches to Islamic history that tout the virtues of Muhammad's religious message and assume God's blessing as the reason for Islamic expansion, Orientalists study the development of Islam as a mere sociological phenomenon. This secular approach excises the supernatural references within the reported accounts while yet depending upon the remaining information as reliable history. In so doing, Orientalists are left to sift through the traditional material in order to offer alternative explanations of how, apart from appeal to divine favor, seventh-century Arabia produced a global religion in less than two centuries.

According to the traditional material, the Arabian Peninsula of Muhammad's day was rife with intertribal conflict. Desire for a unified Arab state existed, though disunity prevailed at nearly every level of society. Seventh-century Arabia was in want of leadership and reform.

Muhammad's ministry began in Mecca, the regional center of polytheistic religious practice. The simple monotheism at the core of Muhammad's message, while not initially well received, provided a unifying bond with which the diversity of polytheism could not contend. Having gathered a modest following in Mecca, Muhammad relocated to Medina, where he proved influential as a political and social reformer.

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1. The term "Orientalist" is admittedly problematic due to unavoidable echoes of colonialism. The word has been used to distinguish supposedly lesser forms of culture in the east from the supposedly superior cultures of the occident. Yet, it is prolific enough within the literature discussing Islam to merit retaining it here.

Shortly after Muhammad's move, Medina and Mecca entered into a state of war with one another. While the war continued to exacerbate the divisions of the peninsula, Muhammad's ability to strategically unify the Medinan population politically and militarily allowed him, and consequently his religious message, to rise in power and prominence.

For most Orientalists, then, Muhammad and the religion that followed him was successful on the basis of his ability to forge a common identity for his Arab kin. In the words of prolific author Bernard Lewis,

From what is known of the circumstances of the time, it is clear that the deeds performed by Muhammad or ascribed to him served to revive and redirect currents that already existed among the Arabs of his time. The fact that his death was followed by a new burst of activity instead of by collapse shows that his career was the answer to a great political, social, and moral need. . . . Muhammad had aroused and redirected the latent forces of an Arab national revival and expansion.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, as we approach the question of Islamic origins from the perspective of the Orientalist scholar, we see Muhammad as a unifying reformer whose religious message was carried on the wings of his political savvy. Islam was born as a result of Muhammad's leadership and Arab nationalist desire.

### **A Critical Approach: Muhammad's Successors**

One of the true wonders of the Islamic faith is its rapid expansion. Reportedly having begun in an isolated region on the Arabian Peninsula, in less than two centuries Islam had spread to what is now southern France in the west, and to what is now western India in the east. Yet if one follows the traditional accounts, upon his death Muhammad had not clearly provided his followers with instructions for appointing a successor, let alone a codified means of practicing Islam in the far-flung corners of the empire as the centuries progressed.<sup>3</sup>

How did this fledgling faith, left by its iconic leader in such an early stage of development, come to dominate such a wide region? One major issue that critical scholars have identified is that the material available to inform us of Muhammad's life does not pass the test of historical criticism.<sup>4</sup> While it is perhaps the text that exerts the most influence on the practice of Islam, the

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2. Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46.

3. Lewis, *Arabs in History*, 48. In fact, different claims regarding Muhammad's appointment of a successor is the basis for the split between Shia and Sunni Muslims and will be treated in Question 5.

4. See Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 135–38.

traditional biography of Muhammad's life—to say nothing of the body of traditions known as the *hadith*—is unattested, late, and prone to bias.<sup>5</sup> Since Muhammad's biography is the primary source of information regarding the life and ministry of the Arab prophet, skeptical scholars question how much one can truly know about this man named Muhammad.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, beyond the dearth of acceptable literary evidence for a traditional understanding of Islamic origins, archeological evidence does not lend its support to the Muslim account. For example, the first apparently Muslim reference to Muhammad to be connected to any recognizable form of Islamic theology is found on an inscription on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, dating to 691 CE, nearly sixty years after Muhammad's death.<sup>7</sup> After the date of this inscription, the archeological record reports frequent appearance of inscriptions, epitaphs, and documents bearing Islamic theological themes. However, that the first sixty years are silent leads some scholars to conclude that later Arab leaders were responsible for crafting a religious message and tying it to a character named Muhammad in order to unify the broad empire under a common identity.<sup>8</sup>

Unsatisfied with the supernatural explanation for Islam's explosive growth given by Muslims, and unconvinced by the traditional account of Muhammad's life, historical-critical scholars offer an alternative approach to Islamic origins. Instead of attempting to recreate a historical sketch of a man named Muhammad, critical scholars are keen to find Islamic origins in the political developments of later Arab rulers. Thus, as we approach the picture of Islamic origins from the vantage of critical scholarship, Islam did not precede Arab expansion, but was produced as an ideological bond, born and shaped in response to the Arab conquests.

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5. For more details on the scholarly critique of traditional accounts of Muhammad's life, see Question 33.

6. Furthermore, there are scholarly works that deny that a character named Muhammad as described in the traditional material ever existed. Cf. Karl-Heinz Ohlig, "From *Muhammad* to Jesus Prophet of the Arabs: The Personalization of a Christological Epithet," in *Early Islam: A Critical Reconstruction based on Contemporary Sources*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ohlig (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2014), 251–307. For further treatment, see Question 33.

7. Though references to Muhammad as the leader of the Arabs appear in the early part of the eighth century, at least one author has challenged this idea, claiming that these references are linguistic misunderstandings of Arabic references to heterodox understandings of Jesus. See Christoph Luxenberg, "A New Interpretation of the Arabic Inscription in Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock," in *The Hidden Origins of Islam*, eds. Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2010), 125–52. Here, Luxenberg also counters prevailing scholarly opinion, making the case that even the Dome of the Rock inscription need not be understood as Islamic theology, but might actually be a form of Syriac Christian Christology.

