

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
MUHAMMAD

Edited by Jonathan E. Brockopp  
*Pennsylvania State University*



protestation that only the two sects (meaning Jews and Christians) were known to have such books (Q 6:156). But God will come with His angels, and then nothing will benefit those who were unwilling to believe (Q 6:158). It is clear that Sūra 6 is not envisioning a polity or a community of believers as such, or if it did, not for the Muslims. The call is for a personal conversion and personal responsibility. Muḥammad had realized the limits of his mission in Mecca.

#### CONCLUSION: MUḤAMMAD THE PROPHET IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Muḥammad was not only a product of his environment; like a classic revolutionary character, he was also capable of transcending his limitations. In a tribal pagan environment, he dared to preach a salvific religion, a high imperial cult – and monotheism was then the cult of an empire – and he wanted to end the barbarism of the Arabs. The Arabs were to be made similar to the peoples of the empire, the *Rūm*, the Romans up north, with a book, and part of the legacy of Abraham. It is not insignificant that Muḥammad was rooting for the Romans in their wars with Sassanid Iran (Q 30:1–5). It is also worth noting that Alexander the Great became part of the salvific history of the Qurʾān: empire building and monotheism are one (Q 18). Muḥammad wanted to bring Rome to Arabia and, having been too successful, ended up taking Arabia to Rome.

#### *Further reading*

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## 2 Muḥammad's message in Mecca: warnings, signs, and miracles

URI RUBIN

In the previous chapter, Walid Saleh describes the many portents from Muḥammad's early life that set the stage for his ultimate role as prophet to Arabia. Such miraculous events are said to have continued throughout the Prophet's life, confirming his mission and demonstrating his personal connection to God. The present chapter looks more closely at the differences between the two major sources for Muḥammad's life, namely the Qurʾān, on the one hand, and the extra-Qurʾānic sources, on the other hand. The latter include the compilations of *tafsīr* (Qurʾānic exegesis), *Sīra* (Muḥammad's biography), and *ḥadīth* (tradition). The comparative analysis will focus on Muḥammad's image as emerging in his Meccan period, which stretches from the moment when he first received revelation, through his first attempts at preaching God's warning and promise to the people of Mecca, and up to their final rejection of him. This rejection resulted in Muḥammad's flight (*hijra*) to the oasis of Yathrib, later to be known as Medina.

When we read the Qurʾānic Meccan passages alone, without benefit of post-Qurʾānic interpretation, Muḥammad emerges as a mortal prophet who still has no miracle other than the Qurʾān, the book he received from God over the last twenty-two years of his life, first in Mecca (610–622 CE) and then in Medina (622–632). Muḥammad appears in these passages as a man who both warns of the oncoming Judgment Day and brings God's message of mercy. But in the post-Qurʾānic sources, a different Muḥammad emerges; these sources move away from the mortal Qurʾānic warner toward an ideal hero whom later generations of devoted believers have shaped and read back into the Qurʾān by means of its exegesis.

The basic differences between the Qurʾānic Muḥammad and the post-Qurʾānic one will be brought out in this essay by looking closely at one event, the splitting of the moon. This event is referred to in two verses of the Qurʾān (54:1–2) that form part of Qurʾānic eschatology, but when later on the same event is discussed in the post-Qurʾānic literature,

it is already transformed from an eschatological sign into a historical miracle. This transformation indicates that the post-Qur'anic literature is already aware of the worldly triumph that Muḥammad experienced after his *hijra* to Medina, and hence it is able to read back this post-*hijra* triumph into the Meccan period and place the splitting of the moon within the historical context of Muḥammad's worldly success. But let us begin the discussion with the Qur'anic Meccan sūras, reading them for their own sake.

### THE QUR'ĀNIC WARNER

The earliest Qur'anic passages (i.e., those revealed to Muḥammad during his Meccan period<sup>1</sup>) employ tactics of warning and good tidings that are designed to support the Qur'anic monotheistic campaign. These passages warn the unbelievers of God's chastisement while promising divine reward to the believers. Accordingly, Muḥammad is styled a *nadhīr* ("warner") and a *bashīr* ("announcer of good tidings").

Muḥammad's function as a warner is essential to his prophetic mission from the very outset. Already Sūra 74, fourth according to 'Aṭā' al-Khurāsānī's order of revelation (see note 1), opens with a request that Muḥammad "rise and warn." Further on, the Sūra describes the horrors of hell and the fate of the unbelievers in its flames. The gardens of Paradise that await the righteous are also depicted, and it is asserted that the sinners are denied access to it because they have not believed in the Day of Judgment. The same twofold message is conveyed in Sūra 92, which appears shortly after Sūra 74 on the list of Meccan sūras. In these revelations, Muḥammad's religious campaign is focused on the eschatological sphere and conveys the strong feeling that the Last Judgment is very near.

The addressees of the Qur'anic eschatological warnings are defined in Q 6:92 as the inhabitants of Umm al-Qurā ("Mother of Cities")

<sup>1</sup> The division of the Qur'an into Meccan and Medinan sūras is based on traditions containing lists of sūras arranged according to their order of revelation. One of the earliest available lists is by 'Aṭā' al-Khurāsānī (Syrian, d. 135/753), who ascribes it to Ibn 'Abbās. The list was preserved by Muḥammad b. Ayyūb b. al-Dūrayṣ (d. 294/906) in his *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, ed. Ghazwat Budayr (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1987), 33-4. For later sources in which this list appears, see Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 69. Even if one does not take these lists as historical, they are still relevant to anyone interested in the manner in which the early Muslims remembered Muḥammad's prophetic career. See further Gerhard Böwering, "Chronology and the Qur'an," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006), 1:316-35.

and those around it. The same applies to Q 42:7, where Muḥammad is requested to warn Umm al-Qurā and those around it by means of the Arabic Qur'an that has been revealed to him and to give warning of the Day of Gathering (*yawm al-jam'*) when "a party shall be in Paradise and (another) party in the Blaze."

