



The Islam Research Group

What Is Islam?



Contents

I Uncontested Facts	2
Introduction	
Jews	3
Christianity	5
Mohammed in Mecca	8
Mohammed at Medina	9
Mohammed's wives	15
The Quran	16
The Sharia	17
II Irrefutable reason	33
Slavery	
Exploitative sex and the marriage of juvenile girls	34
Equality of Women	35
Severe violence used as a punishment	
Violent jihad	36
Muslim attitudes to Unbelievers	37
III Counter arguments considered	38
Conclusion	43

Paul Ellis

The author is a former employed barrister and teacher, a practising Roman Catholic and a member of the national executive committee of the For Britain Movement.

Extracts from the Quran reproduced in the body of this booklet are, unless otherwise stated, taken from *The Study Quran* published by Harper One (2015).

Every fact presented in this paper is believed to be unchallenged by any generally respected academic authority.

Introduction:

The classic credo of Islam is contained in a form of words known as the *shahada*:



'There is no god but God and Mohammed is His prophet'.

Orthodox Islamic belief holds that Mohammed lived in Arabia in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, that during his later life he declared that he had received visits from the angel Jabril¹ who had delivered messages to him directly from God and that as Mohammed announced these revelations they were memorised or written down and after his death were compiled to form a canon of text known as the Quran.

Very many verses in the Quran are, according to this belief, addressed to Mohammed and preface their substantive message with a command to Mohammed to repeat their content to a wider audience, typically by beginning a recitation with the word "Say... ". Sometimes they recite a question that has been posed to Mohammed by his followers using a form of word such as: "They ask you concerning..." All this serves to emphasise that the Quran is presented not as the words of Mohammed himself but merely as his repetition of instructions given to him by Jabril.

As evidence of divine authorship, the Quran contains five similar assertions that its form is so perfect that it could not be the work of a human author, for example stating:

11.13. "Or do they say:

'He [*Mohammed*] has fabricated it [*the Quran*]?"

Say:

'Then bring ten surahs like it and call upon whosoever you can apart from God if you are truthful'.

14. But if they answer you not, then know that it has been sent down with God's Knowledge and that there is no god but He. So are you submitters?" ²

¹ Jabril being an Arabic language variation of the name known to the English-speaking world as Gabriel. Gabriel features as the messenger archangel in both the Jewish scriptures and the Christian New Testament.

² Verses containing what is essentially the same challenge appear at **2.23**, **4.82**, **10.38** and **17.88**.

The Quran also contains declarations that the ‘Messenger of God’, whom Muslims assume to be Mohammed, provides a perfect exemplar of moral conduct that all Muslims should seek to emulate:

33.21. “Indeed you have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example for those who hope in God and the Last Day and remember God much.”³

As a consequence, it is generally held that to be an orthodox Muslim is to believe:

- ❖ that the Quran is the verbatim word of God; and
- ❖ that in applying the Quran Muslims are bound to follow Mohammed’s example in so far as this can be discerned from the historical record.

However, although the Quran urges Muslims to follow the example of Mohammed, the historical record from which Muslims may seek to learn about Mohammed’s life is problematic.

The earliest and best known biography of Mohammed, *Sirat Rasul Allah (the Life of the Messenger of God)* was probably written by Moḥammed ibn Ishaq (hereafter referred to as Ibn Ishaq) approximately a hundred and thirty years after Mohammed’s death. The full text of this work is now lost but lengthy extracts have survived as they were copied into two later works. These are most frequently read in English language as reconstructed by Alfred Guillaume and published as *The Life of Mohammed* in 1955.

In addition, numerous short accounts of words and deeds of Mohammed known as *hadith* (‘narrations’) were recorded, first by Islamic jurists, then, about two hundred years after Mohammed’s death - in large collections. Six collections are generally regarded as being the most reliable, and of these six, two are treated with greatest respect: the *Sahih* (‘Trusted’) collections of *Sahih Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*.

Muslim theologians and jurists generally accord the *hadith* greater weight in as a source of Mohammed’s life than biographies such as Ibn Ishaq’s as each contains a purported unbroken chain of narrators who transmitted the account from companions of Mohammed to the compiler of the written collection. However:

- they are generally presented as a short account of a saying, deed or habit of Mohammed without context and as such they constitute a fragmentary record of Mohammed’s life and teachings;
- all scholars accept that there are false *hadith* and there is no consensus concerning which *hadith* are reliable and which are not and schools of Islamic jurisprudence have evolved based, *inter alia*, upon their differing assessments as to the weight to be given to individual *hadith*.

³ Also: **4.59, 83, 24.63.**

Judaism and Christianity

Mohammed was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but the Quran makes numerous references to the prophets of the Jewish scriptures and to Jesus and some other figures from the gospels. In so doing it presents itself as the culmination of a series of prophesies given by God, of which these Jewish prophets, including Jesus, formed part. Therefore, a brief overview of Judaism and Christianity is here provided by way of preface to the founding of Islam.

The Jews

The Israelites were a people of the ancient Near East. Of old, they had believed in one God and preserved a history of their people imbued with accounts of God's direct interventions in their affairs following a covenant that He had made with their ancestor Abraham. These stories, and also a code of strict religious laws, are traditionally attributed to Moses (and this law will hereafter be referred to as Mosaic Law) although modern analysis shows them to have been composed by many people over a long period. The oldest texts consist of five scriptures - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - which are known by the Jews as the Torah and by Christians as the first five books of the Old Testament.

The Israelites are said to have established their First Kingdom occupying territory that one might broadly today describe as Israel-Palestine. This kingdom subsequently divided into two parts, and in 586 BCE the southern kingdom, Judah, came under the control of the Babylonian Empire and many of its leading citizens were taken to Mesopotamia as hostages. During the Babylonian Captivity the Israelites, through a series of prophets including Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, developed (from a Jewish perspective) new religious concepts including a belief in the immortal soul and a hoped-for liberation at the hands of a messiah. From this period onwards the term 'Israelites' ceases to be generally used in favour of the word 'Jews', signifying a transition from communal folklore and traditions to a developed theology.

During the third century BCE Ptolemy II, a successor to the empire of Alexander the Great, had many Jewish scriptures translated into Greek for his great library at Alexandria. These included the Torah and other Jewish texts from the Babylonian period and later. The resulting compendium, comprising histories, prophecies, psalms (hymns) and other devotional texts (now known to scholars as the Septuagint) marks the earliest occasion on which it is known that the major Jewish scriptures had been combined as a single collection.

By the time of Jesus this body of texts was commonly used by Greek-speaking Jews as a 'Hebrew bible'. After Jesus' death this collection would be adopted by Christians to form the prototype of what they came to call the Old Testament.

In the century before the birth of Jesus the region fell under the control of the Roman Empire. Initially the Romans governed the Jews through a client king, Herod the Great, but in 6 CE the southern part of the region was formally incorporated into the Roman Empire, as the Province of Judaea. In 66 the Romans crushed a Jewish revolt and from the time of this event the Jews became scattered across the Middle East.

Jesus and Christianity

Jesus was born a Jew in the Herodian Kingdom of Judea, at that time under indirect Roman rule⁴. Several accounts of Jesus' life were written in the century following his death, and the church that was established by his followers selected four books derived from these, the Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as together representing an approved history of the life of Jesus for liturgical and theological purposes.

