

The Muhammad of the Muslims—and of Everyone Else  
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Muhammad is upon us. For the last twenty-five years, the Danes have been preoccupied with the prophet of Islam—because we have been preoccupied with Islam. Koran verses fly back and forth in public debate. Ordinary Danes know that there is a difference between Sunni and Shia. Arabic terms such as *taqiyya* and *ijtihad* are referred to mysteriously and significantly by public debaters. At the center of it all stands Muhammad.

Muhammad has marked us. During 2005 and 2006, Denmark experienced its most serious foreign policy crisis in recent memory, a crisis that revolved around the prophet Muhammad, and in many places in the world, Denmark's reputation is still bound up with this and similar affairs. Since 2001, the issue of immigration and Islam has played a central role in Danish parliamentary elections. In this way, Muhammad has also divided us.

Muhammad is among us. In 2017, Muhammad was the most common boy's name in England and in Malmö. In Denmark, too, many relatively young people will have a friend or a schoolmate named Muhammad. Muhammad has become a Danish boy's name.

Muhammad is important. Other than Jesus, not many human beings have been of such great significance over the course of history. Religions with more than four billion adherents have grown from the teachings of Jesus and Muhammad and the examples these individuals set, and together these religions have dominated world history for about fifteen hundred years. Empires have been built and wars fought with these prophets as motivating forces and central symbols. In the twenty-first century, scores of nations identify themselves as Muslim.

But Muhammad has not just shaped history—he has also been shaped by it. As in the case of Jesus, there is a long history of interpretation of him, and every age has found its ideals in him. He has been seen as the protector of the poor and the defender of the rich, as a model for male domination and for women's liberation, as a sufferer and a victor, as a warlord and a prince of peace.

That history is not known in Denmark, but it is the one that is to be related here. And a basic assumption in connection with this narrative will be that a religion has not been fully and irrevocably formed when its founder dies. In fact, people shape it afterward. And in the course of the following generations, the religion receives its teachings, its laws, its rituals, its priesthood, its theology, its temples, and its art. In short, institutions that create stability and predictability but that are continually changed themselves and may one day be dramatically reformed. In the course of time, its practitioners select scriptural passages and interpret episodes in the life of the founder in ways that also undergo changes.

This is the first book in Danish about these developments. It is not a book about Muhammad as he really was but a book about the successive versions of him that were created over time. Muhammad's significance today is the result of historical changes, of stable interpretations and reinterpretations.

This is true for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Western Europe has a long tradition of interpreting Muhammad, and the corresponding tradition in the Christian Middle East is even older. And because the world is integrated, Muslims have had to relate to non-

Muslims' interpretations, which have therefore also had an influence—positive and negative—on Muslims' own interpretations. This was seen particularly during the centuries after the creation of Islam and with colonialism and modernization again from the nineteenth century onward.

With Muslim immigration to the West, mutual influences have intensified. Because if there is anything we have seen in recent years, it is that Muhammad has explosive potential. Not only for some Muslims but also for many non-Muslims who consider him greatly influential in one way or another.

Muhammad is important primarily for Muslims, of course. But they do not own him. Nor are they in agreement about him—in fact, they argue about him. The internal Muslim struggle over Muhammad is important to us all. Muhammad is simply too important to be left to the Muslims. Or to those who are anti-Muslim. We all need to know about Muhammad and the historical developments that have made him what he is today. Muhammad is world culture and therefore belongs to all. Hence the book's title.

What is it, then, a well-informed Dane should know about Muhammad? And what should the attorney, the teacher, the publisher, the journalist, the childcare provider, the caseworker, and all others who come in contact with Muslims professionally know about the man in whom the believers obviously see so much good? This is a question I have spent many years discussing with colleagues in Denmark and elsewhere. With this book, I offer an answer. Primarily, it is the result of my own encounter with Muhammad and my fascination with his diverse congregations on four continents as they existed in the past and as they exist today.

