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## God Speaks to Humanity

### God Hears and Responds

Before God mentioned her, Khawla bint Tha'laba was apparently an ordinary woman living in seventh-century Medina in the Arabian Peninsula. For every person in this tribally organized sedentary community, dignity and honor were, to a large extent, commensurate with the status of his or her group. Descent (*nasab*) or affiliation (*wala'*) with a powerful clan was, for many people, a decisive factor in determining physical security and material success. Still, every individual had opportunities to prove the strength of his or her own character (*hasab*). For men, politics and war were arenas of particular distinction. Most women had little chance of significantly contributing to these areas of public life, although there were notable exceptions.<sup>1</sup> Rather, most women distinguished themselves by establishing and maintaining beneficial relationships with family, neighbors, and guests. Beauty, an energetic spirit, generosity, loyalty – these were the hallmarks of a noble woman. As the charms of youthful beauty faded, a woman could expect to earn increasing respect and gratitude for the relationships she had cultivated over the years.

It may have been anger that made Aws ibn Samit reject his wife with the vulgar expression, “To me, you are like the backside of my mother.”<sup>2</sup> Whatever the reason, after so many years of marriage, these words reduced Khawla to the status of his mother’s behind (completely devoid of sensual attraction). Moreover, according to Arab custom, there was no way to revoke the declaration of *zihar*. Henceforth, it was prohibited for Aws to touch Khawla, yet she was not free of the marital bond. Sympathetic family and friends had no power to override such norms and customs. Khawla’s only chance was to appeal to a power higher than social custom and patriarchal authority. And so, Khawla complained to God.

Complaining to God is not difficult; the challenge is eliciting a satisfactory response. In what Marshall Hodgson termed the “Irano-Semitic”

## 2 God Speaks to Humanity

tradition, the expected response from God entailed not only spiritual comforting but also social transformation.<sup>3</sup> At the individual level, God could send a sign: a kind stranger with food and comforting words, the sun breaking free of the rain clouds, a heavenly vision appearing in a dream. Transforming society, on the other hand, required a different kind of intervention. It is for this purpose that God sent prophets with authority to speak on his behalf, empowered to overturn the existing social order.

When Khawla first went to the Arabian prophet to complain of the injustice done to her, she was disappointed. Muhammad<sup>4</sup> indicated that existing customs remained normative unless God revealed a new ruling, and the Prophet had received no revelation about this issue. Khawla did not give up hope, for she knew that this custom was unjust; she continued to complain to God, and waited near his Messenger, expecting him to receive a revelation. Then the answer arrived:

*God has heard the words of she who disputes with you regarding her husband and made her complaint to God. God hears your conversation. Verily God is All-Hearing, All-Seeing.*

*Those of you who shun their wives by zihar – they are not their mothers. Their mothers are only those women who gave birth to them. Indeed they utter words that are unjust and false; but God is Absolving of Sins, All-Forgiving.*

(Mujadila; 58:1–2)

With these verses God confirmed Khawla's conviction that what had been done to her was unjust and was to be prohibited by law. Upon hearing this revelation, 'A'isha, the Prophet's wife who later would herself desperately need God to hear and respond to unjust claims made against her, declared, "Blessed is He whose hearing encompasses all things!"<sup>5</sup>

## Defining the Qur'an

Khawla's story shows the Messenger of God to be a man deeply involved in the lives of those around him. More importantly, Khawla's story shows that God's speech can be elicited by the concerns of ordinary people. The Qur'anic revelation, although transmitted through the Prophet, is not a response to his concerns alone. From an Islamic theological perspective, God created a community of men and women to whom he wanted to speak, in a manner that would have universal and eternal significance for people of other times and places.

This ruling on a form of divorce customary among pre-Islamic Arabs is one of a number of specific rulings that were revealed to Muhammad to rectify injustices present in his community. Other rulings deal with more

### God Speaks to Humanity 3

general evils present in all societies, such as murder, theft, and betrayal of trust. Exhortations to strengthen the bonds of community are also found in abundance in the Qur'an. Honoring parents, sheltering orphans, giving charity, and fighting oppression are among the duties and hallmarks of the righteous. The foundation of all these legal and ethical pronouncements is faith in the one true God, the creator and sustainer of all creation.

Much of the Qur'anic revelation, however, is not, as is the case with Khawla's story, obviously related to any historical event or legal dispute. The Qur'an is also infused with invocations, supplications, and doxologies:

*Blessed is He in whose hand is the dominion, and He has power over all things.  
He who created death and life to test which one of you is best in deeds, and He is  
the Eminent, the All-Forgiving.*

(Mulk; 67:1–2)

Perhaps these were the words God spoke to the Prophet in his solitary moments, as he stood praying deep into the night. Other passages in the Qur'an are clearly directed to the Prophet individually, commanding him to rise and warn his people or to listen carefully to the revelation (74:1–7). Many passages of the Qur'an narrate incidents in the lives of pre-Islamic Hebrew and Arabian prophets and show how the resistance and hardship Muhammad faced in his mission to guide others to God is mirrored in the righteous struggles of his ancestors in faith:

*We sent messengers before you to the communities of old; and we never sent a  
messenger but that they mocked him.*

(Hijr; 15:10–11)

Together, these legal judgments, prayers, and narrative passages form a unity by virtue of their status as God's words, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

In later chapters, we will explore these themes in more depth and we will describe how the Qur'an became a textual unity that encompassed numerous discrete revelations addressing diverse issues. In this chapter, we will describe the historical context of the revelation, show how Muhammad received God's message, and consider how the Qur'an describes itself in relation to other forms of God's speech and guidance to humanity.