The gospels describe Jesus as having been miraculously born of a virgin, living for a period of approximately three years as a preacher in the area around the Galilee area, before being arrested by the Jewish religious authorities for blasphemy and being crucified by the Roman civil authorities for treason. The Gospels also describe Jesus appearing to his disciples in a supernatural form, having risen from the dead, and thereafter ascending into heaven.

The gospel accounts presents Jesus as teaching his followers to observe the following values:

- i. To show selfless compassion and generosity to all others, regardless of that other person's race or standing in society, and especially to show kindness to one's enemies, strangers, and those on the margins of society (such as lepers, prostitutes or tax collectors for the occupying Roman Empire).

Amongst Jesus' most famous teachings in this regard are:

- the Parable of the Good Samaritan⁵ in which a foreigner in Judea was shown to be doing God's will by helping a stranger, contrasted favourably with two observant Jews who had failed to help; and
- Jesus' declaration that whenever anyone helps any hungry, thirsty, naked or ill person. or a stranger or a prisoner, they will be treated by God as having as though they had performed that service for Jesus himself⁶.

- ii. To avoid forming moral judgements against others, Jesus telling his disciples to "*Judge not, lest ye be judged*" and to remove the beam from their own eye before looking for motes in the eyes of others⁷;
- iii. To forgive all wrongs done to them, a principle depicted through the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Prodigal Son, and encapsulated in the words of the Lord's Prayer "*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*"⁸;

and

- iv. To adopt a genuine attitude of humility and compassion, which are more important to God than achieving particular ends or observing religious forms.

⁴ Prevailing opinion now is that Jesus was actually born some four years earlier than the date used as the start of the common era.

⁵ Luke 10:25-37

⁶ Matthew 25:34-45

⁷ Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 6 37-42.

⁸ Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7; John 10:1-21

Jesus's recorded views on the Mosaic law are complex. On the one hand he is said to have asserted that he had not come to change 'one jot or tittle' of the Mosaic law but rather had come to fulfil it.⁹

However he is also presented in the gospels as disapproving of its strict application or enforcement.

In particular he:

- Appear to have regarded the law as secondary to man's needs, dismissing criticism of him for preparing food on the Sabbath with the phrase "*Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath*"¹⁰,
 - preached that the most important commandments were to love God and one another,
- and
- argued strongly against being judgmental against one another but to look to their own sins, urging his listeners not to judge lest they themselves be judged;¹¹ this manifested itself in his approach to the Mosaic law when he secured the freedom of a woman caught in adultery with the words: "*Let he who is without sin cast the first stone*".¹²

His harshest words were directed against those who took a legalistic approach to religion calling the religious scribes and lawyers of his day "*blind guides*" and a "*brood of vipers*".¹³

Approximately twenty years after the crucifixion, with many non-Jews converting to Christianity, the Council of Jerusalem presided over by the two most influential figures in the apostolic church, St Peter and St Paul, decreed that, subject to a number of exceptions, the Mosaic Law was not binding upon non-Jewish Christians.¹⁴ Since this time hardly any Christians have also been practising Jews.

From approximately AD 140 the church adopted the four gospels, the Septuagint¹⁵, and several other texts such as the epistles of the first disciples, into a single canon, that would later become known as the Bible. Although different Christian traditions treat the Bible differently all major denominations¹⁶ agree that:

- all the books of the Bible were written by people from their own perspective, using their own words, often with substantial subsequent editing;
- Christians are not bound to treat the Bible as literally true;
- Christians are not bound to follow the Mosaic Law.

⁹ Matthew 5.18

¹⁰ Mark 2:27

¹¹ Matthew 7.1-5

¹² John 8:3-11

¹³ Matthew 23:1-33

¹⁴ Acts 15

¹⁵ See [Jews](#) above

¹⁶ Including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodism and Reformed churches

In 325 the majority of the Christian church adopted the core tenets of Christianity into the Nicene Creed. These include the belief:

- in monotheism;
- that Jesus was the messiah whose coming had been foretold by the Jewish prophets;
- in the Holy Trinity: a complex doctrine that asserts that Jesus was both the Son of God and of the same nature as God - sometimes expressed as God's Word made flesh - and that following his death and resurrection a third aspect of God, the Holy Spirit, was sent to guide the church;
- that Jesus' sacrifice of his life created a new covenant between all humanity and God by virtue of which anyone may have their sins forgiven and experience immortal life after their death on earth.

Although Christianity was initially persecuted by the Roman Empire, the Christian church thrived and in 380 Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The Recorded Life of Mohammed

Mohammed at Mecca

Note: It is not possible to construct a chronology of Mohammed's life in which every event will be agreed by every Muslim, but it is believed that the following chronology is in full accord with the traditional, orthodox Muslim understanding of the history of Mohammed.

Mohammed is generally held by Muslims to have been born in Mecca, Arabia, in 570. Although he was neither a Jew nor a Christian he clearly came to possess some knowledge of both religious traditions.

Mohammed was born an orphan of limited means. He worked as a camel driver but at the age of twenty five married a wealthy widow and trader Khadija. They had six children – two boys and four girls- and, no sons having survived to adulthood, they also adopted a slave, Zayd, as their son.

From 610 Mohammed commenced declaring a series of recitations that he said came from Jabril and came to constitute the Quran. The revelations that Mohammed proclaimed whilst he was living in Mecca (the 'Meccan Surahs') generally:

- preach monotheism;
- present contrasting images of heaven and hell; and
- warn listeners that the means to attain the former are through belief in the one God and the Jewish prophets - amongst whom he includes Jesus – by expressing submission to God and by acting righteously. Righteousness is presented in general terms of obedience to God's will, generosity to others and humility.

Over time the pagan Meccans became hostile to Mohammed's teachings and for two years imposed a trade boycott on Mohammed's clan. At one stage Mohammed retreated out of Mecca camping in a nearby valley. Mohammed returned to Mecca after the boycott was abandoned, although hostility between him and the non-Muslim Meccans continued.¹⁷

Mohammed gained the support of a number of Arabs who had travelled to Mecca on pilgrimage from Yathrib (now Medina). In 622 seventy three Yathrib converts pledged to support and defend Mohammed and his followers in an incident known as the Second Pledge at Aqaba and following this event Mohammed determined to migrate with the majority of his followers to Yathrib. This migration is referred to as the Hijrah and from this time onwards the Muslim community became an autonomous community known as the *ummah*. Several tribal groups already lived around Yathrib some of which were Jewish.

¹⁷ The extent of the persecution is not easy to assess as a matter of history. Ibn Ishaq records some slave owners torturing their slaves to renounce Islam and there is one reported killing a female slave, traditionally called Sumayya bint Khayyat, belonging to one of Mohammed's chief opponents, Abu Jahl. There are accounts of some minor assaults used against Mohammed whilst in Mecca. On one occasion Abu Jahl placed some camel intestines over him whilst he prayed; on a separate occasion a man called Uqba grabbed Mohammed's cloak and tried to strangle him until being dragged off; and one of Mohammed's own uncles, Lahab, placed thorns outside Mohammed's doorway to prick the soles of his feet. The record of these incidents is not as detailed as one might wish but it is submitted that on the face of the historical record none of these actions seem to have constituted a deliberate intent to cause Mohammed or his free supporters serious injury.

Mohammed at Medina

Following the Second Pledge at Aqaba, but before his departure for Yathrib Mohammed announced two revelations declaring that henceforth violence would be justified against the Meccans.