The inhabitants of Umm al-Qurā (i.e., Mecca) are the Quraysh, Muḥammad's own tribe, who are mentioned by name in Sūra 106. This Meccan chapter (twenty-eighth in 'Aṭā' al-Khurāsānī's order) reveals another level of Muḥammad's role as a warner. The first two verses of the Sūra mention the "winter and summer caravans" of the Quraysh, which seem to be taken as a sign of divine benefaction, from which the Quraysh must draw a monotheistic conclusion and "worship the Lord [i.e., Allāh] of this House" (i.e., the Ka'ba) (v. 3). He deserves to be worshipped because he is the one who "has fed them against hunger and has made them secure from fear" (v. 4). This statement contains a hidden threat to the Quraysh: if they do not worship Allāh, they are liable to suffer hunger and killing (i.e., to lose their hegemony in Arabia, which had been given them by Allāh and not by any other deity). In further Meccan passages, they are requested to remember the fate of ancient mighty towns in Arabia that were likewise destroyed by God (e.g., Q 46:27). In Q 41:13, the fate of the Quraysh is explicitly linked to that of the extinct generations. Muḥammad tells them, "I have warned you of a scourge like the scourge of 'Ād and Thamūd." The bitter end of these ancient generations is expounded in the Qur'anic "punishment stories."<sup>2</sup>

The punishment awaiting the Quraysh is the result of their sinful conduct, the nature of which is made clear by the manner in which they are referred to throughout the Qur'an. They are often designated as "idolaters" (*mushrikūn*, lit. "those who associate"). This refers to their polytheistic tenets and especially to their belief in God's associates or partners (*shurakā'*) who are considered his offspring.<sup>3</sup> The same Meccan polytheists are also referred to as "unbelievers" (*kāfirūn*, lit. "those who disbelieve"), which pertains to their rejection of God's signs as brought to them by Muḥammad.<sup>4</sup>

The warning of an earthly calamity as inherent in Sūra 106, as well in the punishment stories, is complementary to the eschatological

<sup>2</sup> See David Marshall, "Punishment Stories," in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, 4:318-22.

<sup>3</sup> The Qur'an mentions by name three of God's alleged daughters: Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt (Q 53:19-21).

<sup>4</sup> See Camilla Adang, "Belief and Unbelief," in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, 1:218-26.

warnings addressed to the same audience in the other Meccan sūra. These chapters elaborate on the idea of the oncoming judgment, and especially on the role of Allāh as the ultimate judge between believers and unbelievers (e.g., Q 32:25; 39:46; 40:12). Belief in the Day of Judgment is declared an article of faith (e.g., Q 70:26), and it is stressed that one must always check one's deeds while being fearful of standing God's trial in the hereafter (e.g., Q 29:5). Disbelief in the Last Judgment and in the inevitable appearance before God the judge entails divine wrath and chastisement in the flames of hell (e.g., Q 6:31; 30:8–9; 32:10–12; 74:46; 82:9; 83:10–12; 95:7; 107:1).

The Last Judgment, according to early Meccan revelations, will be preceded by cosmic disasters, as is stated, for example, in Q 81:1–13: the sun shall be covered, the stars shall be thrown down, the mountains shall be moved away, the pregnant camels shall be left untended, the wild animals shall be mustered, the seas shall be set on fire, the heaven shall be stripped off, and so on. Or as described in Q 82:1–4: heaven shall become cleft asunder, the stars shall become dispersed, the seas shall swarm over, and the graves shall be overthrown (see also Q 84:1–5; 99:1–5; 101:1–5). Sometimes mention is made of devastating events pertaining to the sun and the moon in particular: the moon shall be eclipsed, and the sun and the moon shall be "brought together" (Q 75:7–9). In this case, the calamity marks the onset of resurrection (Q 75:1–5), which means that the ideas of resurrection and judgment overlap in the Qur'ān.<sup>5</sup>

Such calamities are already described in a biblical apocalypse. In Joel 2:30–1 [3:3–4 in the Hebrew Bible] God says: "I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth; blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." The same recurs in the New Testament,<sup>6</sup> and later on the Qur'ān has embedded these eschatological warnings into the Arabian context of Muḥammad's antipolytheistic campaign.

The beginning of the Last Judgment is frequently referred to as the Hour (*al-sā'a*). The Meccan passages (and occasionally the Medinan ones) assert that it is inevitable (Q 18:21; 40:59) and that one must not doubt it (Q 43:61). Whoever denies the Hour shall be in hell (Q 25:11). Indeed, the believers "go in fear of it" (Q 42:18), yet the unbelievers refuse to

<sup>5</sup> For which, see Maurice Borrmans, "Resurrection," in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, 4:434–5.

<sup>6</sup> Joel's apocalypse is quoted in Acts 2:19–20. And see further Matthew 24:29: "Immediately after the suffering of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken" (see also Mark 13:24–5).

believe that it will ever come (Q 34:3; 41:50; 45:32). It is expected to occur within a short time (e.g., Q 16:77; 42:17) and suddenly (Q 6:31; 12:107; 21:40; 47:18; 43:66), but God will not disclose exactly when (Q 7:187; 20:15; 31:34; 33:63; 41:47; 43:85; 79:42–6).

Similar allusions to the unknown hour already occur in the New Testament but in a specific Christian context,<sup>7</sup> which the Qur'ān has reshaped and built into Muḥammad's discourse with his Arab polytheistic interlocutors.

When the Hour comes, "they who are in error . . . shall know who is in more evil plight and weaker in forces" (Q 19:75), because on that day, the "vain-doers" shall perish (Q 45:27). Furthermore, "the Hour is their promised time, and the Hour shall be most grievous and bitter" (Q 54:46).

The Hour is sometimes alluded to with various ominous designations, such as "the Clatterer" (*al-qāri'a*, Q 101:1–3), "the Enveloper" (*al-ghāshiyā*, Q 88:1), "the Imminent" (*al-āzifa*, Q 40:18; 53:57), "the Shocking Event" (*al-wāqī'a*, Q 56:1), and "the Great Predominating Calamity" (*al-ṭāmmatu l-kubrā*, Q 79:34).

One eschatological cataclysm that marks the Hour is the splitting of the moon, which is mentioned in Sūra 54 (*al-Qamar*), thirty-sixth according to 'Aṭā's list. It is here that a comparative reading of the Qur'ān and the extra-Qur'ānic sources reveals significant aspects of the changing interpretation of Muḥammad's prophetic message in Mecca, and especially his progress from a mere mortal warner to something else.