Muhammad is a historical chameleon because every age has seen its own ideals and ideas incarnated in the prophet. One can fairly easily acquire basic knowledge of the prophet of Islam that is centered on the most important events in his career. That is useful and important, and that is what the book's first chapter offers. But in the course of history, these events have constantly been reinterpreted, which is of central importance to understanding Islam today.

One can, of course, choose to ignore the traditions of Muslim interpretation and attempt to reach back and achieve a more certain knowledge of the historical figure Muhammad—to the extent the sources allow this. But that is historical study and would not teach us anything about the Muhammad of the Muslims or Muhammad today. In the same way, one cannot simply read the Koran or the stories of the prophet's life to understand Islam today. That would amount to engaging in amateur theology on the Muslims' behalf—as though one would read the Old Testament and then believe one knew everything there was to know about Judaism and Jews today.

The point of departure for this book is the history of the interpreters and of interpretation. We know the prophet only through them, and we have no detailed contemporary sources or confirmed relics. Muhammad has always been interpreted, always been "somebody's." The chapters that make up the book's main part are respectively devoted to the various interpreters, who are presented more or less in chronological order, though many have existed—and many still exist—parallel to each other. What they have in common is that they have been selected either because they are important or because they are representative. Particularly in the early chapters, reference is to well-known interpreters of the Islamic tradition—interpreters regularly referred to by later theologians and thinkers.

The authors and works I describe in the book's later chapters have not achieved a similar status, but they have been chosen because they are particularly illustrative or

representative of their times. In both cases, the authors are predominantly Arabs and the works are predominantly Arabic, which reflects the prestige and authority the Arabic language has had in Islamic religious culture throughout time. Though it would certainly have been possible to concentrate on developments outside Arabia, for example in India, Arabic has been the language of scholarship, and translations have for the most part been undertaken from Arabic to other languages and not the other way around. Today, however, English is spoken and understood by more Muslims than Arabic is, and it is in the process of gradually becoming the Muslim lingua franca.

The structure of the book

The book's chapter 1 presents a summary of the life of Muhammad taken from the oldest cohesive description, by the Muslim historian Ibn Ishaq (died 767), as it was transmitted by another historian, Ibn Hashim (died 833), a good two hundred years after the death of the prophet. This is the source on which later treatments—Muslim and non-Muslim— have typically been based. There will be an emphasis on a series of key events and themes to which the book's later chapters will return, namely:

- Birth, youth, years of learning, years of wandering, death
- Rich and poor, slaves and chiefs
- The central military events: Badr, Uhud, and Hudaibiyyah
- Love life: Khadija, Aisha, Zaynab
- Political characteristics: Constitution of Medina, satirical poems, and Satanic verses
- Relationship to the Quraysh tribe, the Christians, and the Jews

To begin with, the reader should be familiar with the situation with regard to sources—that is, the question of what we actually know about the person Muhammad. The problem here is that the Muslim sources regarding Muhammad's life are late and that they themselves are interpretations. We should keep that in mind. We will never be able to know what the prophet thought and felt, and we should therefore be cautious in connection with categorical interpretations of the man himself. On the other hand, we should pay a great deal of attention to the fact that the early Muslim interpretations are historical and characterized by specific interests—primarily an interest in bearing witness to Muhammad's status as God's prophet much as the gospels witness that Jesus was God's son and died for our sins.

Chapter 2 gives the reader an introduction to the early sources and the picture they give us of Muhammad. The early sources are comprised by the Koran, the sira literature, and the hadith literature. The Koran gives us the revelations Muhammad received and is considered by the believers to be the word of God. The sira is an independent genre in Muslim literature in which biographies of Muhammad were created, and hadith literature is another genre, in which brief texts describe Muhammad's actions or present his utterances in a given situation.