These are:

22.39: “Permission is granted to those who are fought, because they have been wronged.
– and truly God is able to help them.

40: Who were expelled from their homes without right only for saying ‘Our Lord is God’. Were it not for God’s repelling people, some by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, wherein God’s name is mentioned much, would have been destroyed. And God will surely help those who help him - truly God is Strong, Mighty - **[41]** who, were we to establish them upon the earth would perform the prayer, give the alms, enjoin right and forbid wrong. And unto God is the end of all affairs.”

and:

2.190: “And **fight in the way of God against those who fight against you but do not transgress.** Truly, God loves not the transgressors.

191: **And slay them wheresoever you come across them and expel them whence they have expelled you, for fitna¹⁸ is worse than slaying.** But do not fight them near the Sacred Mosque until they fight with you there. But if they fight you then slay them. Such is the recompense of the disbelievers.

192: But if they desist, then truly God is Forgiving, Merciful.

193: And fight them until there is no fitna and all is for God. But if they desist then there is no enmity save against the wrongdoers.”

¹⁸ Literally strife, interpreted here as defiance of God’s will

A few months after his arrival in Yathrib, Mohammed began organising his followers to engage in military operations. These may be understood as comprising three distinct but connected series of expeditions:

- i. To steal from caravans travelling to and from Mecca, and later to prevail over the Meccan counterattacks.
- ii. To raid tribes of Bedouins who lived in between Mecca and Yathrib,¹⁹ to support his disruption of Meccan trade routes and to extend his territorial influence. This process continued after Mohammed's eventual conquest of Mecca and by his death his military reach stretched to include Yemen in the south of Arabia and areas outside of the Arabian Peninsula to the north.
- iii. To remove resistance to his message and rule in Yathrib/Medina. At some stage the tribes of Yathrib/Medina are reported to have signed a document, commonly called the Constitution of Medina, in which the signatory tribes pledged collective military support with all disputes to be arbitrated upon by Mohammed, although there is no consensus over precisely when this treaty was agreed.

The major three events in this limb of Mohammed's strategy were the exile of two of the three major Jewish tribes from Yathrib, and the massacre of all the men from the third, the Banu Qurayza, and the enslavement of its women and children.

¹⁹ Sometimes these were motivated by Mohammed's belief that these tribes meant him harm. It is likely that they fitted into a strategy of Mohammed gaining political and military dominance over the region

Chronology of Mohammed's Medinan Years

To understand the context in which the Quran was announced and the example that Mohammed provides, it is necessary to consider the recorded events of Mohammed's Medinan years.

For the purposes of this tract, it is convenient to present these in the form of a chronology. The years are numbered according to the Islamic calendar from the date of the Hijrah (AH).

Year

1AH The Hijrah

Mohammed and his followers left Mecca for Yathrib/Medina

2AH The raid on Naklah

Muslim fighters carried out their first successful raid on a caravan carrying raisins and leather close to Mecca. During the raid one caravaner was killed and two captured. The raid was initially controversial even amongst the Muslims, as it had taken place during a traditional Arabian sacred month of truce, but Mohammed announced a verse of the Quran²⁰ vindicating it.

The Battle of Badr

The leader of a large Meccan caravan, Abu Sufyan, became aware that Mohammed was planning to attack it and summoned reinforcements from Mecca. These met Mohammed in battle at a valley called Badr and were unexpectedly defeated by the smaller Muslim force.

Shortly after the Battle of Badr, Mohammed ordered the (separate) killings of three poets who had mocked him.

Mohammed also expelled the Jewish tribe of the Banu Qaynuqa from Yathrib over an incident in which a Muslim woman had been stripped and a Muslim who had killed her assailant had himself been killed.

The Muslim community conducted its first raid on a Bedouin tribe, the Banu Salem, whose livestock they seized.

3AH The Muslims carried out a successful raid on a large Meccan caravan.

²⁰ 2.217

The Battle of Uhud

A Meccan army, much larger and better prepared than the one defeated at Badr, led by Abu Sufyan marched to confront Mohammed at Yathrib. Mohammed left Yathrib to meet the Meccans and the two armies met at the foot of Mount Uhud. The result was a defeat for the Muslim army. Mohammed himself was wounded and had for a time been thought by his supporters to have been killed.

After the battle, it is generally thought Abu Sufyan had the opportunity to kill Mohammed but spared him, as they held a shouted conversation in which they agreed to fight again, at Badr, a year hence.

In a separate event six Muslim missionaries were killed by fighters of the Banu Lahyan.

4AH Mohammed ordered the assassination of the chief of the Banu Lahyan.

40 (alternatively 70) Muslims were killed by the Banu Salem.

The Expulsion of the Banu Nadir

Mohammed expelled a second Jewish tribe, the Banu Nadir from Yathrib, announcing a revelation that they had planned to kill him whilst he waited outside their compound by dropping a stone on his head.

The 'Second battle of Badr'

A Meccan force intending to do battle with Mohammed at Badr - as agreed by Abu Sufyan and Mohammed after the Battle of Uhud - was forced back by drought giving further prestige to Mohammed.

5AH Mohammed sent a military expedition to the Christian town of Dumat al Jandal (350 miles northwest of Yathrib on the border of the Byzantine Empire). No fighting occurred.

The first Muslim raid against the Banu Mustaliq (on the Red Sea coast). Was conducted. Livestock and two hundred women were captured.

The 'Battle of the Trench'

In the third confrontation between Mohammed and the Meccans, ten thousand Meccans besieged Mohammed in Yathrib but were unable to attack across a defensive ditch that Mohammed had built and were forced to abandon the siege without major fighting.

The Massacre of the Banu Qurayza

Immediately after the Meccans had withdrawn, Mohammed besieged a Jewish tribe the Banu Qurayza for having received messages from the Meccans during the siege in which the Meccans had proposed an alliance. Qurayza agreed to Mohammed's allegation against them, that they had conspired against him, being arbitrated by a man, Sa'd ibn Mu'adh. Sa'd pronounced the sentence that all the men of the Banu Qurayza (estimated to be between six and nine hundred) were to be put to death and the children and women enslaved.

This sentence was carried out on Mohammed's order.

- 6AH** Muslim expeditions carried out raids against Bedouin tribes throughout western Arabia and at Dumat al Jandal and they conducted a further successful raid upon a Meccan caravan, this time carrying silver.

The chief of the Jewish settlement at Kaybar was invited to talks with Mohammed but was killed by his Muslim guides when he left Kaybar.

The Treaty of Hudaibiyyah

Mohammed led 1,400 Muslims, ostensibly on a pilgrimage of Mecca. The Meccans blocked his way and the two sides agreed a truce to last for the following ten years. In the aftermath of this treaty Mohammed announced a verse from the Quran called *The Victory* in which his supporters were promised booty from a forthcoming attack on Kaybar.

- 7AH** **The Conquest of Kaybar, Fidak and Wadi al Qura**

Mohammed besieged Jewish settlements at Kaybar which surrendered and promised to pay Mohammed half their produce in tribute indefinitely.

Mohammed ordered his first expeditions into Yemen, south of Mecca.

Mohammed makes peaceful pilgrimage to Mecca in accordance with the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah.

- 8AH** Mohammed sent his first raiding party into Byzantine territory, after the death of an emissary he had sent to Basra.

