

## Church History (14): The Rise of Islam

The term *Islam* is an Arabic word that means surrender or submission. It was eventually used to describe the religion started by Mohammad in the early part of the seventh century. "It is called *Mohammedanism* from its founder, or *Islam* from its chief virtue, which is absolute surrender to the one true God" (Schaff).<sup>1</sup> "In the seventh century there suddenly appeared in the East a new religion. Inspired by the genius and passionate fanaticism of Mohammed, a band of warring Arabian tribes became a nation bent on conquering the world to the belief in one god and to the acknowledgement of his prophet" (Fisher).<sup>2</sup>

While Christianity was spreading to China and India, major developments in the Middle East were overturning the established political and religious order. The rise of Islam was one of the most remarkable and unexpected events in history, one with profound implications for Christianity. It was the last thing anyone might have expected from the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>3</sup>

### I. The Rise of Islam

1. *The beginning of Islam.* "Mohammad was born in Mecca (Saudi Arabia), probably in the year 570, and passed his early life in obscurity. At the age of twenty-eight, by his marriage with a wealthy widow, he was relieved to some extent from worldly cares and obtained leisure for contemplation" (Fisher).<sup>4</sup> "At the age of twenty-five he suddenly moved from being a keeper of camels to overseeing the business affairs of a wealthy widow. She was impressed by his character, and though fifteen years his senior, soon proposed marriage to him" (Shelley).<sup>5</sup> "Arabia had at the time when Mohammed appeared, all the elements for a wild, warlike religion like the one which he established. It was inhabited by heathen star-worshippers, Jews, and Christians" (Schaff).<sup>6</sup> The heathen were largely descendants of Ishmael. The Jews had fled to Arabia after the destruction of Jerusalem. The Christians belonged mostly to the various heretical groups which were expelled from the Roman empire during the violent doctrinal controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. "These three races and religions, though deadly hostile to each other, alike revered Abraham, the father of the faithful, as their common ancestor. This fact might suggest to a great mind the idea to unite them by a national religion monotheistic in principle and diverse in its character. This seems to have been the original project of the founder of Islam" (Schaff).<sup>7</sup> Thus, Islam wasn't so much a new religion, but a "compound or mosaic of preexisting elements, a rude attempt to combine heathenism, Judaism and Christianity, which Mohammed found in Arabia" (Schaff).<sup>8</sup>

Muhammad's commercial journeys from Mecca through Arabia to Syria brought him into contact with Jews and Christians, with whom he discussed religion. Although the prevailing form of Arabian religion was tribal Paganism there was an economically powerful Jewish ministry, and quite a large scattering of Christian sects. There were living in Arabia various native groups who, under Jewish and Christian influence, had become dissatisfied with the Pagan idolatry of their homeland; they began to worship

---

<sup>1</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:150

<sup>2</sup> George Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, 152

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Hill, *History of Christianity*, 118

<sup>4</sup> George Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, 152

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 195

<sup>6</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:150

<sup>7</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:150

<sup>8</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:150

the Creator-God alone, but without embracing either Judaism or Christianity. Muhammad became one of these worshippers of the one God.<sup>9</sup>

(1) His wives. "As Mohammed's political power increased, so did the number of his wives. Though the Koran would limit legal wives to four (4:3), it was not long before a new revelation allowed him, as the Prophet, to exceed this number" (White).<sup>10</sup> "At his death he left nine widows. He claimed special revelations which gave him greater liberty of sexual indulgence than ordinary Moslems (who were restricted to four wives), and exempted him from the prohibition of marrying near relatives" (Schaff).<sup>11</sup> Ayesha (Aisha), one of his youngest wives (only 9 when he wed her), said of her older husband (he was 53): "The prophet loved three things, women, perfumes and food; he had his heart's desire of the two first, but not of the last" (Schaff).<sup>12</sup>

