ISLAM IN CONTEXT

Past, Present, and Future

Peter G. Riddell
and Peter Cotterell

Baker Academic
A Division of Baker Book House Co
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49516

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Book House Company
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Riddell, Peter G.
Islam in context : past, present, and future / Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8010-2627-X (pbk.)
1. Islam. 2. Islam—Essence, genius, nature. 3. Islam—Doctrines. 4. Islam—History. 5. Civilization, Islamic. I. Cotterell, Peter, 1930– II. Title.
BP161.3 .R53 2003
297—dc21 2002154564

1

Beginnings

When Muhammad was born in Mecca, more than five centuries after the birth of Christ, a movement was initiated that would utterly transform Arabia and the fortunes of the Arab peoples in the space of a mere twenty years. Few men have had a greater impact on world affairs, lasting century after century, than this man Muhammad.

Muhammad ibn Abdullah was born in Mecca, probably in the year 570. By the time of his death at the age of sixty-two he had brought into existence a dynamic movement that would carry Islam through the centuries and across the continents, birthing empires, transforming the sciences, and challenging economic, cultural, and political systems. At the twenty-first century, as occurred frequently in its past history, the Islamic faith that sprang out of Muhammad finds itself at a crossroads, facing a choice between a radical identity willing to use violence to achieve its goals, and a moderation that could accept and even welcome coexistence with other cultures; a choice between moving ahead along a single highway or pursuing separate roads, with travelers on each nervously eyeing the others.

Arabia before Muhammad

Muhammad came to a no-people. The Arabs were largely ignored by the two great empires of the sixth century: the Christian empire centered on Byzantium (Constantinople, the modern Istanbul), over to the west; and the Zoroastrian Sassanian empire to the east, in Persia. It is, perhaps, not surprising that Arabia was ignored. The great Empty Quarter held no attraction for the traveler, and the sea route to India had made the old overland caravan trail obsolete. The Arabs were peoples, not a people. The main thing that united them was their language, and even that was fragmented into a score of dialects.

The peoples of the Arabian peninsula had for centuries been largely nomadic, moving from one oasis to another, from one patch of scant