### Ancient Origins of the Meccan Sanctuary

The story of the Qur'anic revelation begins in Mecca, a desert town located in the Hijaz, the northwestern region of the Arabian Peninsula. In the

#### 4 God Speaks to Humanity

sixth century CE, Mecca was poor in natural resources and comforts; it was not a pleasant oasis, rich in date palm groves, like Yathrib, a city almost 300 miles to the north where Muhammad would eventually establish his community of believers. Mecca was sparse and dry, made habitable only because mountain springs provided enough water to sustain a town of merchants and tradespeople.

According to the history of the pre-Islamic Arabs, Mecca was founded as a settlement by Abraham, his concubine-wife Hajar, and their son Isma'il. It was Abraham and his son who built a simple structure, the Ka'ba (literally, "the cube"), as a center for the worship of God. Other traditions traced the founding of Mecca as the primordial and most holy of sacred sites to Adam, the father of humanity, but credited Abraham and his family with establishing a permanent settlement there.

In an early Islamic report, rich in symbolism and detail, the Prophet Muhammad tells the story of how the unwavering faith and determined effort of Abraham and Hajar opened the way for divine intervention to secure the establishment of this sacred site:

The first woman to use a belt was the mother of Isma'il. She used a belt so that she might hide her tracks from Sarah. Abraham brought her and her son Isma'il while she was suckling him, to a place near the Ka'ba under a tree on the spot of Zamzam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Mecca, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small skin containing some water, and set out homeward. Isma'il's mother followed him saying, "O Abraham! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything here?" She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, "Has God ordered you to do so?" He said, "Yes." She said, "Then He will not neglect us," and returned while Abraham proceeded onwards, and on reaching the Thaniya where they could not see him, he faced the Ka'ba, and raising both hands, invoked God saying the following prayers: "*O our 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 offer prayer perfectly. So fill the hearts of people with love towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks.*" (Ra'd; 13:47)<sup>6</sup>

Isma'il's mother went on suckling Isma'il and drinking from the water she had. When the water in the water skin had all been used up, she became thirsty and her child also became thirsty. She watched him tossing in agony and she left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found that the mountain of Safa was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from Safa and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley like a person making a great effort (*majhud*),<sup>7</sup> until she crossed the valley

## God Speaks to Humanity 5

and reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and kept looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not see anybody. She repeated that (running between Safa and Marwa) seven times.

The Prophet Muhammad said: This is the source of the tradition of the running of people between (the mountains of Safa and Marwa). When she reached Marwa (for the last time) she heard a voice and she said "Shush" to herself and listened attentively. She heard the voice again and said, "O, (whoever you may be)! You have made me hear your voice; have you got something to help me?" And behold! She saw an angel at the place of Zamzam, digging the earth with his heel (or his wing), till water flowed from that place. She started to make something like a basin around it, using her hand in this way, and started filling her water skin with water with her hands, and the water was flowing out after she had scooped some of it.

The Prophet added: May God bestow Mercy on Isma'il's mother! Had she left Zamzam (to flow freely), Zamzam would have been a stream flowing on the surface of the earth. The Prophet further added: Then she drank and suckled her child. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid of being neglected, for this is the house of God which will be built by this boy and his father, and God never neglects His people." The house at that time was on a high place resembling a hillock, and when torrents came, they flowed to its right and left.

She lived in that way till some people from the tribe of Jurhum or a family from Jurhum passed by her and her child, as they were coming through the way of Kada'. They landed in the lower part of Mecca where they saw a bird that had the habit of flying around water and not leaving it. They said, "This bird must be flying around water, though we know that there is no water in this valley." They sent one or two messengers who discovered the source of water, and returned to inform them of the water. So, they all approached. The Prophet added, "Isma'il's mother was sitting near the water. They asked her, 'Do you allow us to stay with you?' She replied, 'Yes, but you will have no right to possess the water.' They agreed to that." The Prophet further said, "Isma'il's mother was pleased with the situation as she used to love to share the company of the people." So, they settled there, and later on they sent for their families who came and settled with them so that some families became permanent residents there. The child (i.e., Isma'il) grew up and learned Arabic from them and (his virtues) caused them to love and admire him as he grew up, and when he reached the age of puberty they had him marry a woman from amongst them. . . .

Then Abraham stayed away from them for a period as long as God wished, and called on them afterwards. He saw Isma'il under a tree near Zamzam, sharpening his arrows. When he saw Abraham, he rose up to welcome him (and they greeted each other as a father does with his son or a son does with his father). Abraham said, "O Isma'il! God has given me an order." Isma'il said, "Do what your Lord has ordered you to do." Abraham asked, "Will you help me?" Isma'il said, "I will help you." Abraham said, "God has ordered me to build a house here," pointing to a hillock higher than the land surrounding it. The Prophet added, Then they raised the foundations of the House (i.e. the Ka'ba). Isma'il brought the stones and

## 6 God Speaks to Humanity

Abraham was building, and when the walls became high, Isma'il brought this stone and put it for Abraham who stood over it and carried on building, while Isma'il was handing him the stones, and both of them were saying, "*O our Lord! Accept (this service) from us, Verily, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.*" (Baqarah; 2:127)

The Prophet added: Then both of them went on building and going round the Ka'ba saying: *O our Lord! Accept (this service) from us, Verily, You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.*

With this narrative of the founding of Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad reaffirms the ancient sanctity of the site for his contemporaries. At the same time, Muhammad's message is that Islam is not a renunciation of the traditions of the Arabs. He shows that their revered ancestors, Abraham, Hajar, and Isma'il, did not worship the idols with whom the Arabs had since populated the Ka'ba; rather, they had worshipped the One true God. Thus it is Islam, not idol worship, that is the original belief and most authentic carrier of Arab tradition. We shall see in a later chapter that this idea, that Islam is a revival of *their* original beliefs, is a message that the Qur'an will also direct to Christians and Jews.