Chapter 3 discusses what the non-Muslim sources—which are actually older than Ibn Ishaq—can contribute. They are polemical but confirm the broad Muslim story, and their

rejection of Muhammad's status as a prophet is of great significance for the development of a Muslim interpretation of Muhammad.

After reviewing these early sources, I turn in chapters 4, 5, and 6 to the various themes and variants in the Muslim understanding of Muhammad that developed during the centuries that followed. This is a large area of research that is relatively little known in Denmark. Here I have chosen the variants that have been of significance over the centuries and remained so into our time, namely Sunni theological and juridical views, the dominant Twelver Shia variant, the Sufi perspective on Muhammad, the popular celebration of Muhammad, and the significance of descent from Muhammad. These chapters, then, cover developments from around the year 1000 until the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Muslim world was exposed to European imperialism but also European modernity and thought—and interpretations of Islam and Muhammad.

To understand this meeting of cultures—which is still in progress—it will be necessary to look at how the picture of Muhammad had developed in Europe. I devote two chapters to this. Chapter 7 looks at what Europeans knew and thought about Muhammad. This chapter traces the overall development in the view of Muhammad from the Middle Ages onward—at universities and at a broader intellectual level—with Denmark as an example. Chapter 8 takes a closer look at the uses to which people put Muhammad. The chapter examines the literary treatment of the prophet of Islam, particularly in drama and again with Danish examples where possible.

Chapter 9 examines the great meeting of cultures that took place particularly during the period from 1880 to 1940, when most of the Muslim world had been colonized. Radical modernization took place, completely reorganizing not only societies but also religion—including the perception of the prophet Muhammad. I recommend beginning with this chapter if you are a reader who is interested only in the contemporary situation and do not want to read everything, as it shows a completely new and modern ideological landscape—and thus renders superfluous a search for an Islamic Reformation or Enlightenment. There was both enlightenment and reformation, but people and states did not necessarily embrace liberal democracy because of that. In Europe, of course, fascism and communism came much later than the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Chapter 10 traces the continuation of this development after majority-Muslim nations gained independence following the Second World War but with a particular focus on socialist and feminist interpretations of Muhammad and those closest to him—interpretations that have greatly influenced the way in which Muhammad is portrayed in schools and the media in the Muslim world today.

Chapter 11 investigates the politicized interpretation of Muhammad that has been used by Islamists since the 1930s, and in chapter 12, the jihadists' militant interpretation of Muhammad is analyzed in particular.

In the next chapters, we return to Muhammad as a figure in fictional narratives or portrayals. First, we look at filmic depictions, which are the subject of chapter 13. Then, in chapter 14, we look at some of the most important European fictional depictions and the Muslim reactions to them, from Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* to the twelve drawings in *Jyllands-Posten* that triggered the Muhammad crisis in 2005.

Chapter 15 has to do with recent missionary literature on Muhammad. The vast majority of the books that are produced today about the prophet of Islam have a missionary purpose and depict him in a strongly negative or positive light. Recent publications about Muhammad can be Christian or Muslim missionary writings but also examples of recent

anti-Muslim literature in which portraits of Muhammad are a modern version of medieval notions of the incarnation of evil. The afterword takes us to the Muslim world and presents examples of contemporary Muslims' relationship to Muhammad. Here I reflect on our image of Muhammad and the need for a better general understanding of what a religion is.

This is quite a broad topic. Not only the story of an individual man but fourteen hundred years of Muslim intellectual history that is at the same time a branch of European intellectual history that is not known to many Europeans and that has only just begun to be drawn into the light in recent years. But it is important, for Muhammad means something to nearly two billion people. And the meaning Muslims find in Muhammad is a universe in itself, or, as the Arabs say, an ocean.

## My Muhammad

At this point, I should describe to the reader my own relationship to Muhammad and account for my own education with regard to Muhammad and how it came about. I am not a Muslim but grew up in a Christian humanist home. My parents were both historians, specialized respectively in medieval and nineteenth-century Danish history, so viewing a subject in its historical context or following its development in the context of intellectual history comes quite naturally to me.