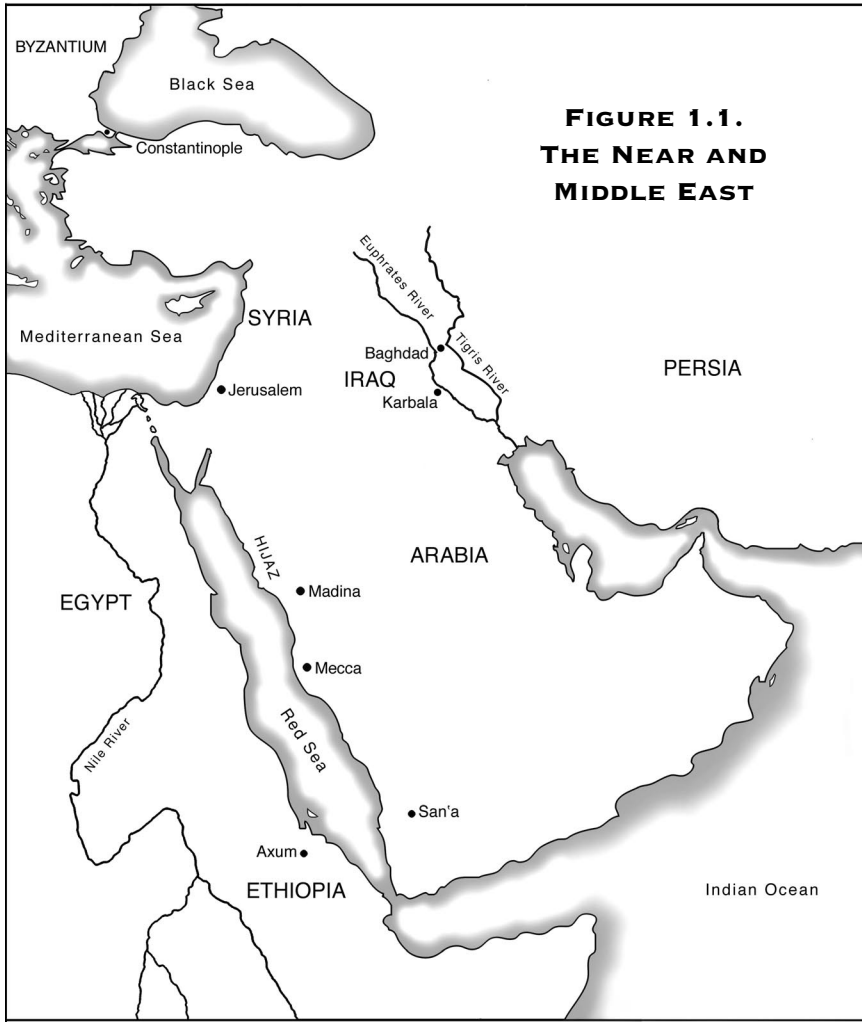

FIGURE 1.1. THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

pasture to another, as water or vegetation failed.[1] Mecca had long been a center for trade, but through the years more and more people moved from the arid desert wastes to this new and fascinating city, with its Zamzam well, reputed to have healing properties.[2] But urban-

1. For a concise introduction to the historical and cultural milieu into which Islam was born, chapter 1 of Alfred Guillaume's *Islam,* 2d ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), is still invaluable. But see also the first chapter of Michael Nazir-Ali, *Islam: A Christian Perspective* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983).

2. But for an alternative, revisionist approach to Mecca's history, cf. Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

ization, as always, brought with it problems. Out in the desert the rules were clear: look after your own clan. An attack on one is an attack on all. The need of one is the need of all. Fighting is unavoidable and noble. Death in fighting for the clan is an honorable death. If you are fortunate enough to live into old age, the clan will care for you, provide for you. Orphans, too, will be cared for. Every member of the clan of a few hundred people knew everyone else.

In the city all this was changed. Now there were the anonymous poor, with no one to care for them. There were fortunes to be made and lost, and with the fortunes went power. Beggars roamed the streets, orphans looked for help, the aged needed care. As always, the rich got richer but were never rich enough.

They had no religion in common. What they had was a confusing mixture: the worship of sun and moon, and stars, probably borrowed in part from the Zoroastrians, the worship of strangely shaped or unusually large stones, the worship of the spirits of trees and wells and springs. And providing it all with some kind of unity was the worship of idols, several hundred of them. The focal point for that unity was Mecca, where stood the Ka'ba, that cube-shaped storehouse for more than three hundred idols, kept by the Quraysh tribe and presided over by an official guardian.[3]

The term *Ka'ba* is related to the English word *cube,* and the building was just that, a cube-shaped building. It was not the only cube-shaped storehouse for idols in Arabia, but it was the most important. From time to time it had been destroyed by some accident and had to be rebuilt. At the time of Muhammad's birth, the Meccan Ka'ba was distinguished by a large stone built into one wall, the Black Stone. Later tradition maintained that the stone was originally white and had been given to Adam, some said to Abraham, as the foundation stone for the first House of Worship. But that was later tradition: at the time it was simply part of the stone worship of Arabia. Here, unexpectedly, is one of the important and perhaps surprising links of modern Islam to those early days, for the Ka'ba in Mecca in the twenty-first century contains that same Black Stone. It is certainly surprising that in such a strongly monotheistic religion as Islam a stone should play such a central role.

South of Mecca lay the great city of San'a, home to a good many Christians. Across the Red Sea lay the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, founded on the lives of two Syrian Christian young men, Edesius and Frumentius, who had been shipwrecked on the Red Sea coast some-

3. See the article "Ka'ba," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam,* ed. J. H. Kramers et al., new ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–), 4:317–22.

time in the fourth century. It was probably Ethiopian influence that was responsible for that Christian presence in San'a. In the years ahead, the histories of Islam and Ethiopia would impact on each other many times.

MUHAMMAD: A PROPHET DISDAINED

When Muhammad was born in 570, his father, Abdullah, was already dead. This meant that his mother, Amina, was robbed of a husband in a strongly patriarchal society. The name Abdullah, *Abdu-llah,* Servant of Allah, is a reminder that his son did not invent the name of the One High God whom millions of Muslims through the coming centuries would worship.