### The Arabian Context

In the late sixth century CE, Mecca was ruled by the tribe of Quraysh, the tribe into which Muhammad was born. Tribes across Arabia, both settled and nomadic, were not united in any political body nor were they ruled by a common authority. For centuries, various powers, including the Byzantines, the Persians, and the Ethiopians, had ventured into the Peninsula to secure their interests. The Byzantine and Persian empires, at war with each other, at times engaged the services of nomadic tribesmen living in the northern regions of the Peninsula to protect and expand their borders. Money, honorary titles, and other incentives were bestowed upon tribes that, in spite of the best hegemonic efforts of the empires, remained fickle and were inclined to switch sides whenever they felt it served their interests.<sup>8</sup> In Yemen, the southernmost area of the Peninsula, the sixth century witnessed struggles for power in the wake of the collapse of centralized authority. In the early sixth century, a Jewish ruler who persecuted Christians was overthrown by armies sent by the Christian ruler (the "Negus") of Ethiopia.<sup>9</sup> Near the end of that century, Persian troops occupied the south.

Within the Peninsula, alliances among tribes were always shifting, but they brought a measure of stability and predictability. Alliances were made for mutual protection and to facilitate trade and travel. Weak and

## God Speaks to Humanity 7

depopulated clans could easily be forced into concessions, for the alternative was a life of constant insecurity, death, and captivity by stronger groups.<sup>10</sup> In the late sixth century, the Quraysh seemed to have been able to develop enough lasting alliances to allow them to engage in caravan trade across the Peninsula, especially between Yemen and Syria.<sup>11</sup> That Mecca was held sacred by many tribes throughout Arabia gave the Quraysh a distinct advantage.

Mecca was seldom directly affected by the political and military struggles occurring along the periphery of the Arabian Peninsula. However, around the year 570 CE, the year in which Muhammad was reported to have been born, Mecca's sanctuary was almost destroyed. Muslim historians report that Abraha, an Abyssinian general ruling Yemen, built a magnificent church in Sana' to rival the Ka'ba and to divert the Arab pilgrimage to it. One or more Meccans reacted by defiling the church, making Abraha determined to destroy the Ka'ba. The Abyssinian army prepared for war, and marched towards Mecca with an elephant who would help them reap destruction upon the temple. According to Islamic sources, the elephant refused to march upon the Ka'ba, despite being beaten, and the army was destroyed by a flock of birds that filled the sky and pelted them with stones.<sup>12</sup>

The Meccans understood the outcome of the "Battle of the Elephant" to be a clear indication that God protected and blessed the Ka'ba. This was confirmed in the Islamic period with a Qur'anic revelation about the incident:

*Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the Elephant?  
Did We not disrupt their plans?  
And send against them flock of birds ?  
Hitting them with hard clay stones;  
Leaving them like a field of grazed crops.*

(Fil: 105)

The pre-Islamic Arabians were not surprised that supernatural forces could disrupt the normal course of human affairs. They were particularly aware that certain places and particular times had special significance to unseen forces. In their journeys they passed through haunted valleys, they rested by blessed trees, and they sought advice from soothsayers. Scattered throughout the desert were oasis sanctuaries (*haram*), where local holy families maintained shrines and mediated disputes.<sup>13</sup> But the greatest and most widely honored sanctuary in Arabia was the Ka'ba of Mecca.

By the time Muhammad was born, it seems that the Quraysh and other local tribes had for generations deemed the Ka'ba and the hills of Safa and Marwa to be sacred. Historical sources indicate, however, that the

## 8 God Speaks to Humanity

Quraysh developed Mecca as the premiere pilgrimage site for the Arabs just a few decades before the birth of Muhammad.<sup>14</sup> It was Muhammad's grandfather, 'Abd al-Muttalib, who is credited with rediscovering the well of Zamzam.<sup>15</sup> By the end of the sixth century, tribes from across the Arabian Peninsula made annual pilgrimage to Mecca, where they engaged in a diverse set of rituals. The use of stone and wood idols in worship is said to have been common, and the veneration of ancestors and animal sacrifices made in their names widespread.<sup>16</sup> Pilgrimage was conducted during certain months deemed sacred and, during these times, strangers and even enemies could mix in Mecca without fear. No weapons were allowed in the Meccan sanctuary and violent actions were prohibited. The Quraysh hosted the pilgrims, providing water and other amenities to the guests of "the House of God," as the Ka'ba was known.<sup>17</sup>

The major religions of Africa and Western Asia – Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism – were also not unknown to the residents of Mecca.<sup>18</sup> There were a few Christians living in and around Mecca and a significant settlement of Christians in the southern city of Najran. A number of Jewish tribes lived in the city of Yathrib, with which Muhammad had ancestral ties.<sup>19</sup> Yathrib would later become "Medina," the "City of the Prophet," when Muhammad established his Islamic community there in the thirteenth year of his mission.

In their travels and trade, the Quraysh were exposed to Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Ethiopia. The Quraysh, perhaps because they were so deeply attached to the Ka'ba, did not adopt any of these religions. It would be the mission of Muhammad to reconcile the particular sanctity of the Ka'ba with a universal monotheism through the Abrahamic model. Muhammad would criticize the use of these idols and their presence inside the Ka'ba as a violation of the monotheistic principles established by their ancestor Abraham. Until that time, those few Meccans who were troubled by idol veneration were said to have sought the true religion of Abraham (*al-hanifiyya*), some eventually adopting Christianity, others remaining independent, unaffiliated monotheists.<sup>20</sup> These individuals are reported to have abstained from eating meat sacrificed to idols and to have shunned rituals they deemed idolatrous.