The motives of his excess in polygamy were his sensuality which grew with his years, and his desire for male offspring. His followers excused or justified him by the examples of Abraham, David and Solomon, and by the difficulties of his prophetic office, which were so great that God gave him a compensation in sexual enjoyment, and endowed him with greater capacity than thirty ordinary men.<sup>13</sup>

(2) His revelations. "At the age of forty Muhammad began to retire into a cave for extensive periods of contemplation and meditation. After one of these occasions, he told his wife that he had been visited by an angel who ordered him 'to recite,' and from that command came the Koran, which literally means *to recite*" (Shelley).<sup>14</sup> "Tradition says Muhammad did not control the speed or frequency of receiving the revelations from Allah that would comprise the document we know today as the Quran. The classical belief is that while its entirety was 'sent down' in one night—the Night of Power—Muhammad himself received it piecemeal over 22 years (610-632). In any case, the revelations began to outline the primary elements of the message Muhammad believed he was being called to deliver" (White).<sup>15</sup>

(3) His exodus to Medina. Medina was a city 210 miles north of Mecca. In 622, Mohammed and his followers were driven out of Mecca for fear of his life. The Islamic calendar begins with this event (called the *Hijra*). Upon arriving in Medina, he united the city under Allah, and returned to Mecca in 630 with 10,000 troops and took the city. "In 630, Muhammad led a huge force into Mecca, cleansing it of all idols and establishing himself as Central Arabia's undisputed leader. All non-Muslims ultimately were driven out of Mecca and Medina, as it is to this day" (White).<sup>16</sup>

(4) His death and legacy. Muslims disagree on the cause of his death. Some say he was poisoned by a woman whose family had been killed by the Muslims. Others attribute his death to a stroke or fever. "In any case, after a few days of sickness, Mohammad died on Monday, June 8, 632. Tradition says he was sixty-three" (White).<sup>17</sup> "By the time Muhammad died in 632, the whole of the Arabian Peninsula had been united under Islam. Muhammad himself would be honored as 'the Prophet,' the last and greatest in a long line of messengers that the Muslims believed had been sent by God throughout his-

---

<sup>9</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:18

<sup>10</sup> James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Quran*, 36

<sup>11</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:170

<sup>12</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:169

<sup>13</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:169

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 195

<sup>15</sup> James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Quran*, 24-25

<sup>16</sup> James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Quran*, 46

<sup>17</sup> James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Quran*, 46

tory" (Hill).<sup>18</sup> After Mohammad's death, a division resulted over his successor. Most wanted the community of Muslims to determine his successor (Sunnis), while a smaller group thought someone from his family should be appointed (Shiites). Thus, the split between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims began (and continues to this day).

2. *The spread of Islam*. "Once Muhammad had unified the Arabs, they proceeded to sweep out of Arabia in an astonishing series of conquests" (Hill).<sup>19</sup> "After the death of Muhammad, the movement of Islam spread with dramatic speed outside Arabia" (Dowley).<sup>20</sup> After Mohammad died, his followers conquered Syria (636), Egypt (641), the Persian Empire (650), North Africa (661), and Spain (711). "From Spain they crossed the mountains (Pyrenees) and threatened the very heart of western Europe. In 732, they were finally defeated by Charles Martel at the battle of Tours, which marked the end of the first wave of Moslem expansion" (Gonzalez).<sup>21</sup> "By the eighth century, one half of all Christians lived under Islamic rule" (Shelley).<sup>22</sup> "Thousands of Christian churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria, were ruthlessly destroyed, or converted into mosques. Twenty-one years after the death of Mohammad the Crescent ruled over a realm as large as the Roman Empire" (Schaff).<sup>23</sup>

Both the example of Mohammad and passages from the Koran provided warrant for Islam's earliest leaders to spread Islam by force and military conquest. Mohammad himself said: "The Sword is the key of heaven and hell; a drop of blood shed in the cause of Allah, a night spent in arms, is of more avail than two months of fasting or prayer: whoever falls in battle, his sins are forgiven, and at the day of judgment his limbs shall be supplied by the wings of angels and cherubim."<sup>24</sup> The *Encyclopedia of Islam*, says: "The spread of Islam by arms is a religious duty upon Muslims in general. Jihad must continue to be done until the whole world is under the rule of Islam. Islam must completely be made over before the doctrine of jihad can be eliminated." The Koran itself exhorts: "O Prophet! Wage jihad against the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and be stern with them. Hell will be their home, a hapless (unfortunate) journey's end" (66:9).