For any account of the life of Muhammad we have three obvious sources: the Qur'an, the Traditions (*Hadith*), and the earliest biography of Muhammad that has survived, the *Sira* by Ibn Ishaq, translated into English by Alfred Guillaume and published as *The Life of Muhammad.*[4]

A Life of Muhammad?

The following attempt at a brief biography of Muhammad generally follows Ibn Ishaq and the Qur'an, but a quite different biography can be put together by playing down these obvious sources.[5] And that is possible, first, because there is no universal agreement among scholars as to the date when the Qur'an came to be written and assembled, and second, because Ibn Ishaq was writing more than one hundred years after Muhammad's death.[6] Not unconnected is, third, the fact that in the period after Muhammad's death traditions concerning his life and teaching began to accumulate, to multiply, some mere pious fabrications, some fabrications to support some disputed point of Muslim practice, some genuine memories. There is a good Muslim tradition saying that when Bukhari, one of six Muslim scholars who edited authoritative collections of these Traditions, came to assemble what he considered to be a reliable collection of them, he selected fewer than three thousand different Traditions from a total of six hundred thousand,[7] one half of 1 percent. And yet it must have been from these oral and written traditions that Ibn Ishaq compiled his *Sira.*

4. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1955.

5. See, for example, Martin Lings, *Muhammad*: *His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1983).

6. See W. Montgomery Watt, "The Reliability of Ibn Ishaq's Sources," in his *Early Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), chap. 1.

7. See the article "Al-Bukhari," *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 1:1296.

The position is summed up conservatively by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook:

> There is no hard evidence for the existence of the Koran in any form before the last decade of the seventh century, and the tradition which places this rather opaque revelation in its historical context is not attested before the middle of the eighth. The historicity of the Islamic tradition is thus to some degree problematic: while there are no cogent internal grounds for rejecting it, there are equally no cogent external grounds for accepting it.[8]

These two scholars proceed to set aside the traditional sources. Of the resulting biography Clinton Bennett says:

> According to these writers, Muhammad's life, as recorded in the *Sira,* is largely the invention of later generations; the real Muhammad was a Messianic-type figure who led a movement to re-possess Jerusalem; the Qur'an was posthumously composed sometime during the Khalifate of Abd al-Malik.[9]

The biography set out here takes a more positive view both of the Qur'an and of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira,* but at the same time recognizes that what we have in both is a redaction, a rewriting of events from the perspective of a period after Muhammad's death.

As usual in those days, the babe was put out to a wet nurse, a poor woman who would care for children until they were weaned, which might not be until they were three or even four years old. But this fact confirms other hints that the family was not a poor one. Indeed, it was an influential family. Muhammad's grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, was guardian of the Ka'ba. His uncle, Abu Talib, was clan chief of the Hashimites, one of the ten or so clans that made up the Quraysh, the dominant tribe of Mecca.

The Year of the Elephant

Muslim tradition calls the year of Muhammad's birth The Year of the Elephant as a reminder of the attempt of the Ethiopian Regent in southern Arabia, the Yemen, to destroy the Ka'ba. In 523 there was a

8. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 3.

9. Clinton Bennett, *In Search of Muhammad* (London and New York: Cassell, 1998), 110. John Wansbrough's alternative approach to the origins of Islam, presenting it as a movement that developed and came to fruition outside Arabia, is sympathetically considered by G. R. Hawting, "John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism," in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* (New York: Prometheus, 2000), 520–23.

massacre of Christians in Yemen, and the Byzantine emperor, Justin, called on Ethiopia to go to the aid of the Christians there. This example of Christian solidarity in the face of non-Christian threats was to be repeated during the Crusades over five hundred years later.

Not only did the Ethiopians defeat the oppressors, they also annexed the Yemen to Ethiopia, whose emperor sent a man named Aryat as his viceroy. Aryat was soon displaced by the ambitious Abraha, defeated in single combat and killed. It was probably Abraha who built the big church in San'a. This church quickly established itself as a pilgrimage destination and was on track to eclipse the Ka'ba in Mecca. Rivalry between the Yemenis in the south and the Meccans to the north became more and more bitter, exploding when one of Abraha's allies in the Hijaz area between the two was assassinated. Abraha mounted a punitive expedition with the express intention of destroying the Ka'ba.

