

Roots of Islam 1 . . .

I'VE BEEN READING – OR RATHER LISTENING TO—a book. It's called *In the Shadow of the Sword* by the populist historian Tom Holland. And it deals with the geopolitical background of the Koran and the birth of Islam in 7th century Arabia. It attempts some answers to questions like,

- Where did Muhammad get his ideas from?
- All those bits of the Koran that essentially recapitulate bits of the bible – how did they get in there? and,
- How and why did Islam spread so far and so fast in those early years?

It's fascinating reading (listening). It's shown up in me a huge well of ignorance about the world's second most prevalent religion, one that I'm now trying to fill. That's why I'm right now listening through for the third time, making detailed notes as I go, as well as reading through the Koran and studying other early Islam documents.

Islam is an important issue in the world right now—religiously, politically, whatever. That's not going to cease in our lifetimes—if anything the opposite, it's more likely to grow. So, we need to understand it. We need to be able to debate with Moslems from a position of knowledge. I've been learning a lot, and I want to share what I've been finding out.

There's a popular myth that's been propagated about early Islam. This myth has now become so widespread as to be almost universally and uncritically accepted even among people (like myself) who should know better. It goes like this:

'Islam is a faith that is based on firm bedrock of established historical fact. We know a vast amount about Muhammad, his life, the cultural background and ambience in which he lived, the circumstances in which his community developed, and the way in which that community expanded out into the surrounding countries. More so in fact than for Christianity, where our historical sources are really a bit limited and we need quite a bit of footwork—or even faith—just to establish the historical realities.'

Ever heard that one? It's quite widespread, and I've fallen for it at times. Sometimes I've found myself a bit on the defensive on this, almost apologizing for it. Saying things like . . .

'Well of course, Muhammad did live 600 years after Christ. The farther back in history you go, the less documentation you are going to find on any historical event. That's obvious. All this really tells us is that Jesus lived earlier and Mohammed lived later. Hardly a revolutionary insight!'

Reasonable as far as it goes. But it's presupposing a basic assumption—that the documentation of Mohamed's life and the history of early Islam really *are* well documented, and that is just what I'd never (until now) taken the trouble to verify. Now that I'm doing so, I'm finding some real surprises . . .

There are various aspects of Islam that I want to touch on in a series of posts. I'm going to start with that fundamental question—***Just how much do we really know, historically, about Muhammad and early Islam?*** We need to look at the source documents on which the history is based. Then we need to look at the political and cultural biases that may have influenced the recording of that history. We look at the origins of the Koranic material. Finally we will look briefly at another question. What is the underlying moral stance of Islam in its original form? What does it really *say* about right and wrong? Bear with me—it's important!

Before we start on that, Why this on a website dedicated to unmasking the 'Pharisee Church'?

Well . . . here's a quote from a rather obscure lecture given by CS Lewis in 1945:

Islam is only the greatest of the Christian heresies, (as) Buddhism only the greatest of the Hindu heresies. (from 'God in the Dock', a collection of obscure CS Lewis writings)

I'm not sure who would be brave enough to stand up in public and say that now! But that really is really the bottom line of this whole study (certainly for Islam—I know little of Buddhism). Islam is a Christian (or more precisely Jewish-Christian) heresy. That is inescapable. And like most heresies it reverts heavily to Pharisee principles—denial of the atoning work of Christ, substitution of works for free grace as the ground for our salvation—for its central dogma. So that's my justification, if any were needed, for discussing it here.

Now let's start with some basic history. . .

The Islamic calendar starts in our year 622 AD. This is Islamic year 0 AH (*anno hegirae*), based on the traditionally accepted date of the *hijra*, when Muhammad left Mecca and travelled north to Medina. In this he switched from being a maverick and persecuted lone preacher to being the leader of a close-knit and sharply defined community. Later he was able to return victoriously to Mecca, and a little while later (632 AD) he died.

What biographical sources do we have for Muhammad's life?

The earliest biographical account still in existence was written by a man called Ibn Hisham. He died in 833 AD—almost exactly 200 years after the death of Mohamed. Ibn Hisham's biography is based extensively on a previous biography, which is now lost in its original form, written by one Ibn Ishaq. Ibn Ishaq lived and wrote in Baghdad, and died in around 760 to 770 AD. Ibn Hisham quotes extensively from Ibn Ishaq, long chunks of text, and some people think that it's possible to more or less reconstruct Ibn Ishaq's biography from these quotes. The truth of this is difficult to judge, technical, and certainly way beyond me. In any case it doesn't really matter too much. Either way, the point is that we've got a very long time gap between the death of Muhammad and the earliest account of his life that raises (or should raise!) some disturbing questions

So what do we have to fill this time gap?

The short answer is, virtually nothing. Prior to these accounts there are practically no written records of any kind to tell us anything about Muhammad as a person, or about events and happenings in his life and the development of the community. Even when Islamic armies were invading the surrounding countries and laying the foundations of a massive empire, nothing was being written. The outsiders—Christian monks, and so forth—have left a few records; but from within Islam itself, there's virtually nothing for well over a hundred years. This is truly extraordinary. I suppose we have to say that it just wasn't a writing culture! Whatever the reason, the fact remains—the years of Islam are shrouded in huge darkness as far as contemporary records go.

There's the Koran of course—and the evidence for this being a genuine document dating from Mohamed's lifetime and little changed from then is actually very good. But the Koran tells almost nothing of historical fact about Islam or about Muhammad—it's all religious dogma and nothing else. There's one other interesting document that can be reconstructed fairly reliably. It's called the Constitution of Medina, and dates back to the early *ummah*, the Medina community that Muhammad founded and developed. It lays down rules for that community, particularly in their dealings with outsiders but again gives no historical detail. And that's it. Everything historical was written well over a hundred years later, by which time Islam had changed vastly from how it had started out, as we'll be seeing.

In that case, where did Ibn Ishaq and the others get their information from to write their story?
What were their sources?

The answer is, they relied almost entirely on what are called the *hadiths*. These are little snippets of information relating to the life of Muhammad, of which there are many thousand known, and are said to represent the verbal tradition handed down in initially unwritten form from the earliest days.

The problem with these is that most of them are clearly not historical at all. They may tell us no more about Muhammad than the 3rd century 'gnostic gospels' tell us about the life of Christ—that is, nothing. Some may indeed be reliable, but who knows? The best known collector of the *hadiths* was Mohammad Al Bukhari. He is said to have collected about 300,000 hadiths, from which he filtered out all but a core of about 4,000 which he felt could reasonably claim to be historical. But Al Bukhari also lived 200 years after Muhammad, so he could only surmise as to what was real and what was not. Really it's difficult to be sure whether any at all of these *hadiths* are truly historical.

So we've got a huge dearth of real information about the life of Muhammad. There's very little we can say about him at all with any real degree of certainty, simply because of the time gap. All we have is the late biographies. And when we consider those, we need to consider also the political and social environment at the time of their writing. This was very changed from when Muhammad was alive, and could scarcely not have influenced the way they were written. That is what we look at next.