## The Arabic Language

Although the pre-Islamic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula were not united under a common political or religious authority, they did share many important aspects of culture. By the seventh century, the Arabic language especially had emerged as a vehicle for the transmission of values and

## God Speaks to Humanity 9

identity that distinguished the Arabian tribes from other groups. At this time, the written language was vestigial and little used, but oral communication was highly sophisticated.

Poetry was the greatest cultural production of the pre-Islamic Arabs, who developed multiple genres and regional variations of poetic forms. Poems were recited orally, and their rhyming verses and internal meters gave them a musical feel – sometimes they were even accompanied by music or at least the beat of a staff. Poets boasted of romantic liaisons and military conquests, and lamented departed lovers and fallen comrades. In the *qasida*, a form of epic poetry held in the highest esteem by the pre-Islamic Arabs, group solidarity was emphasized and reinforced by poets who praised loyalty to kinsmen and lambasted the enemy. Great warriors and tribal chiefs were praised for showing kindness to widows and orphans in acts of *noblesse oblige*. That the wealth they distributed among themselves came from raiding and plunder was not problematic. Labid, one of the great pre-Islamic poets, represents this view in the following selection from one of his poems:

Every indigent woman seeks the refuge  
of my tent ropes,  
Emaciated, rag-clad, like a starved she-camel hobbled  
at her master's grave.  
When winter's winds wail back and forth  
her orphans plunge  
Into streams of flowing gravy which  
my clan crowns with meat.  
When tribal councils gather,  
there is always one of us  
Who contends in grave affairs  
and shoulders them,  
A divider of spoils who gives  
each clan its due,  
Demanding their rights for the worthy,  
the rights of the worthless refusing  
Out of superior might; a man munificent,  
who with his bounty succors,  
Openhanded; a winner and plunderer of all  
that he desires –<sup>21</sup>

Among the pre-Islamic Arabs, mercy and forgiveness towards enemies were disdained. Manliness (*muruwwa*) was proven by boldly pursuing revenge for fallen kin. Only bloodshed could restore the integrity of a group attacked by an outsider. Even women had their own genre of poetry in which they encouraged their men to seek revenge for fallen kin, and belittled

## 10 God Speaks to Humanity

any man willing to accept compensation or reconciliation. In lines typical of this genre, one pre-Islamic woman challenges the virility of the men of her tribe if they do not seek retribution for their slain kinsman:

If you will not seek vengeance for your brother  
Take off your weapons  
And fling them on the flinty ground  
Take up the eye pencil, don the camisole  
Dress yourselves in women's bodices  
What wretched kin you are to a kinsman oppressed!<sup>22</sup>

Upholding martial virtues did not prevent pre-Islamic Arabs from expressing a range of emotions, and poets of this period described their natural environment with great sensitivity and beauty. However, whereas the Qur'anic revelation would draw attention to natural elements as signifiers of the Creator, and proof that God would recreate life after death, the pre-Islamic poet had no such basis for hope. Separated from his kin, the mood of the poet was nostalgic and melancholic. For him, the landscape was scattered with traces of an irretrievable past and with portents of a certain and final departure. Khansa', a celebrated female poet of the pre-Islamic period, describes how after the death of her beloved brother Sakhr, the world signified to her only loss and despair:

The rising sun reminds me of Sakhr  
and I remember him each time the sun sets.<sup>23</sup>

Mecca was a prime location to hear the best Arab poets recite their verses. In the decades before the birth of Muhammad, as increased trade enabled the Quraysh to establish a more secure position for themselves in the Arabian Peninsula, Mecca's importance as a cultural center also increased. It was here in the 'Ukaz market that the finest poets gathered every year to recite their epics in a lively competition. Over the years, some poems were deemed so extraordinary that they were hung (*mu'allaq* – hence they were known collectively as the "*Mu'allaqat*") with honor on the Ka'ba. Muhammad grew up in a sanctuary in which the House of God was literally draped in eloquent language.

### The *Jahiliyya*: A Time of Lawlessness and Immorality

Conversion narratives are important in most religious traditions. These narratives show the way faith transforms individuals by taking them out of the darkness of disbelief to the light of truth. These narratives also show

## God Speaks to Humanity 11

the way that faith can dramatically transform a society mired in immorality and corruption to become a moral and just community of believers.

Early Muslims called the pre-Islamic period the *Jahiliyya*, a word signifying immaturity, immorality, and ignorance. In a speech that Muhammad's cousin Ja'far ibn Abi Talib is said to have made to the Negus of Abyssinia when a group of early Muslims sought his protection from the religious persecution of the Quraysh, Ja'far describes the *Jahiliyya* and the change brought about by Islam thus,

O King, we were an uncivilized people, worshipping idols, eating corpses, committing abominations, breaking natural ties, treating guests badly, and our strong devoured our weak. Thus we were until God sent us an apostle whose lineage, truth, trustworthiness, and clemency we know. He summoned us to acknowledge God's unity and to worship him and to renounce the stones and images which we and our fathers formerly worshipped. He commanded us to speak the truth, be faithful to our engagements, mindful of the ties of kinship and kindly hospitality, and to refrain from crimes and bloodshed. He forbade us to commit abominations and to speak lies, and to devour the property of orphans, to vilify chaste women. He commanded us to worship God alone and not to associate anything with Him, and he gave us orders about prayer, almsgiving, and fasting...<sup>24</sup>