According to legend Abraha assembled an army of some twenty thousand men, and added to them thirteen elephants, headed by an enormous beast named Mahmud. The advance guard entered Mecca and took a certain amount of plunder, including two hundred camels belonging to Muhammad's grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, guardian of the Ka'ba. He went out to meet Abraha and demanded the return of his camels. Abraha received him with respect but said: "You pleased me much when I saw you; then I was much displeased with you when I heard what you said. Do you wish to talk to me about two hundred camels . . . and say nothing about your religion and the religion of your forefathers, which I have come to destroy?" To that Abd al-Muttalib replied: "I am the owner of the camels, and the temple has an owner who will defend it."

The next day Abraha's army advanced on Mecca, led by Mahmud, the elephant. But once Mecca was in sight, the elephant refused to advance. Still facing Mecca it knelt down, and no amount of beating with iron bars or even with metal hooks could drive Mahmud to its feet. And now a strange cloud appeared in the west: great flocks of birds. As they came closer, it could be seen that each bird carried three stones, one in each claw and one in its beak. Some traditions said that the names of Abraha's soldiers were written on the stones. As the birds swooped over the soldiers, they dropped their stones on the named targets, killing any man hit by his stone.

Now came a further wonder: a roaring sound heralded a sudden flood of water, sweeping down from the mountains. It raged through Abraha's camp, sweeping away the bodies of Abraha's soldiers. The scattered remnant of the army fled southward, among them Abraha

himself, stricken by some dreadful disease. When he reached San'a he died. There was only one survivor, Abu Yaksum, who took the melancholy story back to the Negus, the king, in Ethiopia,

> and going directly to the king told him the tragic story; and upon that Prince's asking him what sort of birds they were that had occasioned such a destruction the man pointed to one of them, which had followed him all the way, and was at this time hovering directly over his head, when immediately the bird let fall the stone, and struck him dead at the king's feet.[10]

That is the legend lying behind the history that scholars are trying to establish. The reference to the stones may allude to an outbreak of smallpox, which first appeared in Arabia about this time. The flood of water may well refer to a dam that burst its retaining wall at this time. In any case, the story cannot refer to the year of Muhammad's birth, 570; by then Abraha was already dead. The one reference to this event in the Qur'an is in Sura 105, but there is no suggestion there that the event coincided with the birth of Muhammad. According to J. S. Trimingham[11] the expedition occurred somewhere between 540 and 546, some thirty years before Muhammad's birth. Nevertheless, some significance can be found in this account since it provides early evidence of conflict between Christian empires and the religious authorities in Mecca. This rivalry and conflict was to intensify greatly in coming centuries.

Muhammad the Orphan

As an orphan Muhammad was of little importance in Meccan affairs, but he almost certainly suffered from the typical urban neglect of orphans, widows, the poor, and the aged. In later years he would remember his experiences. His mother died when he was six years old, and then his grandfather Abd al-Muttalib cared for him. And when his grandfather died, his uncle Abu Talib cared for him. As a young man he traveled with Abu Talib's trading caravan into Syria; on these journeys he probably heard some of the stories from the Old Testament and encountered the more powerful and developed world of the Christian Byzantine empire. He may have contrasted what he saw in Syria, a people united in the worship of one God, with the lot of the fragmented Arab peoples of his homeland, worshiping a multiplicity of idols.

10. See A. Guillaume's translation of Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad, *The Life of Muhammad*, 25–30.