The Conquest of Mecca

Two years into his ten year treaty with the Meccans, Mohammed cited a breach of the treaty of Hudaibiyyah by a tribe allied to the Meccans and marched on Mecca. The Meccans, caught by surprise and by now outnumbered in fighters by the Muslims, surrendered.

The Battles of Hunayn, Autas, Siege of Ta'if

Two weeks following the conquest of Mecca, Mohammed led a combined Muslim/Meccan force to attack the Meccans' traditional rivals to their south the Banu Hawazin. The Hawazin were defeated in two battles and six thousand captives who were captured were exchanged for pledges of loyalty.

Some survivors were able to defend themselves in the town of Ta'if.

Mohammed, now unchallenged in Western Arabia, sent out expeditions to destroy idol shrines throughout the area he controlled.

9AH Surrender of Tabouk, Dumat el Jandal

A Muslim force captured the Byzantine town of Tabouk and gained pledge of loyalty from Prince of Duma at Dumat el Jandal.

Further raids were conducted beyond the Tigris River.

Ta'if surrendered and reluctantly agreed to the destruction of its shrine.

10AH Expeditions into Yemen led to the destruction of Dul Khalassa, the main pagan shrine in Yemen.

Mohammed received delegations from across region, including Egypt and Bahrain, seeking alliances with him.

The 'Sword Verse'

One of Mohammed's final Quranic announcement, stated that pagans in Mecca were to have four months in which to leave, convert to Islam or face death, unless they had a specific treaty of protection for longer in which case such treaty would be honoured.

9.3. "And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give zakat, let them [go] on their way."

Mohammed made a pilgrimage to Mecca and delivered a final sermon known as his Farewell Sermon at Mina during his return journey.

11AH Mohammed ordered the preparation of an expedition to Palestine (which left Medina on the day Mohammed died).

The death of Mohammed

Mohammed's Wives

Mohammed's had been monogamous to his first wife Khadija who died in 619 before the Hijrah. Mohammed married several more times. Although one Quranic verse had prescribed that a Muslim man may only take up to four wives at any one time Mohammed later announced another that he alone was permitted an unlimited number of wives.²¹

The traditional list of the wives²² of Mohammed, after Khadija, include:

- **Sawda;**
- **Aisha**, (said in several *hadith*²³ to have had a *nikah* - marriage contract - with Mohamed when she was six years old; consummated when she was nine years old);
- **Hafsa,**
- **Zeynab bint Khuzayma** and
- **Hind**, three widows of Muslims killed during the conflicts with Mecca;
- **Zeynab bint Jahsh**, Mohammed's cousin who had earlier been married to his adopted son Zayd, but whom Zayd divorced in order to free her to marry Mohammed;
- **Safiyah** and
- **Barrah** (after her marriage to Mohammed renamed **Juwayriyyah**) Two Jewish women who had been widowed and enslaved in the campaigns fought by Mohammed;²⁴
- **Ramla** and
- **Barrah** (after her marriage to Mohammed renamed **Maymuna**) who were both close relatives of Abu Sufyan, the commander of the Meccan forces.

Mohammed may have married a third Jewish woman, **Rayhana**. Rayhana had been widowed and enslaved at the defeat of the Banu Qurayza. She had initially refused Mohammed's offer of

²¹ **33:50:** "O Prophet, we have made lawful to thee thy wives to whom thou hast given their bridewealth as well as those whom your right hand possess of those whom God has granted thee as spoils of war.. and any believing woman if she gives herself to the Prophet and if the Prophet desires to marry her – for thee alone, not for the rest of the believers."

²² The term 'wife' is used here in accordance with traditional Islamic use, although clearly it is inappropriate to refer to women who accepted the status having earlier been widowed and enslaved by their 'husband'.

²³ These ages given for Aisha's marriage contract (*nikah*) with Mohammed and the consummation of their marriage are given in four of the six collections of hadith that are generally accepted by Sunni Muslims including the two collections (Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim) that are generally regarded as having the highest reliability (Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 7, Book 62: 64,65 and 88; and Sahih Muslim, 8:3309). The accuracy of these reports does not appear to have been questioned until the twentieth century, when Maulana Mohammed Ali, a member of the Ahmadiyya community put forward arguments that the conventional ages given could not have been correct. These arguments are now occasionally adopted by mainstream Muslims.

²⁴ The Battles of Kaybar and Mustiliq, respectively.

marriage, preferring to remain his slave, but some traditions state that she later accepted marriage to him.

Maryam, a Coptic Christian slave, sent with her sister to Mohammed as a gift of the king of Egypt was kept by Mohammed as his concubine, bearing him a son who died in infancy.

The Quran

The Quran is an extremely complex corpus of texts. When read in its original Arabic, the verses rhyme and the text appears intended to be read aloud, presumably in some form of liturgy.

Its content is varied, but includes:

- descriptions of God's creation of the seven heavens and the earth, and his creation of angels, jinns and Adam.
- references to stories that it seems to be assumed, from the way that they are referenced rather than told in a continuous narrative, to have been well known to the original audience, including:
- allusions to biblical stories including those of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, Joseph, Moses and Aaron, Solomon, and Jesus,
- three similar tales of Arab prophets – Hud, Saleh and Shuaib – each of whom is said to have called their people to worship God but saw them destroyed for their disobedience,
- other stories, some of which already existed in a Christian form (such as the Christian fable of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, or the apprenticeship of a disciple, in the Quran a young Moses, to a 'servant of God'), the legend of the imprisonment of the tribes of Gog and Magog by Alexander the Great (which is based upon the Biblical idea but is essentially secular) and some stories which seem novel such as Solomon's conference of the birds and his death leaning upon his staff, whilst jinn laboured for him;
- presented as a history of divine revelation of which the Quran is the continuation, occasional correction and the final culmination;
- graphic depictions of the sensual pleasures awaiting believers in heaven and agonising torments to be suffered by disbelievers in hell, following a bodily resurrection and judgment by God;
- generally worded exhortations to righteousness and virtues such as patience, forgiveness and generosity to selected categories of people (parents, travellers, orphans, neighbours etc);
- instructions to pray and observe certain religious obligations such as paying zakat (compulsory alms), making pilgrimage, fasting etc;

- a regime of laws and punishments;
 - insults and condemnations of unbelievers, and instructions not to take them as allies;
- and
- and exhortations to war, which are expressed in general terms, but many of which clearly are announced within a specific context of conflict.

Although the Quran is not arranged in a chronological or strictly thematic order, it is common within Islam to ascribe verses to being either:

Meccan, believed to have been announced by Mohammed in Mecca as he sought to gather followers in his home town (which tend to recite versions of biblical stories and Arabic lore along the theme of the need to demonstrate obedience to God and His messengers);

or

Medinan, believed to have been composed during Mohammed's ten year campaign of conflict with the Meccans and others, that led to his becoming the unchallenged ruler of Western Arabia (which tend to contain more, longer and less 'poetic' verses with more bellicose and legislative themes).

Virtually all Muslims accept the doctrine of 'abrogation', namely that where verses appear to conflict, this inconsistency may be explained by the later verse abrogating the earlier verses.