During my childhood in the 1960s, Muslims were distant and belonged mostly in exotic stories like those of the Arabian Nights. I cannot remember the first time I encountered Muhammad, but I remember that at one point, we children who lived on my street enjoyed swearing something "by the beard of the prophet"—no doubt having been inspired to do so by comic strips.

In 1981, when I chose to study exotic religions, it was still common to see religion as a peripheral and moribund phenomenon, and few people could see the use of studies in that field. However, the Iranian revolution had recently taken place, and during the following years, when I visited India, Turkey, Egypt, and other countries with substantial Muslim population groups, I encountered a number of societies in which Islam had traditionally meant a great deal to many people. At the same time, some of these were societies in which secularization had taken place, but in which a religious revival was now taking place among young people.

In Danish media, this revival was solely associated with Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini, and it was often seen as a peculiarly Shia Muslim phenomenon. However, I decided to specialize in modern Sunni Islam—not out of sympathy but because it so obviously was both important and poorly understood. To underscore that I was writing about this contemporary and developed religion, I gave my first book the title *Moderne islam* ("Modern Islam").

Before this, Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* had been published. Reading it was a revelation—and it demanded exactly the kind of preparation the current book is attempting to give readers. Rushdie sets two of his chapters in a premodern Mecca in which strikingly modern struggles over Muhammad's reputation take place. It was precisely those chapters that caused all the rage. Indeed, Rushdie anticipated the storm that followed the book's publication—and also many of the subsequent disputes with Muhammad at their center. For my master's degree lecture, I therefore chose to speak on four different contemporary interpretations of Muhammad—modernist, Sufi, Islamist, and jihadist—to

which I will return in this book. Later, I was a coauthor of a book about the Rushdie affair in which I attempted to explain the book's content.

I was hired by the University of Copenhagen and taught in the field of Islamic studies—and I have now been doing so for about thirty years. This is of course precisely the period in which Islam has gradually become the focus of a great deal of public attention in Denmark. In the meantime, many new and good studies of the Muhammad of the Muslims and of Europe have been written, and chapters 2–6 in particular consist of summaries of the work of others.

At the same time, I have been involved in translation and analysis in connection with many of the relatively recent developments that have taken place—both Middle Eastern and Islamic. I do not engage in research on Islam in Denmark—I have talented colleagues who do that—but sometimes there has nevertheless been a specifically Danish need for the type of insights into Islam that I am able to provide. As the director of the Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute in Cairo, I had to defend the publication of the drawings in conversations with a greatly angered Arab audience in the media and in public debates during the Muhammad crisis of 2005–2006. I have also occasionally assisted prosecutors and intelligence services, and I have been called as an expert witness in a number of cases involving jihadism—including the case of “the bookseller from Brønshøj,” the Danish-Moroccan Said Mansour, who after having received several prison sentences ended up being sent back to Morocco in 2019, and the case of “the match man,” Moyed al-Zoebi, who planned the detonation in central Copenhagen of homemade bombs containing the sulfur from thousands of matches. In many of these cases, the prophet Muhammad assumes a central role, and I will draw on my experience with them in the relevant chapters.

I now have a great deal of experience teaching young Muslims about Islam. Their knowledge of Muhammad varies but has typically been influenced by various modernist depictions of a visionary and peace-loving man deserving of imitation, a man who said many wise things, introduced a constitution, and performed many other good acts. It has been interesting to teach them (as well as Jewish and Christian believers) to apply critical historical methodology in studying subjects including their scriptures. They can very well accommodate personal belief alongside academic analysis. And this is not because we avoid critical or worrying perspectives.