#### THE QUR'ĀNIC MOON PASSAGE

The moon passage (Q 54:1–2) reads:

أَفْتَرَبْتَ الْسَّاعَةَ وَأَنْتَقُّ الْقَمَرَ<sup>7</sup> The Hour is at hand and the moon is

split. And if they see a sign they turn

مُسْتَعْمِرٌ<sup>8</sup> aside and say: transient enchantment.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 24:36: "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (see also Mark 13:32).

<sup>8</sup> On this passage and the myths that have evolved around it, see, e.g., Tor Andrae, *Die Person Muhammads in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt, 1918), 55–7; Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 69–71. On the controversy in modern Islam concerning the authenticity of the traditions, see Gautier H. A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 145–7.

## THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The splitting of the moon seems to allude to a partial lunar eclipse,<sup>9</sup> one of several that could be seen in Mecca before Muḥammad's *hijra* to Medina (i.e., between 610 and 622 CE).<sup>10</sup> But what is meant here is no mere astronomical observation. The juxtaposition of the Hour and the splitting of the moon indicates that the lunar eclipse is taken as a warning of the oncoming eschatological cataclysm.

The eschatological implication of the eclipse is intensified by the vocabulary of the passage. The verb *inshaqqa*, which is a figurative description of the partial concealment of the full moon, recurs in other Meccan eschatological passages, in which it signifies the literal splitting of heaven on the Day of Judgment. In Q 69:16, it is stated that "heaven shall be split [*wa-'nshaqqat*], for on that day it shall be frail." The same is stated in the passages of Q 84:1 (*inshaqqat*), and in Q 25:25 (*tashaqqaqu*), as well as in the Medinan passage of Q 55:37 (*inshaqqat*). The same cataclysm is described in verbal forms derived not only from the Arabic root SH-Q-Q but also from the root F-T-R (Q 73:18; 82:1).

From this eschatological function of *inshaqqa* it may be inferred that the splitting of the moon in the moon passage also bears an eschatological connotation, although here it is only a figurative preview of the imminent literal splitting of the moon as well as of the entire heavens.

## SIGNS

The eclipsed or split moon is defined in the moon passage as a "sign" (*āya*, pl. *āyāt*). This puts the eclipse on a par with a series of other visual signs that are adduced in the Meccan sūras to display the overall powers of Allāh as the one and only God who has created the universe and controls it. These are natural signs that are celestial as well as terrestrial. They are revealed in God's giving all creatures rain and making seed grow and providing food of all kinds, or in creating the skies and the sun and the moon and the stars, or in making the sea with its fruits and the ships sailing in it. The Qur'ān states that all these are signs for those who can understand (Q 16:10–16).

Although the foregoing signs illustrate God's bounty, the split moon is a sign that should be a reminder of the approaching Day of Judgment.

The unbelievers, however, ignore the visual signs, and as pointed out in the moon passage, for them even a lunar eclipse is nothing but a passing illusion. Other Qur'ānic passages indicate that they demand different kinds of visual signs, ones that would go against the ordinary course of nature (i.e., miracles). A list of their requested miracles is provided in several Meccan passages. To believe in Muḥammad's warnings, they need to see an angel descending to assist him or a treasure that will be sent down to him (Q 6:8–9; 11:12; 15:7; 23:24; 25:7–8, 21). Alternatively, they demand to see if the Prophet can cause a fountain to gush forth from the earth for them, or produce a garden of palms and grapes in the midst of which he should cause rivers to flow forth, or cause the sky to come down on them in pieces, or bring God and all his angels face-to-face with them, or produce a golden house, or ascend into heaven and bring down with him a book they can read (Q 17:90–3; see also Q 74:52).

The miraculous signs they demand should resemble those brought by previous prophets (Q 21:5), which means that the Prophet must perform those miraculous deeds as known from the stories about Moses and Jesus, and of which the Qur'ān itself is aware.<sup>11</sup>

But Muḥammad cannot produce such miraculous signs because no prophet can produce a sign without God's permission (Q 13:38; 14:11; 40:78). Moreover, Muḥammad would not be able to produce the signs demanded of him even if he descended through a tunnel into the center of the earth or ascended on a ladder into heaven (Q 6:35). Furthermore, the miraculous signs, says the Qur'ān, did not prevent the previous nations from rejecting their own prophets (Q 17:59). Therefore, all the Prophet can say is, "The signs are only with Allāh, and I am only a plain warner [*nadhīr mubīn*]" (Q 29:50). The Qur'ānic text itself – that is, the verbal signs that the Prophet recites – should be sufficient for his foes (Q 29:51).

Muḥammad's failure to produce the visual signs demanded by his foes runs parallel to the assertion that he is just a mortal of flesh and blood (*bashar*) (Q 17:93; 18:110; 41:6), not an angel; he is one who does not know the unseen (Q 6:50; 7:188; 11:31 [here about Noah]).

On account of his mortality, all the plain warner can do is adduce natural signs, like a lunar eclipse, which testify to God's omnipotence and are derived from the material cosmos that is always there for people

<sup>9</sup> This has already been suggested before. For details, see Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1971), 495.

<sup>10</sup> The list of all lunar eclipses is available at the NASA Eclipse Web site, at <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/JLEX/JLEX-AS.html>.

<sup>11</sup> The miracles that are attributed to Moses revolve around his rod and his "white hand" (Q 7:107–8, 117; 20:69; 26:32–3, 45). His rod helps him strike water from the rock (Q 2:60; 7:160) and split the sea (Q 26:63). Jesus creates a living bird out of clay, heals the blind and the leprosy, and raises the dead and knows the unseen (Q 3:49; 5:110).

to observe. There lies the visual proof of his monotheistic message as well as of the imminent Hour.

### SIḤR – “ENCHANTMENT”

But the Qurʾān informs us in the Meccan sūras that even if the unbelievers see each and every sign in the world, they will not believe (Q 6:25; 7:146. cf. 10:96–7). This is why they also refuse to correctly interpret cosmic phenomena like an eclipsed sun or moon. As stated in the moon passage, they reject the vision of the eclipsed moon as “enchantment” (*siḥr*), which means that they impute to Muḥammad an attempt to bewitch and manipulate them into believing that the phenomenon is a portent of the Hour. In fact, the Meccan unbelievers reject any sign they see by claiming that it is mere *siḥr* (Q 37:14–15).