The Medinan Surahs of the Quran:

- ❖ are increasingly addressed to '*You who believe*' rather than to Mohammed personally, and draw a clear distinction between members of the Islamic community and unbelievers;
- ❖ prescribe precise laws, the *Sharia* (path), governing such matters as the treatment of slaves, inheritance, permissible sexual relationships, divorce, taxation, the punishment of crime, permissible food and personal hygiene;
- ❖ tend more to direct warnings and condemnation towards Jews and Christians than the Meccan verses which are more directed towards confronting polytheism;
- ❖ contain specific references in support of the military campaigns being waged by Mohammed against the Meccans and Jews of Yathrib, and of Mohammed's personal life and leadership of the Muslim community.

As mentioned above, both Meccan and Medinan verses contain. However the references to the Biblical stories is often partial and fragmentary, as though assuming that the listener/reader already has familiarity with the basic narrative. In relation to Jesus the Quran claims that Christians were incorrect in saying that Jesus had died on the cross although God had '*made it appear so unto them*'.²⁵

²⁵ **4:157**

The Sharia

The Quran contains some general instructions to its audience to show patience, generosity, honesty and forgiveness, but these tend to be expressed in general terms and limited to the surahs that are thought to be the earlier ones to be announced.

The most prominent and controversial ethical themes of both 'Meccan' and 'Medinan' surahs are:

subservience of the will: both to:

- i. divine authority, expressed in the Sharia (literally '*path*', commonly '*law*') set out in the Quran and the instructions and imitation of the 'messenger of God'; and also to
- ii. others within a social structure in which slavery, including sexual slavery, is approved, women are afforded a subservient role to men, and justice can be family based;

enmity to unbelievers (*kuffar*): who are describing in derogatory, sometimes dehumanised, terms, liable to divine punishment for their disbelief either by an imminent earthly disaster intervention or judgement in the hereafter, and whom:

- whom believers are repeatedly forbidden from taking as allies or treating them equally with fellow believers,
- against whom believers are instructed in over a hundred and fifty verses to wage 'jihad'

culminating with the instructions to slay all idolaters and require Jews and Christians to pay tribute in submission

Ten of the most controversial instructions contained in the Quran are presented below:

- I. '*Slavery is a blessing from God*'
- II. Permission for a Muslim man to have sex with '*those whom their right hand possesses*'
- III. Inferior matrimonial rights for women, including permission to a man to strike his wife to enforce her obedience,
- IV. Inferior inheritance rights for women,
- V. Marriage to premenarchal girls permitted,
- VI. The endorsement of honour killings,
- VII. Laws restricting sexual autonomy,
- VIII. Laws prescribing inhumane punishments,
- IX. Instructions to engage in violent jihad,
- X. Instructions to demonstrate hostility to unbelievers.

Inevitably there are a range of views concerning the interpretation of each of the verses cited. In this tract the verses are so far as possible left to speak for themselves.

However, each of these instructions is the subject of a separate more detailed analysis available on the Islam Research Group site.

In these papers, the principal verses containing the instruction is presented in sixteen different leading English translations of the Quran, drawn from a wide range of Islamic traditions,

together with:

- **any account of the circumstances of the verse's narration given by the most respected compilation of narration accounts, the *Asbab Nuzul* of Ismail al Wahidi,**
- **any relevant context provided by the recorded life of Mohammed**
- **any related verses from the Quran, and**
- **the rule's application by the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence;**
- **and any explanation provided by leading classical Quran commentaries including that of Ibn Kathir, author of the most widely read Quranic commentary.**

It is hoped that these will give a comprehensive understanding of the verse as it is believed by Muslims to have been practised and preached by Mohammed.

I 'Slavery is a blessing from God'²⁶

The Quran contains several references to slavery as an established part of society.

There include:

- ❖ instructions regulating the holding of slaves including the permission to have sex with '*those whom one's right hand possesses*'; and
- ❖ instructions to free slaves as a punishment for wrongdoing (for example the non-deliberate killing of a Muslim), an act of piety or as an act of kindness to the slave in question.

There is no indication that the practice of enslaving or keeping slaves *per se* is to be disapproved of, and slaves are required for the instruction to free a slave as a punishment to be complied with.

On the contrary **16.71** asserts that slavery is used by God as an instrument of his showing favour or disfavour:

16.71. "And God has favoured some of you above others in provision.

Those who have been favoured do not hand over their provision to those whom their right hands possess such that they would be equal in this regard. Would they thus reject the blessings of God?"

²⁶ For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 10: 'Slavery is a blessing from God'* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

II. Permission for a believing man to have sex with ‘those whom their right hands possess’²⁷

On four occasions in the Quran it is stated that a Muslim man is forbidden from having sexual relations with anyone other than wife or those ‘*whom their right hands possess*’- a phrase that clearly emphasises physical control and can only refer to slaves or captives:

23.1-7. “Truly, the believers have prospered, who ...
[*various religious obligations are listed including*]
... **guard their private parts, save from their spouses or those whom their right hands possess**, for then they are not blameworthy, but for those who seek beyond that it is they who are transgressors.”²⁸

70.29-30. “Truly man was created anxious, when evil befalls him, fretful:
and when good befalls him grudging **save those who... guard their private parts save from their spouses or those whom their right hands possess for then they are not blameworthy**, but for those who seek beyond that it is they who are transgressors.”

33.50. “O Prophet, **we have made lawful for thee thy wives** to whom thou hast given their bridewealth, **as well as those whom thy right hand possess of those whom God has granted thee as spoils of war ...**”

4.24. “**And married women [are forbidden unto you] save those whom your right hands possess.** Thus has God prescribed for you.”

²⁷ For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 9 Permission for a Muslim man to have sex with ‘those whom their right hands possess* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

²⁸ Instead of the phrase ‘*guard their private parts*’ the Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Sarwar and Mohsin Khan translations all use phrases explicitly referring to sexual intercourse.

III Inferior matrimonial rights for women, including permission to a man to strike his wife for disobedience²⁹

The Quran establishes several laws that give different rights to men and women. Examples include that:

- ❖ a man is permitted to have up to four wives concurrently, whilst it is unchallenged in Islam that a woman may only have one husband³⁰;
- ❖ a man is entitled, subject to certain formalities, to repudiate (*talaq*) his marriage³¹ whereas a wife seeking to dissolve a marriage must seek a negotiated divorce (*khul*) from her husband (although there is general agreement within Islam that an appropriate Islamic tribunal has power to annul a marriage or compel a husband to agree *khul* terms in circumstances where it deems appropriate).

One verse concerns a man's right to insist upon obedience from his wife by use of escalating sanctions that may culminate in the application of physical force:

4.34. “Men are the upholders and maintainers of women by virtue of that in which God has favoured some of them above others and by virtue of their spending from their wealth. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [their husband's absence] what God has guarded. **As for those from whom you fear discord or animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them.** Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Truly God is Exalted, Great.”

²⁹ For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 8: Inferior matrimonial rights for women, including permission to a man to strike his wife for disobedience* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

³⁰ **4:3**

³¹ **2:229**

IV Inferior inheritance rights for women³²

The Quran encourages Muslims to write a will, but also has ‘ordained shares’ that different relatives will inherit. The prevailing traditional Islamic view, based upon a hadith, is that a Muslim may dispose of up to a third of their property by a will, with the balance distributed amongst their family according to a formula that includes the following two provisions allowing for male relatives to take twice the inheritance as female ones:³³

4.11. “God enjoins upon you concerning your children: **unto the male a share equal to that of two females; but if there are only daughters, two or more, then unto them is two-thirds of what he leaves; if only one then unto her a half.**”

In the case of a person who dies without living descendants:

4.176. “They seek a ruling from thee. Say:

‘God gives you a ruling concerning the one without a direct heir. If a man dies having no child but he has a sister then unto her belongs half of what he leaves, and he will inherit from her if she has no child. If there are two sisters then unto them belongs two thirds of what he leaves. **If there be brothers and sisters then unto the male a share equal to that of two females.**’

This does God make this clear unto you. Lest you should go astray. And God is the Knower of all things.”

