

## **Muhammad Through Western Eyes**

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The appearance of Islam in seventh century Arabia was perceived as a threat by Christendom. This was because Islam claimed to be correcting what it perceived to be adulterations in the teachings of Jesus and because it refuted cardinal Christian doctrines like those of the trinity, christology and the resurrection of Christ. Islam was also seen as a threat to the west because of the advancement of Muslim armies into Europe. It is to be remembered that by the middle of the eighth century, Muslims armies had conquered parts of Spain and threatened France. Christian writers responded by attacking not only the Muslim scripture and beliefs but also the personality of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). They invented fanciful and highly offensive tales surrounding the life and death of the Prophet.

Among the earliest European accounts of the Prophet is that by John of Damascus (c 650-750). He claimed the Prophet Muhammad was a great deceiver and an epileptic (Reeves/2000/84). John's *Pege gnoseos* also contains a chapter on heresy which mentions Muhammad as "pseudoprophetes". There was a clear intent to demonize Muhammad and present him in a pejorative manner. Fables were invented to frighten people. For example, the Prophet is reported to have died in 666 – which is the number of beasts in the apocalypse. Hence, Muhammad was depicted as the anti-Christ. There was also a focus on the sexual life of Prophet in medieval polemics (Reeves/2000/84).

Around the year 1100 Latin authors invented stories and legends regarding the Prophet. The name Mahound, a term synonymous with the devil, was invented by the writers of Christian play cycles and romances of twelfth century Europe. In the writings, Muhammad appears as a

heathen idol worshipped by the Arabs (Reeves/2000/ 87). The eleventh century nun Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, for example, portrays 'Abd al-Rahman III, the Umayyad Caliph of Cordoba, as worshipping golden idols. In the *Chanson de Roland*, a French epic poem of the early twelfth century, Saracens worship a trio of idols: Apollin, Tervagant, and Mahomet (Tolan/2012).

It should be remembered that Western images and depiction of Muhammad were also determined by socio-political events of that milieu. The Crusaders, for example wanted to portray Islam in very negative terms. Many of the chroniclers of the First Crusade (1095–1099) imagined that their Saracen enemies were idolaters who erected a statue of their god Mahomet in the “temple of the lord” (i.e., the Dome of the Rock) (Tolan/2012).

Somewhat more accurate information about the Prophet of Islam was available in some European monastic libraries, notably in the ninth century Latin translations of Theophanes Confessor's (d.817) *Chronographia*, written in Constantinople around 815. Theophanes claims that the Jews had first flocked to Muhammad, thinking that he was their long-awaited Messiah; when they saw him eating a camel (a forbidden food) they realized their error. Muhammad is mentioned as an epileptic in the *Chronographia* and in *Contra legem Saracenorum* by Ricoldo da Mentecroce (d.1320).

### **Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy**

Dante Alighieri composed his *Divine Comedy* in the early 1300s in Florence. The *Divine Comedy* is one of the first in a European vernacular language to mention the Prophet and his cousin and son-in law, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (c. 661). Dante takes the reader on a tour of heaven and hell. The Prophet and 'Ali are depicted with their bodies split from head to waist in the eighth circle in hell. The Prophet is seen as tearing apart his breast to indicate that he was among

damned soul to have brought schism into religion. It is important to remember that many like Dante were responding to the last crusade defeated in 1291.

In the travels of John Mandeville, which was written towards the end of the fourteenth century, the Prophet is taught to write the Qur'an by a Christian monk, Bahira. This Bahira was then later killed inadvertently by the Prophet who was drunk. It was because of this event that wine was prohibited. The book was translated into different languages and became a guide to pilgrimage to holy land (Reeves/2000/ 106).

### **The Death of Muhammad**

Stories were concocted not only regarding the life of the Prophet but also his death. An important element in the death of the Prophet is the role of Zaynab, a Jewish woman. In a narration by San Pedro Pascual, Zaynab, whom Muhammad desired, insisted that he should come to her bed alone by night. When he did so her relatives killed him, cut off his left foot, threw the rest of his body to the pigs, who quickly devoured it. Other writers state that the Prophet died because of poisoned meat that she gave him. The latter story is found in some Muslim sources too.

A recurring slander was that Muhammad was killed by a pig (or by a herd of pigs). An early attestation of this occurs in the *Vita Mahumeti*, probably the first rhymed biography of Muhammad written in Latin. It was composed in the early twelfth century by Embrico of Mainz. Embrico presents Muhammad (whom he calls Mammutius) as a Christian heretic posing as a holy man. He dies when he is set upon and mangled by a herd of pigs; that is why Muslims are prohibited from consuming pork (Kohlberg/2000/106).

A similar description is given by Guibert of Nogent (d. c. 1124) in his *Dei gesta per Francos* (completed before 1112), one of the earliest Western biographies of the Prophet to be written outside Spain. Here the Prophet's end is described as follows: "When one day he made his way into the forest in order to hunt and happened to stray from his company, he suddenly came upon a herd of pigs by which he was torn apart limb by limb and so thoroughly devoured that nothing of him remained but his right arm. Hence it was decreed for all Hagarenes that thenceforth no one should ever again make use of pigs, which law is most completely observed among them to this day, because their king, who was also their teacher and their Prophet, was consumed by pigs" (Kohlberg/2000/166).