Early Muslims did recognize that before Islam, the Arabs had some laudable qualities, such as generosity and nobility; however, group partisanship mostly prevented the development of a commitment to moral responsibility beyond the tribe. Similarly, although the Quraysh had established some valuable agreements for furthering the economic and political stability of Mecca, a commitment to individual rights was absent. For example, early Muslim sources mention the Treaty (*hifl*) of Fudul as an important achievement of the pre-Islamic Quraysh. The treaty was devised after a visiting merchant to Mecca had been robbed, and a group of the city's notables gathered to bind themselves "by a solemn agreement that if they found anyone, either a native of Mecca or an outsider, had been wronged they would take part against the aggressor and see that the stolen property was returned to him."<sup>25</sup> The Prophet Muhammad would later praise this treaty and say that he would sign it even if it were compacted in pre-Islamic times, showing that Muslims should embrace justice wherever it was found. The Treaty of Fudul demonstrated that it was possible to develop a rule of law that transcended tribal loyalties. At the same time, the treaty benefited the Quraysh above anyone else, since it ensured that their city would be secure for trade. The security of poor free and slaves, on the other hand, was clearly not one of the merchants' concerns. 'Abdullah ibn Jud'an, the very man who called for the Treaty of

## 12 God Speaks to Humanity

Fudul and hosted the oath-taking ceremony in his home, made his living before Islam selling the children of prostitutes he kept in his brothel.<sup>26</sup>

The Qur'an (24:33) would forbid the practice of forcing slave women into prostitution, as it would forbid many of the pre-Islamic practices that subjected women to all manner of indignities. Perhaps the most disturbing of such practices was female infanticide, which seems to have been practiced not just because of poverty, but out of fear of dishonor.<sup>27</sup> Among the nomads especially, women were vulnerable to kidnapping and forced marriage if their group was attacked. It was a terrible dishonor for a man to fail to guard his female relations. For weak and vulnerable groups, the risk of violation was great, and for this reason, they turned to female infanticide rather than see their daughters whom they could not protect captured and taken away. Strong tribes like the Quraysh could deliberately shun these practices with the confidence that they would be able to protect themselves from such humiliation. Still, the Qur'an (16:58–59) indicates that old habits die hard, and that a negative reaction to the birth of a daughter was the cultural norm among the pre-Islamic Arabs.

It would be reductionist to explain social-cultural changes in Mecca before Islam as simply serving the cause of economic stability or resulting from expanding trade, as some authors have done.<sup>28</sup> Assessing other motives, however, is almost impossible, since early Islamic sources are sometimes unreliable in this respect. On the one hand, early Muslims wanted to show how bad the pre-Islamic period had been, and consequently, how greatly Islam had improved society. On the other hand, there clearly was a desire on the part of some narrators to refrain from portraying their ancestors in a purely negative light. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that some sources indicate that the Quraysh banned female infanticide just before the rise of Islam because they found it "shameful."<sup>29</sup> This shows that there was a moral dimension to this prohibition.

Furthermore, this prohibition was enacted in the context of the establishment of a new ritual identity declared by the Quraysh sometime around the "Year of the Elephant" – the year Abraha tried to attack the Ka'ba and the year in which Muhammad was reportedly born.<sup>30</sup> Studies have shown that around this time, the Quraysh developed successful trade alliances that allowed them to take up a purely sedentary lifestyle in Mecca; previously, the city was inhabited mostly during the pilgrimage season.<sup>31</sup> The Quraysh called themselves and all tribes who settled with them in Mecca the "Hums," a word said to signify their "zeal" in promoting Mecca as the most important Arabian sanctuary. They are reported to have said, "We are the sons of Abraham, the people of the holy territory, the guardians of the temple and the citizens of Mecca. No other Arabs have rights like ours or a position like ours."<sup>32</sup>

## The Early Life of Muhammad

The Qur'an and Islamic tradition ascribe significance to the fact that prophets are often born in unusual circumstances or have difficult childhoods. Adam, recognized as the first prophet of Islam, was created without a father or mother. Moses was taken from his family to be raised in the house of the Egyptian tyrant. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. Jesus was born without a father. Muhammad lost his father, 'Abdullah ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib, while he was still in his mother's womb. Muhammad came from a respectable Meccan family, and had a grandfather who could care for him, so his situation was not dire. However, in a patriarchal society, a fatherless child was at a distinct disadvantage and was called an "orphan" (*yatim*).

The Quraysh had a custom of sending infants to live with bedouin tribes for the first few years of their lives. They believed that the desert air was healthier, and that the bedouin would teach their children the customs and pure language of their ancestors. For the bedouin who accepted the children, the advantages were more than monetary. According to Arab (and later Islamic) custom, wet-nursing created a relationship similar to that established by birth. The wet-nurse was respected as a mother, and her children were brothers and sisters to the nursed child. Establishing such a relationship with the future leaders of a powerful tribe like Quraysh was a strategic move for impoverished nomads. According to early Islamic narratives, because Muhammad was an orphan, he was passed over by a group of bedouin women who came to Mecca looking for sucklings. In the end, a kindly woman named Halima took pity on the child. That Muhammad was blessed became immediately apparent to Halima, as her worn-out donkey suddenly sprang to life and carried her and the child back to drought-stricken lands that now became verdant.

Muhammad was returned to the custody of his mother and grandfather when he was a toddler. But his childhood was marked by the repeated loss of close family members. His mother died when he was six years old and his grandfather died when he was eight. The boy was then taken in by his paternal uncle, Abu Talib, who remained dedicated to protecting Muhammad throughout his life. When Muhammad became a prophet and faced threats from some members of the Quraysh, Abu Talib, who never became a Muslim, still defended his nephew.

Muhammad learned the art of trade from his uncle, and probably accompanied him a number of times to Syria to buy and sell his goods there. Islamic sources narrate the story of one trip in particular, in which portents of Muhammad's future prophethood became manifest. When the trade caravan stopped near a monastery, a Christian monk noticed a

## 14 God Speaks to Humanity

cloud miraculously shading the young Muhammad as he worked around the camp. Examining the boy, the monk found the “seal of the prophet” – a mark on Muhammad’s back proving his special status.<sup>33</sup> This is one of a number of Islamic narratives that show pious Christians supporting or confirming Muhammad’s position as a prophet sent by God.

