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 Muhammad was rooting for the Romans in their wars with Sassanid Iran (Q 30:1–3). 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). Muhammad wanted to bring Rome to Arabia and, having been too successful, ended up taking Arabia to Rome.

Further reading

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 tasḥīḥ (Qurʾānic exegesis), Sira [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'ānic literature is already aware of the worldly triumph that Muhammad experienced after his ḥijra to Medina, and hence it is able to read back this post-ḥijra triumph into the Meccan period and place the splitting of the moon within the historical context of Muhammad's worldly success. But let us begin the discussion with the Qur'ānic Meccan sūras, reading them for their own sake.

THE QUR'ĀNIC WARNER

The earliest Qur'ānic passages [i.e., those revealed to Muhammad during his Meccan period] employ tactics of warning and good tidings that are designed to support the Qur'ānic monotheistic campaign. These passages warn the unbelievers of God's chastisement while promising divine reward to the believers. Accordingly, Muhammad is styled a nadhir (“warner”) and a bashîr (“announcer of good tidings”).

Muhammad's function as a warner is essential to his prophetic mission from the very outset. Already Sūra 74, fourth according to 'Ata' al-Khurāsānī's order of revelation (see note 1), opens with a request that Muhammad “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, Muhammad'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'ānic eschatological warnings are defined in Q 6:92 as the inhabitants of Umm al-Qurā (“Mother of Cities”)

1 The division of the Qur'ān 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 'Ata' al-Khurāsānī [Syrian, d. 113/731], who ascribes it to Ibn 'Abbās. The list was preserved by Muhammad b. Ayyūb b. al-Durayḥī (d. 254/869) in his Fadā'il al-Qur'ān, ed. Ghazwan Budayr [Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1987], 31-4. For later sources in which this list appears, see Neal Robinson, Discovering the Qur'ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 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 Muhammad's prophetic career. See further Gerhard Bowering, “Chronology and the Qur'ān,” in Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe [Leiden: Brill, 2003-2006], 1:316-15.

and those around it. The same applies to Q 4:27, where Muhammad is requested to warn Umm al-Qurā and those around it by means of the Arabian Qur'ān that has been revealed to him and to give warning of the Day of Gathering [yawm al-jam'î] 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, Muhammad's own tribe, who are mentioned by name in Sūra 106. This Meccan chapter [twenty-eighth in 'Ata' al-Khurāsānī's order] reveals another level of Muhammad'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'bah) [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. Muhammad tells them, “I have warned you of a scourge like the scourge of Ad and Thamūd.” The bitter end of these ancient generations is expounded in the Qur'ānic “punishment stories.”

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'ān. They are often designated as “idolaters” [mušrīkūn, lit. “those who associate”]. This refers to their polytheistic tenets and especially to their belief in God’s associates or partners [shartākā] who are considered his offspring. 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 Muhammad.

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

1 See David Marshall, “Punishment Stories,” in McAuliffe, Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān, 4:318-22.

2 The Qur'ān mentions by name three of God's alleged daughters: Allāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manākî [Q 5:28-32].

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,7 which the Qur’ān has reshaped and built into Muhammad’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-qārī’ā, Q 101:1–3], “the Enveloper” [al-ghāṣhiyya, Q 88:1], “the Imminent” [al-aṣṣifah, Q 40:18; 53:57], “the Shocking Event” [al-waqqā’ī’ā, Q 56:1], and “the Great Predominating Calamity” [al-tāmmatūt r 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 ‘Atā’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 Muhammad’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:

The Hour is at hand and the moon is split. And if they see a sign they turn aside and say: transient enchantment.8

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

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The splitting of the moon seems to allude to a partial lunar eclipse,\footnote{This has already been suggested before. For details, see Rudi Paret, Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1971), 495.} one of several that could be seen in Mecca before Muhammad's hijra to Medina (i.e., between 610 and 622 CE).\footnote{The list of all lunar eclipses is available at the NASA Eclipse Web site, at http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/ELLEX/ELLEX AS.html.} 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 ḥaqqqa, 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-ḥaqqqa], for on that day it shall be frail." The same is stated in the passages of Q 84:1 (ḥaqqqa), and in Q 25:25 (ṭhaqqqaqa), as well as in the Medinan passage of Q 55:37 (ṭhaqqqaqa). 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 ḥaqqqa 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 prelude 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" (ḍa‘a, pl. ḏa‘āt). 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.