As I have indicated, this book was written to advance relevant knowledge and education regarding Islam. But of course, acquiring this knowledge could potentially be only one part of a broader humanist investigation of history that would bestow the kind of cultural self-confidence that allows its owner to make the world her or his own with curiosity and openness—and to dare to act within it. Muhammad is upon us and among us, but he has essentially already been a part of our culture for many centuries. Now he is becoming a part of it in new ways. It will be up to my students—Muslims as well as non-Muslims—and all of us others to be good stewards of these changes.

A note on translations: For Koran quotes, I have relied on Ellen Wulff's translation, while hadiths and ibn Hisham's sira have been translated from standard English translations. Unless the notes indicate otherwise, I have translated into Danish from the respective language.

## Acknowledgements

Many people have helped me with this book, and I am happy to be able to thank them here. Johannes Riis of Gyldendal was immediately enthusiastic about the idea when I presented it to him at an early stage. He followed the project and read drafts, while more precise organization and skillful editing were provided by Marianne Moring and Ditte Maria Sjøgaard.

Others read, found errors, and improved: Peder Worning, Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, Iselin Hermann, Bent Holm, Carsten Jensen, Eva Gulløv, John Gulløv, Rune Lykkeberg, Martin Riexinger, Jørgen S. Nielsen, and Tarek Ziad Hussein.

Still others contributed particular information and works: Morten Hecquet, Rasmus Bech Olsen, Kurt Villads Jensen, Rasmus Elling, Claus V. Pedersen, Saer al-Jaichi, June Dahy, Anne Fastrup, Marie-Louise Svane, Peter Madsen, Mille Rode, Thomas Harder, Steffen Groth, Claus Seidel, Janne Teller, Flemming Weiss Andersen, and Jonas Svensson.

A major part of the book was written in Aix-en-Provence, where I was granted a research stay at the Institute of Research and Study on the Arab and Muslim Worlds, whose director, Richard Jacquemond, I would also like to thank. Here I presented the book, and I later repeated my presentation in Paris as part of an EU research project on interpretations of Muhammad to which Rachida Chih and Stefan Reichmut were so kind as to attach me.

I would also like to thank the C. L. David Foundation and Collection, which has contributed to the creation of the book both financially and with images, and in particular Director Kjeld von Folsach, who took time to introduce me to the possibilities offered by the collection.

Finally and especially, I would like to thank Silje Schyberg, who has followed me all the way.



## Ibn Hashim's Muhammad—the prophet's life in the oldest version

Muhammad was a man of medium height, with dense eyebrows and coal-black hair. He smiled frequently but almost never laughed. His hands were soft and cold. His most striking physical feature was a large birthmark between his shoulder blades, the size of a dove's egg. He always finished his meals but did not care for gluttons. He was fond of honey and bread dipped in vinegar. He did not much care for poetry, and he refused to wear silk or gold and silver rings. On the other hand, he loved horses and small children.

How is it that we know all of these details regarding a man who lived from 570 to 632 AD? The answer is that we do not actually know them at all. Early Muslim sources give us much information, but even these texts were written several generations after his death, and strangely enough the number of details seems to increase with the temporal separation. We can neither verify nor disprove the claims. But we can note that everything about Muhammad was of interest to his later adherents. He is truly the Muhammad of the Muslims.

But before Muhammad became the Muhammad of the Muslims, who was he then? Who was the historical Muhammad? We will never know very much about that. In chapter 3, we will take a closer look at the source situation and what it has meant in terms of the opportunities to interpret and administer Muhammad's authority.

Here in the first chapter, the source situation is not very important. This is because here we are going to hear about the Muhammad transmitted by Muslim tradition. The emphasis is on the earliest cohesive transmission, which has been the basis for all later treatments—and to which the later chapters in this book will return. Here we therefore follow an abbreviated version of this most important older source, which is a text written by the Muslim historian Ibn Ishaq (704–767), who lived in Muhammad's home city of Medina. To complicate matters further, we know Ibn Ishaq's report on Muhammad only second hand, in an edited and annotated version written by the Iraqi-Egyptian scholar Ibn Hisham (died 833), a version created nearly two hundred years after Muhammad's death. These two men and the source situation will be described in detail in the next chapter.