³² For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 7: Inferior inheritance rights for women* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

³³ The point is often made that a woman will usually gain a *nikah* (bridewealth) from her husband upon her marriage, and that it is the duty upon her husband to keep her during their marriage and so, it is said, Sharia law as a whole may well be more financially beneficial to daughters than an equal division of an estate between children would have been.

However, it should be borne in mind that this assumes that a woman will marry a man who is financially capable of maintaining her. Moreover a marriage governed by Sharia law may involve a man having up to four wives, whose obedience he may enforce with striking and with the threat of divorce. Even if the Sharia law were to be more financially beneficial to women than equal inheritance and marriage rights, they would still give women less financial independence.

V Marriage to premenarchal girls³⁴

In **2: 228** the Quran prescribes that where a husband has declared his wife to be divorced (see above) this divorce is not irrevocable until his wife has since the divorce declaration had three menstrual periods.

In **65:4** the Quran gives details concerning how this rule should be applied in relation to wives who no longer menstruate or have not begun to menstruate.³⁵

65.4-5. “As for those of your women who no longer await menstruation, if you are unsure then their waiting period is three months., **as it is for those who are yet to menstruate.** But for those who are pregnant their term is until they deliver. And whoever reverences God, he will appoint ease for his affair. That is the Command of God that He has sent down unto you. Whosoever reverences God He will absolve him of his evil deeds and honour him with reward.”

³⁴ For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 6: Marriage to Premenarchal girls* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

³⁵ It is sometimes said that the verse may refer to women suffering from amenorrhoea – a permanent or temporary inability to menstruate. The Study Quran footnote states that the verse was announced in response to a specific question concerning young wives: “*It is reported that the companion Ubayy the Ka’b said to the Prophet “People say that there remain women regarding whom nothing was mentioned in the Quran, the young and those who are pregnant.”* (this detail is then attributed to three Quranic commentators: Ibn Kathir, al-Qurtubi and al-Wahidid)

VI The endorsement of honour killings³⁶

In **18:65-82** the Quran presents an account from the life of Moses in which Moses follows a mysterious and unnamed man described (in words attributed to God) as:

“A servant from amongst Our servants whom We had granted a mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Our Presence”

The ‘servant of God’ is not named in the Quran but in Islamic tradition he is referred to as al Khidr and he shall be referred to by this title henceforth in this paper. Al Khidr grants Moses permission to follow him upon the condition that Moses asks for no explanation of his actions until an explanation is offered to him. Moses agrees but three times al Khidr performs acts that Moses cannot resist asking him about:

- First, the man sinks a boat in which they are travelling exposing the occupants to the risk of drowning;
- then the man kills a young boy for no apparent reason; and
- finally, the man repairs a wall.

At the conclusion of the story Al Khidr offers Moses an explanation for his actions. In relation to the killing of the boy this explanation is:

18.80. “And as for the young boy, his parents were believers and we feared that he would make them suffer through rebellion and disbelief.

So we desired that their Lord give them in exchange one who is better than him in purity and nearer to mercy;...

82. And I did not do this on my own command. This is the meaning that thou could not couldst not bear patiently.”

Clearly the overall story of al Khidr is intended to be read as a parable to encourage obedience to God’s instructions even where the benefits of so doing cannot be seen, on the basis that God knows hidden facts and future events that humans cannot know or foresee.

However the story of al Khidr’s killing of the boy also rests upon three unsettling ideas:

- I. A person may properly be punished for offences that they have not yet committed;
- II. That the sins of ‘rebellion and disbelief’ justify killing a person;
- III. That killing a person may be necessary to protect other people from suffering as a result of that person’s ‘rebellion and disbelief’.

³⁶ For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 6 ‘Honour killings’* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

VII Laws restricting sexual autonomy³⁷

Three sexual relationships are approved in the Quran:

- ❖ marriage,
- ❖ sex with those '*one's right hands possess*';³⁸
- ❖ and the sensual reward for pious Muslim men of supernatural *houris* in paradise.

Beyond these three contexts, the Quran prohibits any sexual activity with severe sanctions.

4.15. “**And as for those of you women who commit an indecency** call four witnesses among you to bear witness against them. And if they bear witness, then **confine them to their houses until death takes them** or until God appoints for them another way.

16. And if two of those among you are guilty thereof punish them both, but if they make amends then let them be. Truly God is Relenting, Merciful.”

24.2. “**As for the adulterer and the adulteress flog them each one hundred lashes and let not pity for them overcome you** concerning God’s Judgment, if you believe in God and the Last Day. [3] And let their punishment be witnessed by a group of the believers.”

In relation to homosexual activity, the Quran makes no legislative provision, but it tells on several occasions of the Torah/Biblical story of the destruction of Sodom. Unlike the account that appears in the Book of Genesis in which the city is destroyed to punish the inhabitants for sinfulness that is exemplified by an attempted homosexual rape, the Quranic account contains no reference to rape and in four verses makes it explicit that the reason for the destruction was the townspeople’s homosexuality.

7.80. “What! Do you commit an indecency such as none in the world committed before you? [81] **Verily you come with desire unto men instead of women. Indeed you are a prodigal people!**”

³⁷ For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 4: Laws repressing sexual autonomy* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

³⁸ See *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 9. Sex is permitted with those one's right hands possess.*

26.165. “Among all creatures do you come unto males [166] leaving your spouses you Lord created for you? Nay but you are a transgressing people”

27.55. “Do you commit indecency though you see? [55] Do you really come with desire unto men instead of women? Nay, but you are an ignorant people!”

29.28. “Do you commit indecency such as none in the worlds has committed before you. [29] What! Do you come unto men, cut off the way and commit reprehensible deeds in your gatherings”.

VIII Laws prescribing inhumane punishments³⁹

The Quran prescribes specific punishments for three offences:

- ❖ For sexual misconduct such as fornication or adultery⁴⁰, a person is directed by one verse to be sentenced to confinement until death, and in another verse to a hundred lashes.
- ❖ For making an allegation of illicit sex against a chaste woman, but being unable to produce four witnesses in support of the allegation the appropriate punishment is eighty lashes:

4.4.: “And as for those who accuse chaste women but then do not bring four witnesses **flog them eighty lashes** and never accept any testimony from them. And it is they who are the iniquitous. [5] save those who repent thereafter and make amends for truly God is Forgiving, Merciful.”

- ❖ For theft the prescribed penalty is the amputation of a hand:

5.38. “As for the male thief and the female thief **cut off their hands** as a recompense for what they have earned as an exemplary punishment from God...”

In addition to the above specific punishments, 5:32-33, sets out a range of four punishments for those ‘endeavouring to work corruption on the earth’:

5.32. “For this reason We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whoever slays a soul – unless it be for another soul or for working corruption upon the earth – it is as though he slew mankind altogether, and whosoever saves the life of one, it is as though he saved the life of mankind altogether. Our messengers have certainly come unto them with clear proofs. Yet even after that, many of them are prodigal on the earth.