Muḥammad’s Meccan foes dismiss as *siḥr* even the verbal signs recited to them, and especially the Qurʾānic eschatological warnings, including the idea of resurrection (Q 11:7). They claim that he tries to bewitch them and make them believe that he speaks the word of God, although he is just an ordinary human being like themselves (Q 74:24–5; see also Q 21:2–3; 34:43; 43:30; 46:7).

### THE POST-QURʾĀNIC WARNER

As we turn from the Qurʾān to the post-Qurʾānic sources, we realize that some traditions still preserve Muḥammad’s Qurʾānic image, portraying him as a mortal warner whom God does not provide with any miraculous signs to help him persuade his audience. Certain canonical *ḥadīth* collections contain a tradition on the authority of the Companion Abū Hurayra in which Muḥammad is said to have stated that every prophet has been given a sign of the kind that could make people believe (*mā mina l-anbiyāʾi nabiyyun illā uʿṭiya mina l-āyāt mā mithluhu āmana ʿalayhi l-basharu*), whereas all Muḥammad has been given is a revelation (*waḥy*) from God. Muḥammad goes on to express his hope that on the day of resurrection the number of his believers will exceed that of any other prophet.<sup>12</sup>

This tradition is still aware of the gap separating the Qurʾānic Muḥammad from the previous prophets who, unlike him, were aided by miracles. But the tradition turns the Qurʾān itself into a sign that

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān* [section 66]: *Bāb kayfa nazala l-waḥyū* [chapter 1].

surpasses that of any other prophet; by force of it, Muḥammad will have in the hereafter the greatest number of believers.

### THE ESCHATOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE MOON PASSAGE

As for the post-Qurʾānic *tafsīr* of the moon passage, here, too, some traditions keep to the Qurʾānic image of Muḥammad as a mortal warner aided by no miracles. This applies to those exegetical traditions that take the splitting of the moon as a lunar eclipse prefiguring eschatological cataclysm.

For example, ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827) has recorded in his *Muṣannaf* a tradition traced back to ʿIkrima (d. 105/723), the Medinan *mawlā* of Ibn ʿAbbās. ʿIkrima relates that once in Muḥammad’s time the moon was eclipsed (*kasafa l-qamaru*) and the people said, “A spell has been cast over the moon” (*suhīra l-qamar*). Thereupon the Prophet recited the first verse of the moon passage: “The Hour is at hand and the moon has been split.”<sup>13</sup>

In this version, Muḥammad is still the mortal warner who can only adduce visual signs from the material cosmos, in this case, an alarming lunar eclipse that was seen in Mecca. The inner eschatological context of the Qurʾānic moon passage is fully preserved, and the verb *inshaqqa* is still just a figurative prediction of the eschatological cataclysm.

### LITERAL SPLITTING

Other post-Qurʾānic interpretations that are found in the early *tafsīr* sources also preserve the eschatological connotation of the moon passage, yet they reveal an ever-growing tendency to release Muḥammad of his human limitations. They produce a new Muḥammad, one who not only warns but also provides the miraculous signs that attest to the truth of his warning. In these traditions, the celestial phenomenon itself is not just an incidental lunar eclipse that looks like splitting but rather an intentional splitting apart of the moon. The verb *inshaqqa* is transformed here from figurative to literal, and the event changes from a sign that Muḥammad merely interprets into a miracle of the most powerful kind. This transformation is noticeable in the earliest available *tafsīr* compilations.

<sup>13</sup> ʿAbd al-Razzāq b. Hammām al-Ṣanʿānī, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-Aʿzamī (Beirut: al-maktab al-Islāmī, 1970), 3:104–5 (no. 4941).

Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) begins his commentary on the moon passage saying that the Hour is the resurrection (*al-qiyyāma*). He then states that there are three portents of the Hour: the prophetic emergence (*khurūj*) of Muḥammad,<sup>14</sup> the “smoke” (*al-dukhān*; see Q 44:10<sup>15</sup>), and the splitting of the moon. This explanation, which joins the splitting of the moon with the two other events signaling the approaching Hour, preserves the eschatological sense of the passage. Yet Muqātil immediately proceeds to tell a story that provides the occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) that places the splitting of the moon into history: Muḥammad’s Meccan adversaries asked him to show them a sign (*āya*), and thereupon the moon was split in two halves (*niṣṣayn*). The Meccans said that this was the act of sorcerers (*‘amal al-saḥara*). Eventually, the two halves were reunited into one (*ilta’ama*).<sup>16</sup>

In this account, the moon not only is split apart, which turns the verb *inshaqqa* from figurative to literal, but the event itself no longer happens by chance but rather on demand. Muḥammad meets the challenge set by his adversaries, which implies superhuman powers. Consequently, the charge of *sihr* that comes as a reaction to the miraculous sign changes from mental enchantment of the mind into actual magic.

In ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s *Tafsir*, the verb *inshaqqa* is also perceived in its literal sense. Here various versions of what supposedly happened are recorded on the authority of some prominent Companions of the Prophet.<sup>17</sup> The Baṣran Companion Anas b. Mālik (d. ca. 91/709–95/713) tells us that the people of Mecca asked the Prophet for a sign and then the moon was split in two. Although nothing is new here compared with what we have already seen in the work of Muqātil, several versions that are traced back to the Medinan/Kūfan Companion ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652–53) add some local color to the spectacle. This Companion embraced Islam in Mecca at a very early stage of Muḥammad’s career, which makes him an eyewitness to the event. In one version, Ibn Mas‘ūd assures us that he saw the moon split apart, so much so that he could

<sup>14</sup> This reflects traditions to the effect that Muḥammad’s prophetic emergence occurred when the Hour was just about to come. See, e.g., Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. De Goeje et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879–1901), 1: 12–13.

<sup>15</sup> In this verse, the Prophet is requested to expect a day on which “heaven shall bring a manifest smoke covering the people.” The eschatological connotation of the smoke is borne out by the previous passage from Joel.

<sup>16</sup> Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsir al-Qur‘ān*, ed. ‘Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta, 5 vols. (Cairo: al-hay’at al-Miṣriyya al-‘amma li-l-kitāb, 1979), 4:177.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Tafsir al-Qur‘ān*, ed. Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad, 3 vols. (Riyadh: maktabat al-rushd, 1989), 2:257.