Muhammad's message in Mecca: warnings, signs, and miracles

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 Muhammad'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.\footnote{The miracles that are attributed to Moses revolve around his rod and his "white hand" (Q 7:17–8, 21, 100), and split the sea (Q 26:63). Jesus creates a living bird out of clay, heals the blind and leprous, and raises the dead and knows the unseen (Q 3:49; 5:110).}

But Muhammad cannot produce such miraculous signs because no prophet can produce a sign without God's permission (Q 13:58, 14:11, 40:78). Moreover, Muhammad 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 6:33). 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 muṣān"] (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).

Muhammad'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 (bāṣār) (Q 17:93, 18:110, 41:6), not an angel; he is one who does not know the unseen (Q 6:50, 7:186, 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
to observe. There lies the visual proof of his monotheistic message as well as of the imminent Hour.

SIHR – "ENCHANTMENT"

But the Qur’ān 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" (sihr), which means that they impute to Muhammad 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 sihr [Q 37:14–15].

Muhammad’s Meccan foes dismiss as sihr even the verbal signs recited to them, and especially the Qur’ānic 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-QUR’ĀNIC WARNER

As we turn from the Qur’ān to the post-Qur’ānic sources, we realize that some traditions still preserve Muhammad’s Qur’ānic image, portraying him as a mortal warner whom God does not provide with any miraculous signs to help him persuade his audience. Certain canonical hadith collections contain a tradition on the authority of the Companion Abu Hurayra in which Muhammad is said to have stated that every prophet has been given a sign of the kind that could make people believe (mā mina l-anbiyā‘i nabiyyun illā u’tiya mina l-a'yāt mā mittihahu amana ‘alayhi l-basharatu), whereas all Muhammad has been given is a revelation [wahy] from God. Muhammad goes on to express his hope that on the day of resurrection the number of his believers will exceed that of any other prophet.13

This tradition is still aware of the gap separating the Qur’ānic Muhammad from the previous prophets who, unlike him, were aided by miracles. But the tradition turns the Qur’ān itself into a sign that surpasses that of any other prophet, by force of it, Muhammad will have in the hereafter the greatest number of believers.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

OF THE MOON PASSAGE

As for the post-Qur’ānic tafsīr of the moon passage, here, too, some traditions keep to the Qur’ānic image of Muhammad 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, ‘Abd al-Razzāq [d. 211/827] has recorded in his Maṣūnaf a tradition traced back to ‘Ikrima [d. 105/723], the Medinan mawla of Ibn ‘Abbās. ‘Ikrima relates that once in Muhammad’s time the moon was eclipsed (kasafa l-qamaru) and the people said, “A spell has been cast over the moon” (suḥīra l-qamaru). Thereupon the Prophet recited the first verse of the moon passage: “The Hour is at hand and the moon has been split.”14

In this version, Muhammad 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 Qur’ānic moon passage is fully preserved, and the verb inshaqqqa is still just a figurative prediction of the eschatological cataclysm.

LITERAL SPLITTING

Other post-Qur’ānic 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 Muhammad of his human limitations. They produce a new Muhammad, 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 inshaqqqa is transformed here from figurative to literal, and the event changes from a sign that Muhammad merely interprets into a miracle of the most powerful kind. This transformation is noticeable in the earliest available tafsīr compilations.

