

The Shifting Significance of Muhammad

It can be quite a shock for Christians to realize what the Prophet Muhammad really means to a Muslim. I can recall the first time I heard about the “toothpick of Muhammad.” How strange, I thought, that the purity of fasting during Ramadan could be reduced to how Muhammad had dealt with the food between his teeth.

That Muslims everywhere cherish his role as the bearer of Qur’anic revelation is not hard for us to understand; it’s grasping the particularities of Muhammad as a “lived reality” that can be mind-boggling for most Christians—especially when we know so little about our own Old Testament prophets by comparison. And while we’re familiar with the call to follow Jesus as found in the biblical narratives, the way in which the Islamic tradition (*hadith* and *sunnah*) transmits a labyrinth of episodes and anecdotes about Muhammad’s character and action is a “prophetology” of a whole other type. Indeed, Muhammad’s biography is perceived as the very substance of God’s activity, a living presence. Listen to al-Ghazali:

Know that the key to happiness is to follow the sunna and to imitate the Messenger of God in all his coming and going, his movements and rest, in his way of eating, his attitude, his sleep and his talk... “What the messenger has brought—accept it, and what he has prohibited—refrain from it” (Sura 59:7). That means, you have to sit while putting on trousers, to stand when winding a turban, and to begin with the right foot when putting on shoes...¹

This emphasis on the embodied presence of Muhammad’s life has created a type of prophetic consciousness quite distinct from the more abstract theological bias of Western Christianity.

I have found over the years that the finest communicators of the gospel to Muslims, though not explicit about Muhammad, usually have a good fix on what he might mean to a Muslim. They’re sensitive to his psychological, cultural and ideological grip on a mind and heart. What does Muhammad mean to them? What is his significance? Muslims may respond to Muhammad in myriad ways, yet at the base is a common prophetological mindset that prioritizes him as *uswa hasana*, “the beautiful model” (Surah 33:21).

In his article, Harley Talman has resisted our typical categorical treatment of Muhammad by exploring recent scholarship that re-examines the traditional Islamic understanding of the Prophet (his bibliography is an incredible starting

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place for the budding scholar). But in a self-reflective exercise, he also helps us examine the assumptions behind our own Christian prophetology (p. 169). Talman is courageously trying to open a new conversation on the prophet Muhammad, and Martin Accad believes it warrants a new mandate for evangelical mission (p. 191).

Perry Pennington broadens the way we interpret the prophetology of a Muslim with his study of South Asian folk Islam (p. 195). The river of Islam has flowed over many a cultural landscape throughout history, and the primal spirituality of indigenous peoples has often blended into the rituals of Islamic faith. Over the centuries, this syncretistic consciousness has flourished in a greater veneration of the Prophet, in the seeking of blessing from his relics, and in the emergence of large unorthodox brotherhoods that have claimed a unique *baraka* (power) from his lineage. (When it comes to sorting through this level of religious syncretism, don't miss the new release of Alan Tippett's *Slippery Paths in the Darkness*, p. 166.)

Islamic fundamentalism arose as a modern rejection of this folk Islamic stream, so today we witness a more ideological use of Muhammad by jihadists. The brutal territorial grab of the Islamic State presently demands the world's attention (p. 218), but one journalist notes a clear prophetological refrain in their propaganda. ISIS militants smash antiquities as "a chance to re-enact the life of the Prophet," and they remind the world that the Prophet Muhammad "removed and destroyed idols with his own exalted and noble hands when he conquered Mecca."² This radical emulation of Muhammad assaults our modern sensibilities, but it also distracts us from seeing the manifold ways in which our own Westernization is reviving Muhammad in the lives of individual Muslims. H. L. Richard would suggest we moderns can't see this variety of religiosities because of our own "enlightened" view of religion (p. 209).

The articles in this issue of the *IJFM* make a case for a more perceptive prophetology, one that discerns the place of Muhammad in our communication of the gospel.³ It was actually

the Apostle Paul who perceived the weight of prophetic awareness when he said "at the reading of Moses a veil lies over their heart" (II Cor. 3:15). As with Moses, so with Muhammad, for any prophetology can cover a mind and prevent it from turning to the Lord. Such has been the case with Muslims for fourteen centuries. But then maybe you've heard of the pervasive dreams of Jesus that are penetrating Muslim consciousness today, or of the open hearts of those refugees fleeing the crisis of a brutal Islam. Indeed, the significance of Muhammad is shifting, and the veil is lifting.

In Him,



Brad Gill
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Endnotes

¹ From chapter 20 of al-Ghazali's *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, cited in Lamin Sanneh's excellent article, "Muhammad's Significance for Christians," in Stackhouse, et al, *The Local Church in a Global Era* (Eerdmans, 2000).

² David Pinault, "The Allure of the Islamic State Vandals," *Wall Street Journal*, March 7-8 2015, p. A9.

³ An example is found at <http://jaq.org>.

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- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the *IJFM* (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the *IJFM* for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.