Figure 3. “Muḥammad Splits the Moon,” an illustration from a *Falnameh* (Persian book of prophecies), in the Dresden State Library. SLUB Dresden/Deutsche Fotothek.

see Mount Ḥirā’ between its two halves. In another version, he says that one part of the moon was seen above Mount Abū Qubays and the other above Mount al-Suwaydā’. These mountains are located in the vicinity of the Ka’ba, and thus the miracle adds to the sacredness of the local Meccan geography. This geographical specification also serves to

authenticate the splitting of the moon as a historical event. Nevertheless, the eschatological connotation of the happening is also maintained, as one of Ibn Mas'ūd's versions concludes with Muḥammad's statement: "Just as you have seen the two halves of the split moon, so is true what I have told you about the approaching Hour."<sup>18</sup>

These traditions have been provided with *isnāds* considered sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*), which made them acceptable to authors of canonical *ḥadīth* compilations. For example, al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) dedicated special chapters to the splitting of the moon in which he assembled various versions of Ibn Mas'ūd as well as of other Companions.<sup>19</sup>

### ESCHATOLOGY VERSUS HISTORY

Despite the widely accepted perception of the moon passage as alluding to a historical splitting apart of the moon above the mountains of Mecca, further texts reveal attempts at depriving the event of its claimed place in history. This is evinced by some linguistic explanations that insist on reading the form *inshaqqa* as denoting the future, thus preserving the purely eschatological context of the passage. Al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) records in his *Tafsīr* the interpretation of 'Uthmān b. 'Aṭā' al-Khurāsānī (d. 155/751), who says on the authority of his father that *inshaqqa* means *sa-yanshaqqu* ("will be split").<sup>20</sup> Al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) adds some more details, saying that the moon will be split after the second blast of the trumpet (*al-naḥkha al-thāniya*), which is a stage in the process of resurrection (cf. Q 39:68). He also provides the observation of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) to the effect that, had the moon been split in the past, everyone would have seen it (and remembered it, which was not the case).<sup>21</sup>

These interpretations reflect efforts to get around what could be considered the irrationality of the literal splitting in its supposed historical

<sup>18</sup> For additional versions on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd and others, with a splitting just as literal, see Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Būlāq, 1323/1905; reprinted in Beirut, n.p., 1972), 27:50–1; citation is from the Būlāq edition. The localities above which the two parts of the moon are seen include Minā, another prominent station of the pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>19</sup> Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Tafsīr* [65]: *Bāb wa-nshaqqa l-qamar* (Q 54:1); *Manāqib al-Anṣār* [section 63]: *Bāb inshiqāq al-qamar* [chapter 36].

<sup>20</sup> Abū Ishāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tha'labī, *al-Kaṣh wa-l-bayān 'an tafsīr āy al-Qur'ān*, ed. Abū Muḥammad b. 'Ashūr and Naẓīr al-Sā'idī (Beirut: dār ihyā' al-turāth al-'Arabī, 2002), 9:160.

<sup>21</sup> al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-'uyūn fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abd al-Maḥsūd b. 'Abd al-Raḥīm (Beirut: dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1992), 5:409.

setting.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, exegetical maneuvers were exercised to rule out the possibility of reading the verb *inshaqqa* in the future tense and to maintain the historicity of the splitting. In a *qirā'a* ("variant reading") attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, the verb *inshaqqa* is preceded by *qad*, so that the meaning can only be "[the moon] was already split [in Muḥammad's time]."<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, Ibn Mas'ūd is said to have added the splitting of the moon to a list of four other events that the Qur'ān mentions with reference to the calamities of the Day of Judgment. But in Ibn Mas'ūd's tradition, the five events are said to have already come about in Muḥammad's lifetime (*khamṣun qad maḍayna*).<sup>24</sup> One of the other four on the list is the (event of) the smoke (Q 44:10), which, as seen previously, was defined by Muqātil as a portent of the Hour. But in Ibn Mas'ūd's tradition, the smoke is presented as an event of the past, which brings to mind a series of occurrences described in traditions recorded in the *tafsīr* sources regarding the smoke passage. These traditions depict a prolonged drought and famine that God has inflicted on the Meccans as punishment for their opposition to Muḥammad. The famine, which causes a smokelike haze that dims the eyes, begins miraculously, as soon as Muḥammad prays to God asking him to bring down on the Quraysh seven years of drought like those suffered by the Egyptians in Joseph's time.<sup>25</sup> This exposition detaches the smoke from the context of the Hour and transforms this event, together with the splitting of the moon and other incidents on Ibn Mas'ūd's list, from eschatological signs into historical miracles.

<sup>22</sup> Another interpretation, which likewise tries to avoid the literal sense of *inshaqqa*, takes this verb as a metaphor connoting "to become apparent" (*waḍuḥa l-amru wa-zahara*) or signaling the "splitting apart of the cover of darkness that has concealed the moon" (*inshiqāqu l-zulmati 'anhu*). No explanation is provided, however, as to the implication of such an interpretation on the significance of the moon passage. See Māwardī, *Nukat*, 5:409.

<sup>23</sup> Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 27:51. The same reading was reportedly used by the Medinan/Kūfan Companion Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān (d. 36/656) in a Friday sermon about the approaching Hour. See Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Huwwārī, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-'Azīz*, ed. Belḥāj Sharīfī (Beirut: dār al-gharb al-Islāmī, 1990) 4:250–1. See also Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 27:51; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* (Beirut: maktabat al-ma'ārif, 1974), 4:75.

<sup>24</sup> The remaining three are the (event of) "that which shall cleave" (*al-lizām*, Q 25:77), the (event of) the "seizing" (*al-baṭsha*, Q 44:16), and the (victory of) the Rūm (Q 30:2–3). See Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 27:51. This tradition recurs in the canonical *ḥadīth* collections; see, e.g., Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Tafsīr* [65], on Q 25:77.

<sup>25</sup> On the traditions about the famine and Muḥammad's prayer, see Uri Rubin, "Muḥammad's Curse of Muḍar and the Blockade of Mecca," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 3 (1988): 249–64; Heidi Toelle, "Smoke," in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, 5:64–5.