13 E.g., Bukhari, Saḥīḥ. Fadū‘ al-Qur’ān [section 66]: Bab kaysa nasala l-wahy [chapter 1].
Muqāţīl b. Sulaymān (d. 130/767) begins his commentary on the moon passage saying that the Hour is the resurrection (al-qiyāma). He then states that there are three portents of the Hour: the prophetic emergence (khurjil) of Muḥammad,14 the "smoke" (al-dūkhān; see Q 44:1015), 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 Muqāţīl immediately proceeds to tell a story that provides the occasion of revelation (sabab al-nuzūl) that places the splitting of the moon into history: Muhammad's Meccan adversaries asked him to show them a sign (āya), and thereupon the moon was split in two halves (nisfayn). The Meccans said that this was the act of sorcerers (ʿamal al-sahara). Eventually, the two halves were reunited into one (iltāʾama).16

In this account, the moon not only is split apart, which turns the verb inshaqqā from figurative to literal, but the event itself no longer happens by chance but rather on demand. Muhammad 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 ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s Tafsīr, the verb insaqqā 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.17 The Başran Companion Anās 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 Muqāţīl, several versions that are traced back to the Medinan/Kufān Companion ʿAbdallāh b. Masʿūd (d. 52/652-53) add some local color to the spectacle. This Companion embraced Islam in Mecca at a very early stage of Muhammad’s career, which makes him an eyewitness to the event. In one version, Ibn Masʿūd assures us that he saw the moon split apart, so much so that he could 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’bah, and thus the miracle adds to the sacredness of the local Meccan geography. This geographical specification also serves to

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14 This reflects traditions to the effect that Muhammad's prophetic emergence occurred when the Hour was just about to come. See, e.g., Muhammad b. Jarir al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk, ed. M. J. De Goeje et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879-1901), 1: 12-13.
15 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.
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 Muhammad'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.”

These traditions have been provided with isnāds considered sound (ṣahīḥ), which made them acceptable to authors of canonical hadith 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.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'labi [d. 427/1035] records in his Tafsīr the interpretation of 'Uthmān b. 'Āṣa' al-Khurāsānī [d. 155/751], who says on the authority of his father that inshaqqa means sa-yanshaqqa (“will be split”). Al-Māwardi [d. 450/1058] adds some more details, saying that the moon will be split by the second blast of the trumpet (al-naḍḥka al-thānīya), 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).

These interpretations reflect efforts to get around what could be considered the irrationality of the literal splitting in its supposed historical setting. 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 Muhammad’s time.”

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 Muhammad’s lifetime (khamsun qad madayna). One of the other four on the list is the event of the smoke (Q 44:10), which, as seen previously, was defined by Muqātīl 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 Muhammad. The famine, which causes a smokelike haze that dims the eyes, begins miraculously, as soon as Muhammad 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. 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.

19 For additional versions on the authority of Ibn Mas‘ūd and others, with a splitting just as literal, see Muhammad b. Jarir al-Ṭabarī, Jam‘ al-bayān fi tafsīr al-Qur‘ān [Cairo: Būlāq, 1323/1905; reprinted in Beirut, n.d., 1972], 27:50-1; citation is from the Būlāq edition. The localities above which the two parts of the moon are seen include Mina, another prominent station of the pilgrimage to Mecca.


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) Ṭafsīr. He is reported to have said about the moon passage: “This has already come to pass [dhāka qad madū]. It occurred before the hīra, when the moon was split till its two [separate] halves could be seen.”

The reinterpretation of the Meccan eschatological warnings—such as the splitting of the moon and the smoke—reflect a new post-Qur’ānic perception of Muhammad’s career before the hīra. 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’ānic literature looks at Muḥammad’s Meccan period from a new perspective; it is already aware of the worldly triumph that Muḥammad experienced after his hīra to Medina, which resulted in his message expanding to the rest of the world. The post-Qur’ānic sources read back this post-hīra 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 Meccan’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-HIIRA 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-hīra 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.