At the age of twenty-five, Muhammad was hired by a widow, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, to conduct trade on her behalf. Impressed by the young man’s comportment and charm, Khadijah had a friend convey the message that she would not refuse Muhammad if he proposed marriage. Muhammad married the forty-year-old woman with whom he lived monogamously for the next twenty-five years until her death. Khadijah was Muhammad’s closest companion, the first to believe in his mission and the mother of his children, including a few boys who died in infancy and four girls who lived to adulthood. Until the end of his life, Muhammad would remember Khadijah with immense gratitude and love.

Islamic sources say that before he became a prophet, Muhammad was not distinguished with political or economic power in Mecca. He was, however, known among the Quraysh as a man of honesty and integrity and was called “the trustworthy” (*al-amin*). About five years before Muhammad received his first revelation, the leaders of Quraysh relied on his sound judgment to resolve a particularly sensitive dispute. They were rebuilding the Ka’ba after having discovered some rot in its foundation. After they completed the reconstruction, the only task remaining was to reinsert the sacred “Black Stone” in the corner of the building.<sup>34</sup> The leaders could not agree on who should have this honor, so when Muhammad appeared, they decided he should resolve the dispute. Muhammad’s ingenious solution was to place the stone on his cloak which was lifted by all the leaders gathered, then he himself positioned the stone in its final resting place.<sup>35</sup>

Whatever its historical value, this story is rich with symbolism. The religious life of the Quraysh, like the Ka’ba, had rotted at the foundation. It would take the Prophet Muhammad to unite the Quraysh and lead them in a project of spiritual renewal.

### Muhammad as the Messenger of God

Muhammad was called to be the Messenger and Prophet of God around age forty, although he reported that for some time before the angel Gabriel first appeared to him, he had experienced a change in his spiritual state. ‘A’isha, a later wife of Muhammad, reported what he had told her about this change: “The first thing that came to the Messenger of God at the beginning of the revelation were good dreams in his sleep. He never saw a

## God Speaks to Humanity 15

dream except that it came to him like bright daylight. Then seclusion became dear to him and he began to seclude himself in the cave of Hira' distancing himself from idols and praying. . . ."<sup>36</sup>

Like other seekers of God, Muhammad experienced the paradox of first entering a spiritual awakening in his sleep. Many centuries later, the great scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) would explain both the possibility of prophecy through dreams and the way in which the experience of dreaming might help us understand something of the experience of prophecy:

God most high . . . has favored His creatures by given them something analogous to the special faculty of prophecy, namely dreams. In the dream-state a man apprehends what is to be in the future, which is something of the unseen; he does so either explicitly or else clothed in a symbolic form whose interpretation is disclosed.

Suppose a man has not experienced this himself, and suppose that he is told how some people fall into a dead faint, in which hearing, sight and the other senses no longer function, and in this condition perceive the unseen. He would deny that this is so and demonstrate its impossibility. "The sensible powers," he would say, "are the causes of perception (or apprehension); if a man does not perceive things (sc. the unseen) when these powers are actively present, much less will he do so when the senses are not functioning." This is a form of analogy which is shown to be false by what actually occurs and is observed. Just as intellect is one of the stages of human development in which there is an "eye" which sees the various types of intelligible objects, which are beyond the ken of the senses, so prophecy also is the description of a stage in which there is an eye endowed with light such that in that light the unseen and other supra-intellectual objects become visible.<sup>37</sup>

To be awake to God, while awake to the world, is the goal of seekers of the Divine. Like other men of God, Muhammad was drawn to retreat to a mountain cave, where the quiet darkness might allow the experiences of the night to pass into the day. We do not know what words, what prayers Muhammad uttered in the cave. Historical sources give little detail on the way in which the Quraysh in general and Muhammad in particular practiced seclusion (called *tahannuth*). What is reported is that Muhammad would spend one month a year in seclusion, giving food to any poor person who came to him during that time.

Ibn Ishaq records the following account in which Muhammad describes his experience in the cave:

While I was asleep (Gabriel) came to me with a (coverlet of brocade) upon which was some writing. He said, "Read." I said, "What shall I read?" He squeezed me so tightly that I thought it was death, then he released me and

## 16 God Speaks to Humanity

said, "Read!" I said, "What shall I read?" He squeezed me again until I thought I would die, then he let me go and said, "Read!" I said, "What shall I read?" He squeezed me a third time until I thought I would die and said "Read!" I said, "What then shall I read?" I said this only to save myself from him, in case he would do the same thing to me again. Then he said,

*Read in the name of your Lord who created –  
Created the human from a suspended (embryo).  
Read! And your Lord is most bountiful.  
The One who instructed using the pen.*  
(Iqra'; 96:1–5)

So I recited it, and he left me. When I woke up, I felt as though those words were written on my heart.<sup>38</sup>

Muhammad was shaken by the dream, so he left the cave and began heading down the mountain. But like a vision that burst out of his dreams, the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared in the form of a man standing on the horizon saying, "O Muhammad, you are the messenger of God and I am Gabriel." Muhammad remained transfixed for a long time, and when he returned to his wife, she comforted him when he told her what had happened. Khadijah played an important role in building Muhammad's confidence during his transition into prophethood. Ibn Ishaq, who wrote a comprehensive biography of the Prophet about a century after his death, said about Khadijah, "She was the first to believe in God and His apostle, and in the truth of his message. By her God lightened the burden of His prophet. He never met with contradiction and charges of falsehood, which saddened him, but God comforted him by her and he went home. She strengthened him, lightened his burden, proclaimed his truth, and belittled men's opposition. May God almighty have mercy upon her!"