8. See Yahuda D. Nevo, "Towards a Prehistory of Islam," in *What the Koran Really Says*, ed. Ibn Warraq (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2002), 131–69. Nevo states, "In short, the state decided, as a political act, to adopt Muhammadanism as its official creed."

### A Confessional Approach: Muhammad's Predecessors

It is likely obvious that faithful Muslims reject the conclusions of critical scholars discussed above. Like the Orientalists, those who personally confess Islam are typically inclined to accept the traditional material as historically accurate. Yet in contrast, confessional approaches retain the supernatural elements that Orientalists dismiss, understanding Muhammad to be the mouthpiece of God, whose blessing accounts for the success of Islamic expansion.

However, despite adhering to the traditional material, from the confessional Muslim perspective, Islam does not actually begin with Muhammad. Rather, according to Islamic theology, submission to God is the original form of worship prescribed by all of the prophets since Adam.<sup>9</sup> Islamic scholar Mark Anderson highlights this idea, writing, “Every prophet before Muhammad is said to have pointed to the path of *islam*, since that is both the ideal for which we were created and our sole route of recovery from lostness.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Adam was a prototypical Muslim who foreshadowed the faith that Muhammad recovered and perfected.

While the claim that Islam precedes Muhammad is made variously throughout the Qur’an, perhaps no character is more centrally utilized to emphasize this idea than Abraham, of whom it is said in Qur’an 3:67, “Abraham was not a Jew, nor a Christian, but he was a *hanif*, a Muslim. He was not one of the idolaters.” Therefore, by exalting Abraham as an embryonic exemplar of Islamic faith who preceded both Judaism and Christianity, the Qur’an lays claim to roots much more ancient than Muhammad.

Thus, for confessional Muslims, the source of Islamic origins is not the product of Arab political strategy, nor is it wholly tied to the dynamic leadership of Muhammad. Rather, Islam originates at the dawn of creation and, through Muhammad’s call, humanity is given the opportunity to return to the one true expression of divine religion. A confessional perspective on the question of Islamic origins reveals a picture of Islam as the original religion, beginning when God first commanded submission from his creation.

### Summary

Like the tourists glancing at the poster mentioned in the introduction, the preceding paragraphs have shown how drastically one’s approach to Islam will affect the picture that emerges. In the same way that the three pictures of the celebrity tell a fuller story of his career than any individual picture does, so do the three perspectives on Islamic origins allow for a more robust investigation into the question, “What is Islam?” Each approach reveals an image

9. John Kaltner and Younus Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an: Biblical Figures in Islamic Tradition* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 16–19.

10. Mark Robert Anderson, *The Qur’an in Context: A Christian Exploration* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 83.

that evokes a distinct impression about the faith and will affect the various answers given to the rest of the questions contained in this book. Yet, for the purposes of this book, each picture, perspective, and impression provides helpful insight for our holistic investigation of Islam.

For example, the Orientalist approach benefits the investigation by highlighting the sociological factors that explain how Muhammad's message and leadership could resonate so deeply with seventh-century Arabs, resulting in a global movement. Likewise, the critical approach reminds us that, no matter what one does with the traditional history, later political and military pressures affected the body of literature we have that attests to Muhammad, leaving significant impressions upon the contemporary practice of Islam. Both perspectives provide a healthy caution to those tempted to read the Islamic history from a posture of naive positivism.

Yet, as Christians engaged in conversation with Muslim neighbors, we do well to consider the confessional perspective at length. Whether or not the history recorded in Muhammad's biography or the traditions regarding Muhammad's teaching and practice can pass the test of historical reliability, we must acknowledge that they exert formative pressure on the worldview of the Muslims with whom we relate. Taking the time to understand the material that is shaping and informing our Muslim friends, we demonstrate neighborly love, dignifying our conversation partners by considering the world through their eyes. Such a posture encourages effective communication, loving challenge, and an opportunity to speak gospel hope into the places where the cracks in an Islamic worldview might appear.

Both faiths certainly do exhibit superficial similarities. However, Islam and Christianity operate on different understandings of who God is, the problem of sin, its solution, and the ultimate purpose for human life. As such, the deep theological differences ultimately outweigh the superficial similarities. The charitable posture encouraged by this book need not deny such differences. Rather, it aims to prepare Christians to anticipate deep theological differences while yet striving for meaningful interactions with their Muslim neighbors. Thus, Part 7 is dedicated to acknowledging the irreconcilable differences between Islam and Christianity while encouraging a loving approach to gospel communication.

With this tri-perspectival reality in mind, this book aims to highlight the pertinent issues that emerge from each approach. The first four parts will approach Islam from a confessional angle, treating Islamic history, theology, and practice from the perspective of its adherents. In the fifth section, comparison between biblical and qur'anic teaching will draw on Orientalist, critical, and evangelical perspectives. Following this, the sixth section will raise four significant questions that emerge from a critical approach. Finally, Part 7 considers six missiological questions that press upon an evangelical engaged in relationship with a Muslim friend.

Standing on the street outside of the curio shop, I found myself thinking about how one image of the celebrity in the poster, isolated from the rest, gave but a partial impression of his entire career. Likewise, taking any one approach to the study of Islam will distort the overall impression it produces. It is my hope that these three approaches will provide a broad, healthy, informed picture of our overall answer to the question posed by this book, “What is Islam?”

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why might it be important to consider each of the three approaches to Islam discussed in this first chapter?
2. From an Orientalist perspective, how do we explain the rise of Islam in seventh-century Arabia?
3. What makes the traditional narrative of Islam’s advent doubtful from a critical perspective?
4. How does a confessional approach explain the success of Muhammad’s prophetic career?
5. How might each perspective answer the question, “What is Islam?”