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16 Ṭabarī, Ṭafsīr, 27:51. The same view was recorded on the authority of al-Dāʻībāb b. Muzāzhīm (Khusāṣṣī, d. 100/719). 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: so-yuzamū l-‘a‘ām). The opening of the “gate of severe chastisement” (Q 35:77: bttā’ abāb l-ḥamām bī-mā l-ma‘ām bī-‘a‘ām bī-‘a‘ām). See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, al-Durr al-manṭūr fi l-ṭafsīr bi-l-ma‘ām (Cairo: Būlāq, 1869, repr., Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘āriha, n.d.), 6:134 (from Ibn Mardawīyā, citation is from the Būlāq 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 (1/642). See the commentaries on Q 35:77, 54:45.

For example, Ibn Ishaq (d. 150/668), 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-Mughirah, 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 Qūṣayy, 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. 17

This account is based on the Qur’ānic 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-Isfahānī (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’ayṣ’ān” (these two mountains are near the hills of the Saʿf and the Marwa, in the vicinity of the Ka‘bah). Muḥammad asks

Muḥammad’s message in Mecca: warnings, signs, and miracles

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 Sunnis and Shi‘īs over the succession to the Prophet mentions the name of Abū Bakr, the first caliph after Muḥammad. It is ascribed to Mūjahīd (d. 104/722) and relates that, when the moon was split, Muḥammad said: “Abū Bakr, behold!”30 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 Shi‘īs won their own praiseworthy place in the traditions about the moon, one of them being Ḥāmza b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Muḥammad’s paternal uncle. He was considered among the Shi‘īs as the “lord of the martyrs.”31 His name occurs in a tradition recorded by al-Māwardi in which the moon is split only because Ḥāmza has asked the Prophet for a sign to strengthen his belief in him. This takes place as soon as Ḥāmza has embraced Islam out of rage at Abū Jahl, the leader of the Meccan opposition to Muḥammad.32

Moreover, ‘Ali himself, who according to the Shi‘īs ought to have been Muḥammad’s first successor, is said to have been present on the scene. In a version recorded in al-Majālī’s Bihār al-anwār, ‘Ali declares, “The moon was split while we were with the Prophet.”33 Another Shi‘ī version plants the event in the well-known scene of the meetings at al-‘Aqaba on the eve of Muḥammad’s hiṣra 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 ‘Abdullāh, 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 shi‘a,” bowed down in gratitude. Thereupon the audience asked that the moon be united again and it was.

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32 Māwardi, Nukat, 5:409.
Then they asked that the moon be split again and it was. In this version, the terms of the miracle are subject to the whims of the Shi‘is, 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, sirā, and ḥadīth and later on collected in the compilations of dalā‘īl al-mubawwa (“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-Khargūšī’s (d. 406/1015) Sharaf al-Mustafā. 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 [awwār al-falak], and this is more convincing in the field of miracles [ablugh fi bāb al-‘i‘zād].’”

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 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 Ḥira’ 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. 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.

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

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18 Ibn Kathīr, Rīḍāya, 6:277.
19 Ǧālī, Rīḥ 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 ijtihād 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 fortune-teller, worker of miracles, and magician.38

In their yearning for a new Muḥammad, the Muslim exegetes, Sunnis and Shi‘is 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-Mawardi states that the opinion of the majority of the public (al-jumhūr) that accords with the manifest meaning of the Qur’ān (zāhir al-tanzil) is that the moon was split in Muhammad’s time.39 The Shi‘i exegete Muhammad 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-Ḥārīrī, 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 inshaqqāqa 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.40 The Sufi-oriented exegete Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) states, too, that the Muslims are unanimous that the moon was split.41

Further reading

39 Mawardi, Nuʿayyat. 1:209.
42 Ibn Kathīr, Raddāt, 6:76.
43 Ibid., 5:120, 6:77.
45 A Google search under “الرسالة الفخرية” yields the relevant results. See, e.g., http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1.
3 Glimpses of Muḥammad’s Medinan decade

MICHAEL LECKER

Over the centuries, Muslims have compiled a large number of biographies about the Prophet Muhammad, including both mainstream biographies and less well-known or almost-forgotten ones. However, no meaningful study of Muhammad’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, Shi‘is, Khārijis, Syrians, Medinans, and Iraqis had their own versions regarding events in Muhammad’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 ansār (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 ansār.

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.