11. J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 38–42.

FIGURE 1.2. LIFE OF MUHAMMAD

From His Birth to the First Visions: 570–610 (40 years)	
?	Death of his father, Abdullah
570	Traditional date of Muhammad's birth at Mecca
576	Death of his mother; cared for by his grandfather Abd al-Muttalib, then by his uncle Abu Talib
582	Tradition of a journey to Syria with his uncle's caravan; prophecy of the Syrian monk Bahira
595	Marriage to Khadija
From the First Visions to the Hijra: 610–622 (12 years)	
610	Muhammad as Warner; persecution begins
615	*Hijra* to Ethiopia
616	Quraysh boycott of the Hashimites
619	Death of Khadija and Abu Talib; Abu Lahab becomes clan leader
620	First contact with Yathrib, later known as Madina (Medina)
621	First oath of al-'Aqaba, the Oath of Women
622	Second oath of al-'Aqaba; Hijra to Madina
From the Hijra to the Submission of Mecca: 622–630 (8 years)	
622*	Constitution of Madina promulgated; categories of emigrants and helpers emerge
624	Successful Nakhla raid; *razzia* becomes *jihad*; Battle of Badr
625	Battle of Uhud; paradise promised to those killed on jihad
627	Siege of Madina and Battle of the Ditch; men of Banu Qurayza executed
628	Attempted pilgrimage; Treaty of Hudaybiyya
630	Mecca entered; Ka'ba idols destroyed
From the Submission of Mecca to Muhammad's Death: 630–632 (2 years)	
630	Battle of Hunayn; defeat of Hawazin
March 632	Muhammad performs Greater Pilgrimage
June 8, 632	Death of Muhammad

*Later became year 1 in the Muslim calendar.

Legend also has it that on one of the journeys into Syria Muhammad encountered a Christian monk named Bahira. Bahira had previously ignored these caravans, but after receiving a vision he prepared a feast for the travelers. Being just a boy, Muhammad was left behind

to guard the baggage. Bahira, however, insisted that he be sent for, to join in the meal. Then Bahira questioned Muhammad about his lifestyle, examined the boy, and found between his shoulder blades the seal of prophethood. Abu Talib was then questioned about the boy and warned to take care of him: "Take your nephew back to his country and guard him carefully against the Jews, for by Allah! if they see him and know about him what I know, they will do him evil; a great future lies before this nephew of yours."[12] Even at this early stage of the account of the life of Muhammad, we can perceive a theme which would recur throughout his life and in later Islamic history: a deep suspicion of the Jews.

Back in Mecca the abilities of Muhammad and the swiftness of his mind were becoming apparent. After the Ka'ba had been accidentally destroyed on a particular occasion and was being rebuilt, the moment came for placing the Black Stone in position. The men could not agree on who should have that honor and decided to accept the advice of the next man to come into the court of the Ka'ba. The next man was Muhammad. His advice was Solomonic: place the Black Stone in a blanket, and each of you help to lift the blanket and carry the stone into position.[13]

Marriage to Khadija and a New Life

Khadija was a widow, an entrepreneur who ran her own trading caravans into Syria. She hired Muhammad to take charge of one of these caravans. The relationship developed, and despite the fact that she was fifteen years older than Muhammad, he married her. He remained faithful to her until her death, and she exercised a great influence on him, supporting him when he doubted himself, and through the marriage giving him a new and more influential position in Meccan society. Perhaps as important, she gave him leisure time. Muhammad took to retiring out to the desert, musing, pondering what he had seen in Syria and what that might mean for his Arab people. The cave

12. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad,* 80f.

13. See the article "Ka'ba," *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 4:317–22. This article notes the incident of the repositioning of the Black Stone at Muhammad's suggestion, but Maxime Rodinson (*Mohammed* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971], 52) queries the historicity of the event. Ignaz Goldziher provides a rationale for the preservation of Ka'ba, Black Stone, and their related ceremonies: "The sacred memorial places of the Ka'ba associated with patriarchal times had their origin, like the whole Islamic cult of the Ka'ba, in the need to make acceptable to the new order pagan ceremonies that, because of the Arab character attached to ancestral tradition, were indispensable" (*Muslim Studies,* vol. 2 [London: Allen and Unwin, 1971], 279). See also Malise Ruthven, "Introductory: Pilgrimage to Mecca," chap. 1 of *Islam in the World,* 2d ed. (London: Penguin, 2000), esp. 13–17.

Hira was a favorite nighttime retreat for him. In that cave during his fortieth year Muhammad claimed to have received the first of the revelations that he would experience for the rest of his life. These would one day be written down and collected to become the Qur'an.