Immediately after Muhammad told Khadijah about his vision of Gabriel, she sought confirmation of the authenticity of her husband's experience by consulting with her cousin Waraqa, a Christian monk. After speaking with Muhammad, Waraqa said, "You are the prophet of this people. There has come unto you the greatest *namus* who came to Moses. You will be called a liar and they will treat you with scorn and cast you out and fight you."

The words recited by Gabriel to Muhammad in the cave are the first verses of the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad. The first word, '*iqra*', meaning "read" or "recite," indicates both what is to be the continuous manner of revelation and the basis for naming the collected words. For the next twenty-three years, until his death, Muhammad will receive words from God. He will listen to these words and recite them to his community. The Prophet and his followers will then recite these words back to God in

## God Speaks to Humanity 17

their prayers and devotions. Collectively and individually, these words are called “the Qur’an” – “the Recitation.”

After his first few encounters with the angel, which the Prophet seems to have experienced as awesome, even frightening, Gabriel’s presence became less unsettling to him, and he describes their later encounters in a way that suggests an almost easy familiarity: “Gabriel met me by the side of the road and said . . .”<sup>39</sup> The Prophet told his followers that God’s words were also revealed to him in other ways.<sup>40</sup> In particular, he said that sometimes the revelation came to him “like the ringing of a bell, after which he grasped what was revealed to him.”<sup>41</sup> This mode of revelation, said the Prophet, was the most difficult for him. The strain placed on Muhammad as he received the revelation was sometimes evident to those present. ‘A’isha, the wife of the Prophet, is reported to have said, “Sometimes the revelation would descend upon the Messenger of God and although it was a cool morning, his forehead would glisten with perspiration.”

In a later chapter, we will explore what the Qur’an as the speech of God signifies to various Muslim thinkers. For now, it is important to understand that at times, the Prophet conveyed to his followers divine guidance from Gabriel that was not “Qur’an.” That is, sometimes Gabriel came to the Prophet with divine instructions that were binding, but were not articulated as Qur’an.<sup>42</sup> In some cases, Gabriel delivered these instructions publicly, appearing in the form of a man who was visible to the Prophet’s companions. The following narrative, for example, is one of the most widely cited sources used by Muslim scholars to show the core principles of Islamic faith and spirituality:

(‘Umar, a Companion of the Prophet reported:) One day while we were sitting with the Messenger of God (may God’s peace and blessings be upon him), there appeared a man with very white clothing and very black hair; no sign of travel could be seen on him and none of us knew him. He sat next to the Prophet so their knees were touching and placed his hands on his thighs. He said, “O Muhammad, tell me about Islam.” The Messenger of God replied, “Islam is to testify that there is none worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, to establish prayers, to pay the zakat, to fast the month of Ramadan and to make pilgrimage to the House (the Ka’ba) if you have the means to do so.” (The man) said, “You have spoken truthfully.” We were amazed that he had asked a question and then said that (the Prophet) had spoken truthfully. (The man) said, “Tell me about faith (*iman*).” (The Prophet) replied, “It is to believe in God, His angels, His scriptures, His messengers, the Last Day and to believe in divine decree (*qadr*), both the good and the evil of it.” He said, “You have spoken truthfully.” Then he said, “Tell me about excellence (*ihsan*).” (The Prophet) answered, “It is to worship God as if you see Him, and even though you

## 18 God Speaks to Humanity

do not see Him, you know that He sees you.” He said, “Tell me about the Hour (the end of time).” (The Prophet) said, “The one being questioned does not know any more about it than the questioner.” He said, “Then tell me about its signs.” (The Prophet) answered, “The slave-girl shall give birth to her master and you will see the poor barefoot and unclothed shepherd competing in constructing tall buildings.” (The man) went away and I stayed for a long time. Then (the Prophet) asked, “O ‘Umar, do you know who the questioner was?” I replied, “God and His Messenger know best.” He said, “That was Gabriel who came to teach you your religion.”<sup>43</sup>

This narrative, although central to Islamic teachings, is not part of the Qur’an because the angel’s words were not “God’s speech”; rather, they were God’s instructions delivered in the angel’s own words. The story is therefore found among another body of writings known as *hadith* (“reports”), which record the Prophet’s words and actions, known as the Sunna (“the way”). The Prophet consistently maintained a distinction between his words and God’s words; nevertheless, the Qur’an mandates obedience to the Prophet and declares that he is the role-model chosen by God for the believers. Consequently, Muslims have always understood that the Sunna is the best source for understanding and implementing the Qur’an.

For twenty-three years, from the time the angel first appeared to him in the cave until his death in 632 CE, the Prophet Muhammad would receive revelations addressing all aspects of the relationship between humanity and God. Some revelations would address fundamental questions of the human condition, such as the meaning of life and death, while other revelations would address particular moral and social problems, like infanticide and economic injustice. The fact that much of the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet when he was in the company of others highlights the importance of his contemporary community in the process of revelation. Although Muslims consider the Qur’an universal in its application, they have generally believed that an accurate understanding of the scripture is contingent in large part on an understanding of the historical and social context of the revelation. It is this context we shall explore further in the next chapter, focusing particularly on the way in which the revelation responded to specific concerns of the Prophet’s community with rulings and principles that had lasting significance for later generations of Muslims.