Having entered a new territory, the Muslim army gave the inhabitants three choices: (1) Submit or convert to Islam. As the word Islam means submission to Allah, this is what the Koran demands. To reject every deity except Allah of Islam and Muhammad his prophet. (2) Live as second-class citizens. This option was only given to Jews and Christians (called *people of the book* in the Koran). All else (heathen and idolaters) were enslaved. "Idolaters had to choose between Islam, slavery, and death; Jews and Christians were allowed to purchase a limited toleration by the payment of tribute, but were otherwise kept in degrading bondage" (Schaff).<sup>25</sup> (3) Fight to the death. The Koran says: "And kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out. And disbelief is worse than killing...but if they give up, then lo! Allah is forgiving and merciful. And fight them until there is no more disbelief and worshipping of others along with Allah, and worship is for Allah alone" (2:192-193).

War against unbelievers is legalized by the Koran. The fighting men are to be slain, the women and children reduced to slavery. Jews and Christians are dealt with more

---

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Hill, *History of Christianity*, 118

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Hill, *History of Christianity*, 118

<sup>20</sup> Tim Dowley, *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, 234

<sup>21</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:249

<sup>22</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 195

<sup>23</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:172

<sup>24</sup> As quoted by Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:171

<sup>25</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:171

leniently than idolaters; but they too must be thoroughly humbled and forced to pay tribute.<sup>26</sup>

3. *The major teaching of Islam.* "The Koran is the sacred book of the Muslims. It is their creed, their code of laws, their liturgy. It claims to be the product of divine inspiration by the archangel Gabriel, who performed the function assigned to the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures" (Schaff).<sup>27</sup> "The Koran consists of 114 messages (or *suras*) dictated to Muhammad (as he claimed) by the angel Gabriel. After Muhammad's death, Islam's third caliph (Othman, (644-656), collected these *suras* into a single authoritative edition" (Needham).<sup>28</sup>

(1) God. Muslims despise and reject the Trinity. "O People of the Book! Commit no excess in your religion, nor say anything but the truth about Allah. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a Messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not 'Three.' Cease it! It will be better for you for Allah is one Allah: Glory be to him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth" (4:171). It becomes evident, that neither the Koran nor early Muslim commentators, had a clear understanding of the Biblical concept of Trinity. In fact, from this passage of the Koran, it appears they falsely identify the Trinity as Allah, Mary, and Jesus. "If the Koran's argument is that the 'Three' in view are Allah, Mary, and Jesus, it is easy to see how such a triad would violate any meaningful concept of monotheism! But if that is the Koran's view, we must conclude that its author was exceedingly confused as to true Christian belief" (White).<sup>29</sup>

(2) Christ. According to the Koran, Jesus was a mere man, born of the virgin, a prophet of God, and miraculously taken to heaven. He was not divine nor crucified for our sin. "Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and his Word, which he bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from him: so believe in Allah and his messengers" (4:17). He was taken to heaven prior to His crucifixion. "When it comes to the cross, the Koran stands firmly and inalterably against the mass of historical evidence and the almost universal view of the populace of its day" (White).<sup>30</sup> "That they said (in boast), 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah'; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not" (4:157).

