

Roots of Islam 2 . . .

If the accounts of Muhammad's life date from so long after his death, it becomes crucial to understand the changing political and cultural environment of that later time, to see how it may have influenced the way in which the history was portrayed. For this we need some basic history . . .

A VERY BRIEF, POTTED HISTORY of the political development of early Islam.

To keep it very simple, just remember that there are **three main periods** in early Islamic history.

These are:

- The four early Caliphs, sometimes called the **Rashidun Caliphate** (*rashidun* means righteous. This is the 'golden age' for true believers)
- The Umayyad Dynasty
- The Abbasid Dynasty

THE FOUR EARLY CALIPHS.

These four were all close personal associates of Muhammad, not least through their family connection. That gives them special authority. (A bit like Jesus' Disciples, I suppose).

To be an instant expert on this, all you have to remember is:

- Father-in law
- Brother-in-law
- Son-in-law
- Son-in-law

And there you have them. None actually "reigned" for very long—three died violent deaths. This whole period only lasted for 29 years, from 632 to 661 (Islamic calendar 0 to 29 AH)

The father-in-law was **Abu Bakr**, the father of Muhammad's favourite wife Aisha. He died of illness after only two years (632 – 634).

Umar, the brother-in-law (634 – 644) corresponds better to the stereotypical Moslem warrior, both a fanatical Moslem and a ruthless and aggressive warlord. He presided over extensive military conquests in his ten-year rule, eventually being assassinated in Medina by a Persian slave, upset over the recent Moslem conquest of Persia.

Uthman, the first son-in-law, (644 – 656) was also killed in Medina, hacked to death by another group of disgruntled colonials, this time from Egypt. Uthman is important for a number of reasons. He wasn't, it seems, actually a particularly religious man as such, seeing in Islam perhaps a useful tool to promote his own ambitions, and those of his family. This is when Islam starts to get seriously political! Among other things, he placed his own family members into all kinds of position of power in the empire, the most significant being the appointment of his cousin Muawiyah as governor of Syria (see below).

Ali (656 – 661) was actually both the nephew as well as the son-in-law to Muhammad. He moved the administrative centre of Islam from Medina to Kufa in present-day Iraq. His unsuccessful war with Muawiyah to oust that (as he saw it) illegitimate governor ended in his own death, and marks the start of the Sunni-Shia split that continues to this day. Shias, broadly speaking, are the followers of Ali, while Sunnis accept the claim to authority of Muawiyah and the Umayyads and Abbasids who came after.

After this Muawiyah went from strength to strength. For him Islam was very much a political tool, which he used in a somewhat cynical manner as he went on to take over the entire Islamic empire

and appoint himself Caliph (658 – 680). He had no problem in, for example, praying at Golgotha when he felt it politically expedient to do so. His 'home base' was Damascus in Syria, and this quickly became the administrative capital of Islam.

From here on, leadership of the Islamic empire became essentially a hereditary monarchy, and Muawiyah's descendants continued to rule until 750 when the last Umayyad ruler was defeated and killed by Abbasid rebels from Persia. The new Abbasid dynasty went on to rule almost continuously for the next 750 years. The Abbasids moved the administrative capital again, this time to the newly-build city of Baghdad—in Iraq but close to the Persian border, as befitted their Persian origins.

One consequence of this change of dynasty was that from now on the Islamic culture took on a decidedly Persian rather than Arabian flavour. The Abbasid dynasty had, culturally, far more in common with the Shahs who had ruled Persia prior to their Islamic conquest, than with the desert Arabs who had been the original founders of Islam.

The significance of all this? Various . . .

The Umayyads were quite enlightened as rulers—certainly as far as their domestic policies went, if not in their overweening ambitions to conquer the world. This was a time of considerable prosperity in the conquered lands. There was no particular pressure on Christians and Jews in the conquered lands to convert to Islam. If anything, quite the opposite—there was an extra tax to be paid by non-Moslems, and too many converts would have been a financial disaster for an empire that was heavily reliant on this tax for its revenues. People were, if anything, discouraged from converting.

The Jews in Palestine and elsewhere at this time utterly detested the Christians. The last Byzantine ruler of Palestine had recently passed a law compelling all Jews to undergo Christian baptism, seeing this as the ultimate solution to the 'Jewish problem'. Life for Jews in Palestine was not comfortable, and the ancient Jewish colonies along the Euphrates continued to thrive as they had done for centuries. Initially Palestinian Jews may have seen the Moslems as liberators, and hoped for a substantial affinity with them on spiritual matters. This hope didn't last long, but nonetheless they, along with the Palestinian Christians and other non-Moslems, were largely left in peace to follow their own way. *(Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Egypt had all been under Byzantine rule for centuries until the Moslems took them. After the Moslem conquest, the old Byzantine administration was kept more or less intact, continuing to serve the new masters as it had the old.)*

It is important to understand that by the time of the early Abbasids—and that means the time when Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham were penning the first lives of the Prophet—the Arabian influence in Islam was waning fast. The new axis was Mesopotamia, or Iraq as it soon became known. This is where Ibn Ishaq (though born in Medina) completed his work. Twin influences on the burgeoning faith at this time were Persia, just a stone's throw to the east, and Judaism, which had maintained thriving communities and theological colleges on the 'rivers of Babylon' dating back to the exile a thousand years before. A couple of examples serve to illustrate the way in which mainstream Islam adopted the ideas of these two:

We all know about execution by stoning as the Islamic punishment for adultery, still carried out today in a number of Islamic states. What is less well known is that stoning to death is NOT the prescribed Koranic punishment for this offence in the Koran. The punishment for adultery in the Koran is flogging, and certainly not the point of death, but just as a stern admonition. Stoning to death, or any other form of execution, was never part of the original Islam. So if not from Muhammad, where *did* it come from? The obvious answer has to be—**borrowed from the Old Testament via the Jews!** It's difficult to come up with any other answer. Most ancient civilization were fairly relaxed about sexual matters at that time, and

the Old Testament is really the only source where such draconian punishment is encouraged.

Another example from a different source.

I think by now most people know about the Islamic prayer schedule—five times daily, the first being at sunrise. Is this from the Koran? Actually not! The Koran prescribes prayer **three** times a day, not five! So where does the five times a day come from? Most likely from Persia. Until the recent Moslem conquest the state religion of Persia had for hundreds of years been Zoroastrianism. The Zoroastrians were very into elaborate religious rituals, one of which was . . . prayer five times a day, the first at sunrise. Nothing to do with Islam at all! Borrowed in from another unrelated religion. And what else besides?

If we are to dialogue with Moslems, we need to know these things. We need to know more than they do—and most of them know very little, in my experience. You can't go around telling people they're wrong unless you can explain to them just where they are wrong and how they came to be wrong.

Most Moslems would be outraged by the suggestion that large swathes of the Koran are lifted directly from the bible. *Impossible*, they say (as one said to me a week or two ago). But it's true, as we shall see. That's where we turn next—to the Koran.