### Notes

- 1 This does not mean that women were passive and voiceless. Among others, Asma’ bint Yazid was one of the most eloquent and forceful female Companions to express a desire for greater recognition in society. Mohja Kahf, “Braiding the Stories: Women’s Eloquence in the Early Islamic Era,” in

## God Speaks to Humanity 19

- Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 168–171. One woman who was able to overcome the common limitations on women’s activity in a dramatic fashion was Umm ‘Umara Nusayba bin Ka’b. She was one of two women who, with seventy men from Yathrib, pledged allegiance to the Prophet at ‘Aqaba the year before the *hijra*. Defense of the Prophet was a condition of the pledge, a condition Nusayba fulfilled at the Battle of Uhud where she employed sword and shield with astonishing dexterity to save the Prophet’s life. Muhammad Ibn Sa’d, *al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1958), 8:303–306.
- 2 *Tafsirs* (Qur’an commentary) of Sura Mujadila (58) narrate this story as the “occasion of revelation” of the early verses. See, for example, Abu Ja’far Muhammd ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami’ al-bayan fi tafsir al-Qur’an*, 30 vols. in 12 bks. (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 1987), 28:2–9.
  - 3 Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:117.
  - 4 Muslims have a religious obligation to invoke the peace and blessing of God upon the Prophet Muhammad when his name is mentioned. This supplication “God’s peace and blessings be upon him” is fully written or signified by a sign in Islamic texts.
  - 5 Tabari, 28:5.
  - 6 Notice how Qur’anic verses are woven into this story.
  - 7 From the Arabic root *j-h-d* “to struggle,” the same root generates the word “*jihad*” – a righteous struggle involving physical and spiritual exertion, including, but not limited to, martial struggle.
  - 8 Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 37–49.
  - 9 ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham, *al-Sira al-Nabawiyya*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Khulud, n.d.); all future references to this work will be to the translation by Alfred Guillaume, entitled, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 4–21; Irfan Shahid, “Pre-Islamic Arabia,” in *Cambridge History of Islam*, 2 vols., ed. P. M. Holt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1:14.
  - 10 Donner, 20–37.
  - 11 R. Simon, “Hums et Ilaf, ou Commerce sans Guerre,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 23/22 (1970): 205–232.
  - 12 Ibn Hisham, 21–30.
  - 13 Donner, 34–37.
  - 14 Abu Muhammad ‘Abdullah ibn Muslim “Ibn Qutayba” al-Dinawari, *al-Ma’arif* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1987), 312.
  - 15 Ibn Hisham, 62–63.
  - 16 Joseph Henninger, “Pre-Islamic Bedouin Religion,” in *Studies on Islam*, ed. Merlin L. Swartz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 3–22.
  - 17 Ibn Hisham, 55–56.
  - 18 There are many good studies on the pre-Islamic religions of Arabia, including A. F. L. Beeston, “Judaism and Christianity in Pre-Islamic Yemen,” in *L’Arabie*

## 20 God Speaks to Humanity

- du sud: histoire et civilisation*, ed. Joseph Chelhod (Paris, 1984), 271–278; the Qur'an makes reference to the pre-Islamic practice of sacrificing animals in the name of ancestors in Sura Baqara 2:200.
- 19 His great-grandfather, Hashim, married a woman from Yathrib who gave birth to the Prophet's grandfather, 'Abd al-Muttalib. Ibn Hisham, 59.
- 20 Ibn Hisham, 98–103.
- 21 Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 16–17.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 196.
- 23 Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasib* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); M. M. Bravmann, "'Life after Death' in Early Arab Conception," in *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 288–295.
- 24 Ibn Hisham, 151–152.
- 25 Ibn Hisham, 57.
- 26 Ibn Qutayba, 319.
- 27 Ingrid Mattson, *A Believing Slave is Better than an Unbeliever: Status and Community in Early Islamic Society and Law* (University of Chicago doctoral dissertation, 1999), 200.
- 28 W. M. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); see also Donner, 3–9.
- 29 M. J. Kister, citing al-Jahiz in "Mecca and Tamim (Aspects of their Relations)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 8 (1965): 135–136.
- 30 Abu'l-Walid Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah al-Azraqi, *Ta'rikh Mecca*, ed. Rushdi Malhas (Mecca: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1965), 179–183; Muhammad ibn Habib, *Kitab al-Muhabbar* (Hyderabad, 1942), 179–180; Ibn Hisham, 87–89.
- 31 See Simon.
- 32 Ibn Hisham, 87.
- 33 Ibn Hisham, 79–81.
- 34 Abraham is said to have told Isma'il that the angel Gabriel brought him the Black Stone from heaven. See Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-muluk*, translated in 39 volumes by multiple translators as *The History of Prophets and Kings*, series editor Ehsan Yar, vol. 2 translated by William M. Brinner as *Prophets and Patriarchs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 70–72.
- 35 Ibn Hisham, 85–86.
- 36 (Because there are so many editions of the major hadith collections, in addition to citing the particular books I use, I will also indicate the name of the chapters in which the hadith are found.) Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Kitab al-Jami 'al-Sahih* (Riyadh: Dar al-Salam, 1998), "*Kitab Bad' al-Wahy*," 1–2.
- 37 Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali*, translation of *al-Munqidh min al-dalal and Bidayat al-hidaya* by W. Montgomery Watt (1953; reprint, Oxford: Oneworld, 1994), 68–69.
- 38 Ibn Hisham, 106.

God Speaks to Humanity 21

- 39 Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih*, 18 vols., published as *Sahih Muslim bi sharh al-Nawawi* (Beirut: al-Dar al-Thaqafa al-'Arabiyya, 1929), "*Kitab al-Zakat*," 7:76.
- 40 Two main modes are cited in the hadith below, but Qur'an scholar al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) mentions some other modes, including revelation while sleeping and direct revelation to the Prophet during his "heavenly ascent" (*al-isra'*). See Jalal al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Abi Bakr al-Suyuti, *al-Itiqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 2 vols., ed. Fawwaz Ahmed Zamarli (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1999), 1:168–171.
- 41 Bukhari, "*Kitab Bad' al-Wahy*," 1–2.
- 42 Suyuti, 1:167.
- 43 Muslim, "*Kitab al-Iman*," 1:144–165.