## Muhammad's childhood according to Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishaq

The city of Mecca lies on the western side of the great Arabian Peninsula, a little more than eighty kilometers from the Red Sea. In the middle of Mecca lies the Kaaba, a cube-shaped house that according to Islamic tradition was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. Muhammad was born in Mecca in the year 570, called the year of the elephant because an army with a white war elephant was stopped outside the city. The army was led by Yemen's Christian ruler, Abraha, who wished to destroy the Kaaba and all of the idols that were then standing in and around it.

Muhammad was born into one of the city's largest and most important tribes, the Quraysh, and his paternal grandfather's branch of the tribe had been entrusted with the honorable task of guarding the Kaaba and serving the pilgrims who came from near and far to sacrifice to its many gods. Muhammad's paternal grandfather was named Abd al-Muttalib, and he had rediscovered the Zamzam well, Abraham's old well, near the Kaaba, in

accordance with an order he had received in a dream he had when he had slept in a mountain cave.

Abd al-Muttalib had sworn that if he came to have ten sons, he would sacrifice one of them. In fact, he came to have ten sons, and by means of the drawing of lots using arrows, it was determined that the youngest, Abdullah, would be sacrificed. Abd al-Muttalib was unhappy, for Abdullah was the apple of his eye. He therefore traveled to Syria and visited a seeress to learn how he could avoid the sacrifice. The seeress said that he should go back and offer blood money in the form of ten camels and cast lots to see what his god would choose. And if the lot fell on the boy, then he should add a further ten camels and so on until his god was satisfied. When the lot finally fell on the camels, then he should sacrifice them instead of the boy. The number of camels rose to one hundred before the lot fell on them and Abdullah escaped with his life.

On his way home from the camel sacrifice, Abdullah met a woman, Amina, who offered him marriage with the same number of camels as a dowry. Abdullah had to say no because his father had plans for him. The father paid a visit to another chief of the Quraysh tribe, Wahb, and arranged a marriage to Wahb's daughter. However, the daughter was none other than the Amina who had already offered Abdullah marriage. They were now united, and already that night, Muhammad was conceived. Abdullah asked Amina why she had proposed marriage herself. She replied that she had seen a light surrounding him and that she knew from her brother Nawfal ibn Waraqa, who had studied ancient texts as a Christian, that a prophet would appear among the Arabs. A short time later, while Amina was still pregnant, Abdullah died.

Muhammad was born on the twelfth day of the third month of the Islamic calendar, Rabi' al-Awwal, in the year of the elephant. Ibn Ishaq reports that precisely at the moment she gave birth, Amina saw a light so strong that she could see the city of Bosra, Syria, many days' journey away. Abd al-Muttalib brought his newborn grandchild to the Kaaba. Another miracle occurred. The poor Bedouin woman Halima had come with her husband to Mecca, driven by drought; their son, donkey, and camel were thirsty. She wanted to earn money as a wet nurse, and because Amina had no milk, Halima was entrusted with the fatherless Muhammad. As soon as Halima took him with her, her breasts swelled, as did the udders of the animals, and they thirsted no more. However, the greatest miracle occurred a few years later. One day, when Muhammad was playing with Halima's son, two white beings came and opened his chest and cleansed his heart with snow.

Now a tumultuous childhood followed. Halima was warned that there were men who wanted to kill Muhammad. She returned the child to Amina, who died shortly thereafter, however. Muhammad was now an orphan, and his elderly paternal grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, took care of him, but two years later, Abd al-Muttalib, too, died. The eight-year-old Muhammad then came to live in the house of his paternal uncle, the highly respected Abu Talib, who was fond of him. Not long afterward, Muhammad was allowed to travel as his uncle's assistant with a merchant caravan to Syria, where another wondrous event transpired.