Muhammad himself was at first confused by his experiences. The Arabs believed in divinities, but they also believed in the *jinn,* spirits, especially spirits that inhabited the deserts. He wondered if his ideas were coming from them. Khadija, apparently, was the one who reassured him, and thus with new confidence Muhammad began to preach his message. It is all but impossible to assess this claim to revelation. Certainly the Qur'an itself details events at the cave Hira, and it is reasonably certain that Muhammad later claimed to have received further revelations, although never again in quite the way they had come in the cave. There, he said, the angel Gabriel had transmitted the revelations to him. Later it was claimed to be more subtle: the ideas were dropped into his mind as unconsciously as the bees learned how and where to construct their hives. It was *wahy,* inspiration, owing nothing to his own knowledge or volition.

For Muslims there can be no questioning the view that what Muhammad received was revelation from Allah, mediated by an angel. For the rationalist such as Maxime Rodinson, the Marxist writer on Islam, the question as to "what really happened" is less easily answered. His suggestion is that it was Muhammad's subconscious mind, working on all that he had learned from Jews and Christians, that produced the visions.[14] In any alternative explanation of the source of the "revelations," one must give due weight first to the fact that physical manifestations appear to have accompanied them, and second to the fact that either Muhammad or those who heard him or both were able to distinguish between his regular conversation and the "revelations," between what went into the Qur'an and what was reserved for the later collection of Prophetic Traditions.

Exactly what constituted the initial message is uncertain.[15] We do have the evidence of the Qur'an itself, but this is complicated by the manner in which the Qur'an has been assembled. The individual chapters, *suras,* are mostly composite, containing sections from different points in Muhammad's lifetime. And when the chapters were brought together, it was decided to have the longer chapters first and the shorter chapters last, a system that is almost exactly the opposite of their chronological order. The short chapters at the end represent

14. Rodinson, *Mohammed,* 77.

15. Most Muslims would accept Sura 96:1–5 as the first revelation to come to Muhammad.

some of Muhammad's earlier words, and those at the beginning his later words.

Muhammad as Warner

Even with this uncertainty we can at least suggest that Muhammad's early teaching had three strands to it. First was what would remain at the center of Islam, the statement that God is one and that there is but one God: the central doctrine of *tawhid,* oneness. Tawhid obviously implied an attack on the religion of the day, the worship of idols, and with it an attack on the prosperity that idolatry brought to Mecca. The second emphasis was a call to care for the aged, the widow, the orphan. As we have seen, Muhammad knew something of the experience of being a nobody, and now he spoke out against the heartlessness of the wealthy and the powerful. Third, he proclaimed himself a Warner, admonishing his listeners about the reality of hell awaiting those who ignored his call to believe in the one God.

Behind the Arabs were the years of ignorance, the age of *jahiliyya;* now an Arabic revelation had come for them, parallel to those already given to the Jews in Hebrew and to the Gentiles in Greek.

There was a ready response to this new teaching, both from among the poor, responding to his concern for them, and from the influential, responding rather to the intellectual appeal of the one God over against the absurdity of idolatry. Inevitably there was opposition, too. Bilal bin Ribah was a slave who became a follower of the new teaching and signified it by his continual repetition of what was obviously already a catchphrase of Muhammad's followers: "One, One." His owner, Umayya bin Khalaf, had Bilal dragged out into the desert and thrown on his back. A rock was placed on his chest, and Umayya threatened him: "You will stay here till you die or deny Muhammad and worship Al-Lat and Al-'Uzza."[16]

But Bilal's only response was the unvarying "One, One." Abu Bakr, an early follower of Muhammad and later his first successor, saw his sufferings and agreed to exchange one of his own slaves for Bilal, whom he immediately freed. Here we have evidence of the broad appeal of Muhammad's early message.

The persecution increased until in 615 Muhammad decided that it would be best for some, at least, of his followers to take refuge across the Red Sea in Christian Ethiopia (Abyssinia). This is sometimes called the first *hijra,* some seven years before the Hijra, the emigration to Madina (Medina), that now marks year one in the Muslim calendar.

16. The anecdote is recorded in some detail by Ibn Ishaq. See Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad,* 143–44, 303.