33. Verily, **the recompense of those who wage war against God and His Messenger and endeavour to work corruption upon the earth is that they be killed or crucified or have their hands and feet cut off from opposite sides or be banished from the land.** That is their disgrace in this world and in the Hereafter theirs shall be a great punishment save those who repent before you overpower them. And know that God is Forgiving, Merciful.”

³⁹ For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 3: Laws prescribing inhumane punishments* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

⁴⁰ (separately described using the word *zina*, in surah 4 and *fahashah* in surah 24, although there is no clear consensus on the difference if any between the terms)

IX Instructions to engage in violent jihad⁴¹

Well over a hundred verses of the Quran specifically support the military campaigns led by Mohammed. The word *jihad*, which literally means ‘striving’, is often used in a way – such as in the idiom ‘*striving in the way of God*’ - that clearly refers to the act of fighting in a holy war.

At least eight explicit justifications for Mohammed’s military campaigns are offered in the Quran. These are:

- i. **Retaliation:** for the Muslim emigrants to Yathrib/Medina having been expelled from their homes in Mecca, or for breaking a treaty:

“Permission is granted to those who are **fought because they have been wronged**” (22.39-41); and

“And if they break their oaths after their agreement **and (openly) revile your religion, then fight the leaders of unbelief**” (9.12.)

- ii. **To bring Islamic rule to Muslims living in Mecca.**

“And what ails you that you fight not **in the way of God and for the weak and oppressed. – men, women and children – who cry out: ‘Our Lord, bring us forth from this town whose people are oppressors’ ...**” (4.74-6)

- iii. **Because their enemies resist Islamic** (in practice Mohammed’s) **temporal rule:**

“And fight them **until there is no more strife and all is for God**” (2.193);

“***Fitnah*** [strife or defiance of God’s will] **is worse than killing**” (2.217);

“Truly I am with you so make firm those who believe. And so **whosoever opposes God and His Messenger, truly God is severe in retribution**’, (8.12-7); and

“**He will most certainly make** [those who believe and do righteous deeds] **them vice-regents upon the earth**”, (24.55);

⁴¹ For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 2: Instruction to engage in violent Jihad* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

iv. In order to remove **an obstacle or challenge to the practice of Islam**:

“Fighting (in the sacred months) is grave but **turning others from the way of God and disbelieving in him is graver in the sight of God.**” (2.217);

“They wish you should disbelieve even as they disbelieve that you may be on a level with them.” (4.89);

“He it is Who sent His Messenger with guidance and the Religion of Truth **to make it prevail over all religion.**” (48.28); and

“**That is because they defied God and his Messenger.** And whomsoever defies God and his Messenger truly God is severe in retribution.” (59.4)

v. As a **demonstration** of the power of God/Islam:

“But God desires to verify the truth through His Words and **to cut off the last remnant of the disbelievers so that He may verify the truth and prove falsehood to be false**” (8.7-8);

“So if thou comest upon them in war, **use them to scatter those who will come after them., that haply they might be reminded**” (8.57);

“**It is not for a prophet ‘to have captives until he overwhelms [his enemy] in the land**” 8.67; and

“God has promised you spoils that you will capture - then he hastened this for you and restrained the people’s hands for you. **That it may be a sign for the believers**” (48.18-20).

vi. As a **test** for believers’ dedication:

“And if God willed, He would take vengeance upon them, but **that He may test some of you** by means of others”,(47.4).

vii. To **reward** Muslim fighters for their obedience with plunder:

”And God gave them the reward of this world” (8.148);

“And He bequeathed unto you their land, their homes their property and a land you have not trodden” (33.27); and

“God was content with the believers [and has] ... rewarded them with a victory nigh and abundant spoils that they will capture’ (48.18-20).

viii. And, most commonly, in order to **punish non-Muslims** for their disbelief:

“So that God may assay those who believe and blight the disbelievers” (3.141);

“God has prepared a disgraceful chastisement for the unbelievers” (4.102);

“God will not grant the disbelievers a way to prevail against the believers” (4.141);

“Verily, the recompense of those who wage war against God and His Messenger” (5.33);

“I shall cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve ... That is because they are in schism with God and His Messenger“ (8.12-17);

“And let not those who disbelieve think that they shall come in first” (8.59);

[in the Battle of Hunayn, God] “punished those who disbelieved” (9.26);

“Fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you and let them find in you hardness; and know that God is with the reverent” (9.123);

“God sufficed the believers in battle” (33.25); and

“Strive [in Jihad] against the disbelievers and the hypocrites and be harsh with them. Their refuge is hell” (66.9).

X Instructions to demonstrate hostility to unbelievers⁴²

The Quran frequently refers to disbelievers by an Arabic word (*kuffar*) meaning ‘those who conceal the truth’ and in derogatory, and occasionally dehumanising, terms referring to them as:

‘unclean’ [9.28];

‘further astray than cattle’ [7.179]; and

‘the worst of beasts’ [8.55]; and

(in the context of Jews) ‘apes and swine’ [5.60]; and

It advises on very many occasions that unbelievers will face agonising punishment in the afterlife, from God as a recompense for their disbelief.

By way of instructions to believers:

- ❖ ten verses of the Quran⁴³ instruct Muslims not to take unbelievers as their *aujlas* – a word that is generally translated as ‘protectors’, ‘allies’ or ‘friends’.
- ❖ the Quran twice instructs Muslims to operate a dual standard, being stern or harsh towards disbelievers whilst being humble or merciful towards one another:

5.54. “O you who believe! Whosoever amongst you shall renounce his religion, God will bring a people whom he loves and who love him, **humble towards the believers, stern towards disbelievers, striving** [making *jihad*] **in the way of God, and fearing not the blame of any blamer.**

That is the Bounty of God which He gives to whomsoever He will. And God is All-Encompassing, Knowing.”

48.29. “Muhammad is the Messenger of God. **Those who are with him are harsh against the disbelievers, merciful to one another.**

You see them bowing, prostrating, seeking bounty from God and contentment; their mark upon their faces is from the effect of prostration. That is their likeness in the Torah.

And their likeness in the Gospel is a sapling that puts forth its shoot and strengthens it such that it grows stout and rises firmly upon its stalk, impressing the sowers, **that through them, He may enrage the disbelievers.** God has promised forgiveness and a great reward to those among them who believe and perform righteous deeds.”

⁴² For a detailed analysis of this instruction see: *The Quran as Reportedly Practised and Preached by Mohammed: 1: Instructions to demonstrate hostility to unbelievers* on the *Islam Research Group* website.

⁴³ **93.28, 8.72-3, 60.1-4, 4.88-9, 139** and **144**; and **5.51-2, 57** and **80-1**

- ❖ The Quran prescribes a system of punishment for intentional and accidental killing which is explicitly restricted to either the killing of Muslims or killings in breach of a specific treaty. These verses, by necessary implication, exclude any punishment for a Muslim who kills a non-believer with whom the killer had no treaty.

92. “It is not for a believer to slay a believer unless it be in error.

Whosoever has slain a believer in error let him set free a believing slave and pay compensation to the victim’s family unless they remit it in charity.

If he belongs to a people at war with you **but was a believer**, then a believing slave is to be set free.