The historicity of the splitting of the moon is also endorsed in traditions attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, as recorded in al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) *Tafsīr*. He is reported to have said about the moon passage: "This has already come to pass [*dhāka qad maḍā*]. It occurred before the *hijra*, when the moon was split till its two [separate] halves could be seen."<sup>26</sup>

The reinterpretation of the Meccan eschatological warnings – such as the splitting of the moon and the smoke – reflect a new post-Qur'anic perception of Muḥammad's career before the *hijra*. His life has now become part of a sacred history that already fulfills in this world many of God's warnings as well as promises. This new outlook indicates that the post-Qur'anic literature looks at Muḥammad's Meccan period from a new perspective; it is already aware of the worldly triumph that Muḥammad experienced after his *hijra* to Medina, which resulted in his message expanding to the rest of the world. The post-Qur'anic sources read back this post-*hijra* triumph into the Meccan period and remove the splitting of the moon and the smoke from the eschatological context of the Hour, relocating them in the historical sphere of Muḥammad's worldly career. In their new historical context, these events function as miracles marking the divine aid and protection under which Muḥammad's life proceeds.

#### A NEW PRE-HIJRA HISTORY

The splitting of the moon, once detached from the context of the Hour and perceived as a historical event demonstrating Muḥammad's supernatural abilities, could be grafted onto the specific accounts of Muḥammad's pre-*hijra* period that were eventually retold as part of a glorious history of a continuous success. This literary progression took place at a secondary stage, as proved by a comparative reading of the earliest descriptions of Muḥammad's confrontation with his Meccan opponents and their later reshaped versions.

<sup>26</sup> Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 27:51. The same view was recorded on the authority of al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (Khurāsānī, d. 102/720). See *ibid.*, 52. In another version of Ibn 'Abbās, the splitting of the moon is linked together with two other events that are said to have already happened: the "defeat of the hosts" (Q 54:45: *sa-yuhzamu l-jam'u*) and the opening of the "gate of severe chastisement" (Q 23:77: *hattā idhā fataḥnā 'alayhim bāban dhā 'adhābin shādīd*). See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fi l-tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr* (Cairo: Bulāq, 1869; repr., Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, n.d.), 6:134 (from Ibn Mardawayhi; citation is from the Bulāq edition). These are again two Meccan warnings of eschatological chastisement that the exegetical traditions have transformed into an allusion to the historical disaster that the Quraysh were about to incur in the Battle of Badr (2/624). See the commentaries on Q 23:77; 54:45.

For example, Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/768), author of one of the earliest available biographies of Muḥammad, has recorded a tradition of Ibn 'Abbās describing a meeting that took place in the first stages of Muḥammad's public activity in Mecca. The tradition provides a list of Arab leaders of the Meccan opposition to Muḥammad (among them Abū Sufyān, al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra, and Abū Jahl) who have summoned Muḥammad. He arrives full of hope that the leaders have decided to join him, only to find out that they accuse him of a series of transgressions against their most sacred religious and moral values. They offer him money to make him stop preaching or medical treatment for his "madness." Muḥammad replies that he is not expecting a reward because his mission is only to bring good tidings and be a warner. The leaders then say that, because they are short of land and water and livelihood, they would like Muḥammad to call on his lord to remove the mountains that shut them in and straighten out the land for them and open up rivers in it like those in Syria and Iraq. They also request that he resurrect their forefathers for them, and especially Quṣayy, to see if they confirm Muḥammad's religious message. If he can accomplish it, they will know that he is truly God's messenger. But Muḥammad only repeats his former reply; namely, he has been sent only to deliver God's good tidings and warnings. This is also the reply he makes when the leaders demand to see an angel aiding him and making gardens and castles and treasures for him, or to let the heavens be dropped on them in pieces, and so on, because he seems to them an ordinary mortal.<sup>27</sup>

This account is based on the Qur'anic pattern of the conflict with the unbelievers. Although the latter demand miraculous signs, the Prophet insists that he is a mere mortal messenger of God whose only mission is to warn. But when the story of the same encounter is retold in a later version, Muḥammad's conduct is already decisively different. This version, too, is attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and is recorded in the *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa* by Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038). It is formulated as an occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) of the moon passage. As in the former version, the leaders, whose names are specified, ask for a miraculous sign, but this time they say to him: "If you speak the truth, let the moon be split in two for us, and let one half be above Abū Qubays and the other above Qu'ayqi'an" (these two mountains are near the hills of the Ṣafā and the Marwa, in the vicinity of the Ka'ba). Muḥammad asks

<sup>27</sup> 'Abd al-Malik b. Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, and 'Abd al-Ḥāfiẓ Shalabī (Beirut: dār ihyā' al-turāth al-'Arabī, 1971), 1: 315–18.

God to produce what they have asked for, and the moon is indeed split as they demanded, and Muḥammad tells them: "Behold!"<sup>28</sup>

In the present version, a new Muḥammad emerges who, unlike the one described in Ibn Ishāq, is no longer the passive persecuted mortal warrior who fails to meet the challenge of his foes. Now he is already the capable hero who, when put to the test, immediately produces – with God's help – whatever is requested of him, even a split moon. In this setting, the event is no longer a portent of the Hour but rather a miraculous weapon designed to assist Muḥammad in his earthly confrontations with the unbelievers.

The splitting of the moon is deprived of its eschatological context and functions as a worldly weapon in yet another front of Muḥammad's campaign, the Jewish one. A relatively late tradition to that effect is again traced back to Ibn 'Abbās. It relates that the Jewish rabbis (*aḥbār al-yahūd*) came to the Prophet and asked for a miracle to believe in him. Thereupon the Prophet asked his Lord for a sign, and then he showed them the moon being split. It became two moons, one above the hill of the Ṣafā and the other above the Marwa (both in the vicinity of the Ka'ba). This lasted from the afternoon until nightfall. The Jews, however, rejected the sign as *siḥr*.<sup>29</sup>

In this version, the miraculous splitting of the moon, though taking place in Mecca, has acquired a typical Medinan setting, because the conflict with the Jews broke out only after Muḥammad's *hijra* to Medina. Thus, the Meccan period has again won a Medinan touch. As for Muḥammad, here, too, he is capable of producing a miracle on demand, whereas the Jews are typically the obstinate unbelievers who will not accept even the clearest sign of Muḥammad's powers. This provides a retrospective justification of their bitter fate.