Fables were also invented regarding the fate of Muhammad's body after his death. The Armenian chronicler Mxit'ar of Ani (ca. 1200) wrote: "When Mahmet died, they wrapped him and placed him in his garden; they did not bury him because he had promised that on the third day he would rise, like Christ. And when the guards were asleep, dogs entered and ate the face of the corpse" (Kohlberg/2000/167).

### **Depiction of the Prophet in Medieval times**

In 1453 Mehmet II captured Constantinople, marking the spread of the Ottoman empire into Europe. European writers were now responding to the threat of Islam over Eastern Europe. John Wycliffe, for example, compares the vices of the church with the dangers of Islam. For him, the sins of the church were the cause of rise of Islam (Reeves/2000/126).

Martin Luther wrote soon after fall of Constantinople. For him, the real anti-Christ was the Pope while the Prophet was second to him. Luther mocked the Prophet for believing in one god without the divinity of Jesus (Reeves/2000/129). In his *On War Against the Turk* he

described Islam as a patchwork taken from Jewish, Christian, and heathen sources in which Father, Son, Holy Ghost, baptism, the sacrament, gospel, faith, and all Christian doctrine and life are gone, and instead of Christ only Mohammed with his doctrine of works and especially the sword is left.

Like many others, Luther was worried by the power and spread of Islam. "Our religious are mere shadows when compared to them, and our people clearly profane when compared to theirs. Not even true Christians, not Christ himself, not the apostles or prophets ever exhibited so great a display. This is the reason why many persons so easily depart from faith in Christ for Muhammadanism and adhere to it so tenaciously." Luther was concerned that his people might be moved by the splendor of the "Turkish religion" and the external appearance of their customs.

A very sympathetic portrait is to be found in a seventeenth-century work on the life of Muhammad, published by the English physician and scholar Henry Stubbe (1631-1676). This is probably why the book was not printed until 1911 by the Islamic Society in London. Stubbe portrayed the Prophet as a great law-giver. He rejected the notion that Muhammad was an epileptic and dismissed medieval Christian legends about Muhammad's death, noting that These are such figments that Muslims scoff at them and deride the Christians for relating them. He was also critical of fellow Christian writers for their slandering the Prophet.

Voltaire's work of 1756 praises the Prophet as a genius for his impact on world history. However, he also saw the Prophet as deceiver. A more accurate picture of the Prophet appears in Simon Ockley (*History of the Saracens*) and George Sale (translation of the Qur'an). In the West, they were seen as apologists for the Prophet. Ockley calls the Prophet an imposter but expresses admiration for his heroic deeds and sense of justice. Sale's translation of the Qur'an led to him being seen as a half Muslim. He faced a lot of hostility in the West (Reeves/2000/165). In the

eighteenth century, arguably the most sympathetic account of the Prophet came from the French Count Henri de Boulainvilliers, whose *Vie de Mahomed* was posthumously published in 1730. Boulainvilliers was attacked by the Anglican Jean Gagner (1670-1740), professor of Oriental languages at Oxford, who accused him of not missing any chance to lavish exaggerated praise on Muhammad.

Writing later in the eighteenth century, Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) devoted chapters of his *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* to a detailed description of the rise of Islam, including the life of Muhammad. Gibbon cites the poison talking mutton story (which warned the Prophet that it was poisoned) as an example of the miracles attributed to the Prophet.

Gustav Weil first argued for the legendary nature of the account that the Prophet had died of poisoned mutton. Weil was also the first to imply that the entire story of the Jewish woman Zaynab and the Prophet might not be true. His lead was followed by others. Even those authors who did not reject outright the report that an attempt on Muhammad's life had been made at Khaybar usually dismissed the notion that he had eventually died as a result of this attempt.

As contact with Muslims and Islamic sources increased, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a rehabilitation of the Prophet. Goethe saw the Prophet as a genius who left a legacy that would last for eternity. Goethe wrote Mahomet's Gesang (Prophet's songs) in 1772. The trend of admiring Muhammad continued with Alois Sprenger. Writing in 1861, he saw Islam as one of the greatest phenomenon people know. He defended Islam against the false accusations of Europe and argued that Islam was not to be conceived of blood and flesh (Sprenger/1851).

In 1840 Thomas Carlyle wrote on heroes and hero worship. He saw the Prophet as a genius and said that divine inspiration and genius were not a monopoly of the West. The most precious gift that heaven could give to earth was a man of genius sent down with God's message

to us (Reeves/2000/187). Carlyle also challenged many Western depictions of the Prophet. He argued that the Qur'an brought a restricted and orderly life and the Prophet was an ascetic rather than sensual person. He condemned Europe for their view of the Prophet. Later on, others like George Dawson reinforced Carlyle's views. In recent times, some Christian fundamentalists have attacked the Prophet. Jerry Fallwell called him a pedophile on public television whereas Franklin Graham described Islam as an evil religion.

In conclusion medieval Western writers on Islam propagated a number of often conflicting accounts on the death of the Prophet. Some of these - such as stories that Muhammad was killed by pigs or that his body was devoured by dogs - were nothing but malicious calumnies. Others were based on Islamic sources; they included the story of Muhammad's death from pleurisy and especially the ingestion story reports that Muhammad was poisoned by a Jewish woman, who had either given him poisoned meat or lured him to his death. By the mid-seventeenth century more favorable appraisals of the Prophet begin to appear in more serious scholarship.

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