(3) Salvation. Salvation is by obedience to the teachings of Mohammad (the 5 pillars of Islam). The Koran repeatedly speaks of a Day of Judgment. "It is a day to dread. The scales will be brought forth to weigh the good and the bad, and each person will be treated with absolute justice" (White).<sup>31</sup> "And We set up a just balance for the Day of Resurrection. Thus, no soul will be treated unjustly. Even though it be the weight of a mustard seed, We shall bring it forth to be weighed; and our reckoning will suffice" (21:47). The Koran often refers to forgiveness and mercy. Those with more good deeds than bad, can expect forgiveness. Forgiveness is not given on the basis of atonement, but by the pure power of Allah. According to the Koran, those who wage jihad for Allah receive the greatest reward. "Let those fight in the way of Allah who sell the life of this world for the other. Whoso fights in the way of Allah, be he slain or be he victorious, on him We shall bestow a vast reward" (7:74).

---

<sup>26</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:190

<sup>27</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:174-175

<sup>28</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:21

<sup>29</sup> James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Quran*, 82

<sup>30</sup> James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Quran*, 137

<sup>31</sup> James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Quran*, 145

(4) Heaven. Islamic Paradise is described in terms of sensual delights. There are lofty mansions (39:20; 29:58-59), delicious food and drink (38:51; 52:19, 22), and virgin companions (37:48-49; 38:52-54; 44:51-56; 52:20-21, 24-25; 56:17-19). "The sensual element pollutes even the Islamic picture of heaven from which chastity is excluded. The believers are promised the joys of a luxuriant paradise amid blooming gardens, fresh fountains, and beautiful virgins. Seventy-two black-eyed girls of blooming youth will be created for the enjoyment of the humblest believer" (Schaff).<sup>32</sup>

(5) Women. Islam teaches that women are mentally inferior to men, husbands can beat their disobedient wives, and women will enter hell. The Koran says: "Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property. The good women are obedient, guarding what Allah would have them guard. As for those from whom you fear disloyalty, admonish them, and abandon them in their beds, then strike them. But if they obey you, seek no way against them. God is Sublime, Great" (4:34). The Hadith is a collection of sayings (attributed to Mohammad), and commentaries on the Koran. It says: "Muhammad said, O women! Give to charity, for I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-Fire were women. The women asked, O Allah's Apostle! What is the reason for it? He said: O women! You curse frequently, and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. O women, some of you can lead a cautious man astray."

4. *The Church's response to Islam.* "Islam's religious policy of forbidding Muslim conversion to Christianity made missionary work virtually impossible. Christian nations had only two practical ways of combatting the spread of Islam: they could fight it by the sword and by the pen" (Needham).<sup>33</sup> "The argument of Islam against other religions was the sword. Christian Europe replied with the sword in the crusades, but failed. Greek and Latin divines refuted the false prophet with superior learning, but without any perceptible effect. Christian polemics against Mohammad and the Koran began in the eighth century, and continued with interruptions to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Schaff).<sup>34</sup>

(1) In Medieval times. "The Church in the Middle Ages produced a stream of Christian literature aimed at exposing the falsehood of Muhammad's religion and defending the truths of Christianity against Muslim attack. They concentrated their criticisms of Islam on two major points: (i) the claims of Muhammad; (ii) the doctrine of God" (Needham).<sup>35</sup> "The medieval writers, both Greek and Latin, represent Mohammad as an impostor and arch-heretic, who wove his false religion chiefly from Jewish fables and Christian heresies" (Schaff).<sup>36</sup> "The Christian apologists rejected Muslim attempts to find the coming of Mohammad prophesied in the NT as a distortion of genuine NT teaching (Muslims argued that Christ's predictions of the coming of 'another Counselor' in John 14-16 referred to Mohammad rather than to the Holy Spirit). They also defended the reliability of the NT text against Muslim claims that Christians had corrupted it" (Needham).<sup>37</sup>

"The most outstanding Christian figure who lived and worked under Islamic rule was John of Damascus (675-749), often called the last of the Greek church fathers" (Needham).<sup>38</sup> "John of Damascus headed the line of champions of the cross against the crescent" (Schaff).<sup>39</sup> He wrote a volume enti-