#### POLITICAL APPLICATIONS

As is the case with any significant event in Muḥammad's *Sīra*, having served as an eyewitness to the splitting of the moon became a matter of prestige that was employed for political purposes. Furthermore, because the splitting of the moon took place in pre-*hijra* times,

<sup>28</sup> Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa*, ed. Muḥammad Qal'ajī and 'Abd al-Barr 'Abbās (Beirut: dār al-nafā'is, 1986), 279–80 (no. 209). See also Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, 6:133 (from Abū Nu'aym's *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*); Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 3:119–20.

<sup>29</sup> Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr*, 6:133–4 (from Abū Nu'aym).

a Muslim whose presence on the scene was documented could boast of his early conversion to Islam.

A version that has been applied to the well-known controversy between Sunnīs and Shī'īs over the succession to the Prophet mentions the name of Abū Bakr, the first caliph after Muḥammad. It is ascribed to Mujāhid (d. 104/722) and relates that, when the moon was split, Muḥammad said: "Abū Bakr, behold!"<sup>30</sup> Thus, the miraculous splitting became a sign designed especially for Abū Bakr to observe, as if to welcome his conversion to Islam and exhibit his senior status among the first Companions, which in turn makes him the most worthy of them to be a caliph after the Prophet.

In contrast, Companions venerated by the Shī'īs won their own praiseworthy place in the traditions about the moon, one of them being Ḥamza b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Muḥammad's paternal uncle. He was considered among the Shī'īs as the "lord of the martyrs."<sup>31</sup> His name occurs in a tradition recorded by al-Māwardī in which the moon is split only because Ḥamza has asked the Prophet for a sign to strengthen his belief in him. This takes place as soon as Ḥamza has embraced Islam out of rage at Abū Jahl, the leader of the Meccan opposition to Muḥammad.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, 'Alī himself, who according to the Shī'īs ought to have been Muḥammad's first successor, is said to have been present on the scene. In a version recorded in al-Majlisī's *Biḥār al-anwār*, 'Alī declares, "The moon was split while we were with the Prophet."<sup>33</sup> Another Shī'ī version plants the event in the well-known scene of the meetings at al-'Aqaba on the eve of Muḥammad's *hijra* from Mecca to Medina. This version appears in the *Tafsīr* of al-Qummī (d. 307/919) and is related on the authority of the *imām* Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (Abū 'Abdallāh, d. 148/765). He says that the people present at the meeting asked Muḥammad to split the moon to prove that God was with him. The angel Gabriel descended and told Muḥammad that God had put everything under his command. So Muḥammad ordered the moon to split apart, and when it did, Muḥammad, together with all "our *shī'a*," bowed down in gratitude. Thereupon the audience asked that the moon be united again and it was.

<sup>30</sup> Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 27:51–2.

<sup>31</sup> See Frederik Leemhuis, "Ḥamza b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib," in McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, 2:400–1.

<sup>32</sup> Māwardī, *Nukat*, 5:409.

<sup>33</sup> Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār* (Tehran; repr., Beirut: mu'assasat al-wafā', 1983), 17:350.

Then they asked that the moon be split again and it was.<sup>34</sup> In this version, the terms of the miracle are subject to the whims of the Shī'īs, which demonstrates their importance in the eyes of God.

#### MUḤAMMAD AND THE PROPHETS

Post-Qur'ānic Muslims needed a hero who could be venerated not only for the Qur'ān that had been revealed to him but also for his extraordinary personality and unusual abilities. The Qur'ān could not remain Muḥammad's only substitute for miracles performed by previous prophets (see earlier herein the tradition of Abū Hurayra), and similar miraculous signs had to be attributed to him as well. The splitting of the moon was only one of those miracles, and soon numerous others became the subject of traditions that were circulated and recorded in the various sources of *tafsīr*, *sīra*, and *ḥadīth* and later on collected in the compilations of *dalā'il al-nubuwwa* ("proofs of prophethood"). What makes the splitting of the moon unique, though, is its position as one of the very few miracles that could be read into an explicit Qur'ānic statement.

This miracle eventually served Muslim authors in their attempts to turn Muḥammad into the greatest prophet ever sent by God. For this purpose, they created an inventory of Muḥammad's miracles and undertook a systematic comparison between them and those of the previous prophets, thus proving that his miracles surpassed those of any other prophet. A whole chapter dedicated to such a comparison (*muwāzāt*) is found in al-Khargūshī's (d. 406/1015) *Sharaf al-Muṣṭafā*. Concerning the splitting of the moon, he writes: "They say: 'God gave Moses [the miracle] of the splitting of the sea, and the sea belongs to the kingdom of the earth and the regions of this world.' We say [to them]: '[God] provided Muḥammad with the splitting of the moon, and the moon belongs to the lights of the celestial sphere [*anwār al-falak*], and this is more convincing in the field of miracles [*ablagh fī bāb al-i'jāz*].'"<sup>35</sup>

Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), too, compares the miracles of Muḥammad with those of the other prophets, and in a chapter dedicated to the miracles of Moses, he refers to the hand of Moses that he inserted into his

<sup>34</sup> 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, *al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: mu'assasat al-a'lā li-l-maṭbū'āt, 1991), 2:318–19.

<sup>35</sup> Abū Sa'd 'Abd al-Malik b. Abī 'Uthmān al-Khargūshī, *Sharaf al-muṣṭafā*, ed. Nabil al-Ghamri [Mecca: dār al-bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 2003], 4:300.

bosom and it came out "white without evil," a miracle that was designated as one of the arguments from God to Pharaoh (Q 28:32). Ibn Kathīr states that this is not as great as the splitting of the moon that God gave to Muḥammad. The moon was split when the Prophet pointed his hand at it, and it was divided in two pieces, one appearing beyond Mount Ḥirā' and the other in front of it. Ibn Kathīr adds that there is no doubt that this miracle is greater and more illustrious and magnificent and clear than any other miracle, and its impact is also broader and more apparent and greater.<sup>36</sup> In Ibn Kathīr's statement, Muḥammad's hand has become a magic instrument that surpasses the white hand of Moses. Not just his hand but his forefinger in particular feature in one of the traditions as causing the moon to split.<sup>37</sup>

These attempts at demonstrating Muḥammad's superiority to Moses indicate that the latter, though a Muslim prophet according to the Qur'ān, retained a Jewish identity in the mind of the believers, which made it necessary to assert his inferiority to Muḥammad and thus bring out the superiority of the Islamic *umma* over the non-Muslim monotheistic communities.