---

<sup>32</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:189

<sup>33</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:30

<sup>34</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:195

<sup>35</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:35

<sup>36</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:196

<sup>37</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:35-36

<sup>38</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:31

<sup>39</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:195

tled, *The Fountain of Knowledge*. It has three parts: *On Philosophy*, *On Heresy*, and *On Orthodox Theology*. Towards the end of part 2 (*On Heresy*), he includes a chapter on the Heresy of the Ishmaelites. He describes the origin of the heresy as well as its major beliefs. "There is also the superstition of the *Ishmaelites* which to this day prevails and keeps people in error, being a forerunner of the Antichrist."<sup>40</sup>

From that time to the present a false prophet named Mohammad has appeared in their midst. This man, after having changed upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk, devised his own heresy. Then, having insinuated himself into the good graces of the people by a show of seeming piety, he gave out that a certain book had been sent down to him from heaven. He had set down some ridiculous compositions in this book of his and he gave it to them as an object of veneration. He says that there is one God, creator of all things. He says that the Christ is the Word of God and His Spirit, but a creature and a servant, and that He was begotten, without seed, of Mary the sister of Moses and Aaron. For, he says, the Word and God and the Spirit entered into Mary and she brought forth Jesus, who was a prophet and servant of God. And he says that the Jews wanted to crucify Him in violation of the law, and that they seized His shadow and crucified this. But the Christ Himself was not crucified, he says, nor did He die, for God out of His love for Him took Him to Himself into heaven.<sup>41</sup>

(2) In Reformation times. "The Reformers and older Protestant divines took the same view as the medieval writers, and condemn the Koran and its author without qualification" (Schaff).<sup>42</sup> By 1453, the Turks (Muslims), had captured Constantinople. They then started overrunning Southeastern Europe during the lifetimes of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564). In 1540, Martin Luther said of the Koran: What a shameful, lying, abominable book the Koran is." He called Mohammad "a devil and the first-born child of Satan."<sup>43</sup> "Luther then goes into the question, whether the Pope or Mohammad be worse, and comes to the conclusion, that after all the Pope is worse, and the real Anti-Christ" (Schaff).<sup>44</sup>

John Calvin described the enemies of God as "Turks, Jews, Papists, and Pagans." He said in a sermon on Deuteronomy 13:12-13, "The Christian Faith is challenged by the wicked, which pretend not to come unto the Triune God – as by the Turks, Pagans, and Jews. They blaspheme with open mouth. They be utterly cut off from the Church – like rotten members. Their resisting of the Gospel – and their striving to abolish the Christians' religion – is no great wonder to us. For the Turks and Jews are not more fiery and venomous at this day against God – to deface the whole doctrine of salvation – than are the Papists." He later said in a sermon on Deuteronomy 18:15: "As Mohammad says that his Koran is the sovereign wisdom, so says the Pope of his own decrees. For they be the two horns of Antichrist."

Calvin wrote in his commentary on John 16:14:

From this source the blasphemies of Popery and Mahometism have flowed; for, though those two Antichrists differ from each other in many respects, still they agree in holding a common principle; and that is, that in the Gospel we receive the earliest instructions to lead us into the right faith, but that we must seek elsewhere the perfec-

---

<sup>40</sup> John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 101

<sup>41</sup> John of Damascus, *On Heresies*, 101

<sup>42</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:197

<sup>43</sup> As quoted by Philip Schaff, 4:197

<sup>44</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:197

tion of doctrine, that it may complete the course of our education. If Scripture is quoted against the Pope, he maintains that we ought not to confine ourselves to it, because the Spirit is come, and has carried us above Scripture by many additions. Mohammed asserts that, without his Koran, men always remain children. Thus, by a false pretense of the Spirit, the world was bewitched to depart from the simple purity of Christ.