#### CONCLUSION: THE NEW MUḤAMMAD

The foregoing discussion has detected a progression from signs to miracles, from eschatology to history, from the figurative description to the literal one. These levels add up to the transformation of Muḥammad from a human messenger to a supernatural hero. This process was the result of the popular need of the post-Qur'ānic society for a hero with whom one could identify even after the death of the historical Muḥammad. Muḥammad could become the needed hero thanks to the historical victories that he had won together with his Companions. The military achievements in Medina after the *hijra* and the successful spread of Islam outside of Arabia enabled the Prophet to go on living in the minds of the devoted believers as a new Muḥammad, a person blessed with powers that he still lacked in the Qur'ān and that bridged the gap between him and the previous prophets. This new Muḥammad was eventually read into the pre-*hijra* history of the Prophet, as seen in the exegesis of the moon passage. There he no longer has to apologize for being just a plain warner; with the miracles that God enables him to

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 6:277.

<sup>37</sup> Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī*, 27:75.

perform, he can meet any challenge and even make the moon split on demand.

This new Muḥammad became the one on whom the Muslim scholars achieved consensus, and as put already by Goldziher:

It is one of the most curious phenomena in the development of Islam to observe the ease with which orthodox theology also adapts itself to the needs of popular belief, though this entails open contradiction to the unambiguous teaching of the Koran. The power of *ijmā'* here scored one of its biggest triumphs in the whole system of Islam, insofar as the belief of the people succeeded in penetrating into the canonical conception of the Prophet, and, so to speak, forcing it to make him into a fortuneteller, worker of miracles, and magician.<sup>38</sup>

In their yearning for a new Muḥammad, the Muslim exegetes, Sunnīs and Shī'īs alike, were determined to maintain the historicity of the splitting of the moon and preserve its literal sense. They disapproved of any attempt at a rationalistic interpretation of the Qur'ānic moon passage and deplored whoever tried to suggest as much. For example, al-Māwardī states that the opinion of the majority of the public (*al-jumhūr*) that accords with the manifest meaning of the Qur'ān (*zāhir al-tanzīl*) is that the moon was split in Muḥammad's time.<sup>39</sup> The Shī'ī exegete Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) states that whoever denied the historicity of the splitting of the moon and interpreted the moon passage as referring to the eschatological future – as did al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, and as maintained by the scientist Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 322/934) – has abandoned the *zāhir* of the Qur'ān (i.e., its manifest meaning), because *inshaqqa* clearly stands for the past. Al-Ṭūsī also asserts that the Muslims are unanimous that the moon was split apart, and no notice should be taken of whoever denied it.<sup>40</sup> The Ṣūfī-oriented exegete Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) states, too, that the Muslims are unanimous that the moon was split.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies (Muhammedanische Studien)*, ed. and trans. S. M. Stern and C. R. Barber (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967–1971), 2:261.

<sup>39</sup> Māwardī, *Nukat*, 5:409.

<sup>40</sup> Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tabayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad al-Āmīlī (Beirut: dār ihyā' al-turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 9:443.

<sup>41</sup> Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm Basyūnī (Cairo: al-hay'at l-Miṣriyya l-'āmma li-l-ta'lif wa-l-nashr, 1971), 6:61.

Under the impact of this consensus, the previously mentioned tradition of 'Ikrima, which implies that the verb *inshaqqa* is a figurative representation of a lunar eclipse, is also rejected. The Muslim scholars are convinced that *inshaqqa* denotes literal splitting, and therefore Ibn Kathīr defines 'Ikrima's tradition as a "peculiar exposition" (*siyāq gharīb*). He maintains that an actual splitting did occur, which at best may have coincided with an eclipse of the moon.<sup>42</sup> He also reports that the split moon was observed in India and that a memorial monument was erected there, bearing the date of the event.<sup>43</sup> As late as the nineteenth century, al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1853) declares that "the philosophers" have denied the splitting from the very outset but that their arguments are "weaker than the house of a spider."<sup>44</sup>

Today "scientific" proofs of the splitting based on telescopic photos of the moon's surface are provided at various Islamic Web sites, and the controversy over the validity of these "proofs" still goes on.<sup>45</sup> This testifies to the unceasing urge of generations of pious Muslims to sustain Muḥammad's superiority over the rest of the prophets.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya*, 6:76.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:120; 6:77.

<sup>44</sup> Abū l-Faḍl Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī* (repr., Beirut: dār ihyā' al-turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 27:76.

<sup>45</sup> A Google search under "<انشقاق القمر>" yields the relevant results. See, e.g., [http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%82\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%85%D8%B1](http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B4%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%82_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%85%D8%B1).

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### 3 Glimpses of Muḥammad's Medinan decade

MICHAEL LECKER

Over the centuries, Muslims have compiled a large number of biographies about the Prophet Muḥammad, including both mainstream biographies and less well-known or almost-forgotten ones. However, no meaningful study of Muḥammad's life can be carried out on the basis of biographies alone, because valuable evidence is often found in other sources such as Qur'ān exegesis and collections of poetry.

From the very beginning, the story of Muḥammad's life has been a battlefield of competing claims. The huge literary output about him is made up of thousands of conflicting accounts originating with the Companions of Muḥammad and their offspring, who were eager to secure for themselves and their fathers a place in history. We do not know why a certain account was accepted in the mainstream literature while other accounts were pushed aside. Conflicts and contradictions also abound because early Islamic society was divided along tribal, political, ideological, and regional lines, and hence cannot be expected to have adopted a unified version regarding Muḥammad's life. Members of northern and southern tribes (according to Arabian genealogical theory), Umayyads, 'Abbāsids, Shī'īs, Khārijīs, Syrians, Medinans, and Iraqis had their own versions regarding events in Muḥammad's life, not to mention legal and exegetical prejudices that were also at work. For example, it is unrealistic to expect Muḥammad's tribe (the Quraysh of Mecca that rejected him) and the *anṣār* (the "helpers" of Medina who sheltered him) to preserve the same versions of Muḥammad's *hijra*. Unsurprisingly, the accounts of the *hijra* found in the biographies can be traced predominantly to these *anṣār*.

Historians usually consider conflicts and contradictions as an obstacle, but they are also a blessing. Conflicts shed light on the social and political context in which the biographies were created by pointing out disputed matters and identifying the parties involved.