And **if he belonged to a people with whom you had a covenant** let him pay compensation to the victim’s family and let him set free a believing slave.

Whosoever finds not [the means] let him fast two consecutive months as a penance from God. God is Knowing, Wise.”

- ❖ The Quran justifies violent jihad against unbelievers on the basis of their disbelief [*see above*].

and

- ❖ In its penultimate chapter, announced after Mohammed’s conquest of Mecca and when he had undisputed control over Western Arabia, the Quran instructs that:

- ❖ ‘*People of the Book*’ (effectively Jews and Christians) must pay a financial sum (the *jizya*) as a sign of their submission to Islam (**9.28-30**); whilst

- ❖ polytheists should be killed:

9.5. “Then when the sacred months have passed, **slay the idolaters wherever you find them, capture them and besiege them and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush**”.

What the Quran does not say

It is also worth noting what the Quran does *not* say. In the Meccan Surahs the Quran exhorts believers towards acts of humility, patience, kindness and generosity in general terms. However at no point does any surah declared following the Hijrah and the establishment of the Islamic *ummah* as a political entity state explicitly nor unambiguously imply:

- that Muslims should show any kindness towards non-Muslims;
- that non-Muslims in general have rights that Muslims are bound to respect;
- that women should in general be treated equally to men; nor
- that Muslims should in general limit violence to situations where they are being attacked or fear they are about to be attacked, or
- any criticism of slavery.

There are said to be approximately ten thousand *hadith* recording the words and actions of Mohammed. The author is unaware of any contained within the six major canonical collections, in which Mohammed asserts any of the above principles, nor any in which he is described as acting with generosity, compassion or respect for a person who had not first accepted his authority over them.

In the centuries since Mohammed, several schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) have developed to interpret and apply the laws set out in the Quran. In part the different traditions result from their adherents accepting or rejecting different hadith. In addition the schools vary in their approaches to the practices of extending the rules set down in the Quran by analogy or restricting them by reference to the context in which they were set down, or applied by early generations of Muslims.

Notwithstanding their differences, all schools of *fiqh* hold as their fundamental principle that the *Sharia* laid down in the Quran represents a direct instruction from God and may not be abolished or altered by human will.

Furthermore all agree that:

- ❖ the single most important source for interpreting the true meaning of the Quran, and therefore of God's will, is the interpretation given to it by Mohammed and the example given by Mohammed, in his conduct, in so far as this can be discerned from historical enquiry⁴⁴;
- ❖ the Quran instructs Muslims not merely to follow Islamic law themselves as an aspect of their private lives but to seek to enforce it within Islamic communities through applying the designated sanctions.

⁴⁴ There is a small, fairly recent, movement within Islam, sometimes referred to as Quranists, who reject the hadith in their entirety, but adherents are not generally recognised as a significant school of *fiqh*.

Inconsistency with the values of individual liberty and secular democracy

It would appear to be self-evident that the passages produced above, given their natural meaning in the belief that they were verbatim instructions from God, and given the recorded life of Mohammed as providing the context the verses were announced to address and as a moral exemplar of the perfect life lived according to God's will, are inconsistent with a peaceful society under the rule of law, with laws set in accordance with secular democracy and of individual liberty and the respect of human rights .

In particular:

the punishment of fornication, adultery and homosexuality offends the principle of liberty,

the regulation of slavery, marriage to juvenile girls, the permission to have sex with those women one's right hand possesses and the endorsement of honour killing and the killing of idolaters, constitute gross breaches of basic human rights,

slavery, the affording of women inferior marriage and inheritance rights to men and the permissibility of a man enforcing his wife's obedience by violence, and the instruction to have a separate legal and taxation regime for believers than unbelievers offends the principle of equality before the law,

the instructions to base a legal regime, enforced with punishments, upon the Quran's verses offend the principle of secular democracy,

the prescribed punishments are themselves cruel and disproportionate by any reasonable modern standards,

the instructions not to take unbelievers as friends/allies and to wage jihad to punish unbelievers are inconsistent with the creation of a peaceful, well integrated society.

Counter arguments considered

A number of arguments are commonly made as to why the words of the Quran and example of Mohammed should not be considered inconsistent with the values of modern liberal democracies.

Historical relativism

It is unfair to judge the actions of Mohammed or the true meaning of the Quran contrary to modern standards since Mohammed lived in a harsh environment long ago, and the Quran was revealed to guide people within that environment. To judge the Quran and Mohammed properly one should look beyond the literal meaning of words to their underlying purpose which is to promote peace and tolerance.

- i. The first rebuttal of this argument is that any attempt to read the Quran in a way that is consistent with the standards of modern liberal democracies requires, a wholesale replacement of its core message. Islam is the belief that the Quran contains the verbatim instructions from God, with the Angel Jibril and Mohammed acting merely as interlocutors. It is regarded by Muslims to be the final revelation of God's word, the correction of earlier revelations that had become misunderstood and corrupted. Whilst it is reasonable to interpret individual words and phrases by reference to what meaning those expressions might have had at the time that they were used, it is impossible to reconcile the beliefs that the Quran both constitutes a final definitive statement of God's will, and simultaneously has a need of substantive change in order to make it appropriate for modern conditions.
- ii. The second rebuttal is that the Quran is intended to be normative: to guide followers, and potentially all humanity, towards living in the divinely ordained manner. The Quran's rules are often expressed in unambiguous terms, designed to be obeyed and enforced, with little scope for flexibility in interpretation. Moreover by the end of his life Mohammed had effectively achieved unfettered power to govern the Arabian Peninsula as God's messenger. Had Mohammed, with his unique knowledge of the true meaning of the Quran, desired to outlaw torture and slavery or grant women equal rights to men he had the rare opportunity of so doing. Even had he been, for some unknown reason, unable so to do, he or the Quran could have expressed the instruction that this should be a goal for Muslims to work towards. It is illogical to accept the Quran as one's guide to righteous conduct and then to reject the guidance that it gives as inconsistent with more progressive social values.
- iii. A third rebuttal of this argument is that it is not merely the specific rules of the Quran or the actions of Mohammed that are inconsistent with liberal democracy but their underlying principles justifying, for example, sexual exploitation and draconian sanctions to negate individual liberty.
- iv. A fourth rebuttal is that the environment in which Mohammed lived was not so primitive or harsh as to excuse behaviour from the accusation of being uncivilised.
 - Jesus had preached his message of universal compassion and forgiveness almost six centuries before Mohammed announced his revelations, and the person of Jesus, but not the essence of his teaching, is referenced many

times in the Quran. The Gospels were in circulation, and the references to Jesus in the Quran assume that the listener/reader was already familiar with who he was.

- To the north west of Arabia, lay the Byzantine Empire. Four decades prior to the birth of Mohammed, the Emperor Justinian I had drafted the Code of Justinian that is regarded a milestone in the development of law and remains the basis of many European legal systems to this day. Mohammed spent part of his life as a camel driver and is thought to have travelled to Damascus at a time when Justinian's laws would have applied there.
- To the north east of Arabia, and all along the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula lay the Sasanian Empire, of which the state religion was Zoroastrianism which also famously taught individual responsibility, tolerance and forgiveness.⁴⁵

By the end of his life Mohammed was communicating with Byzantine kings and had captured the Sasanian territory. He kept a Coptic Christian slave, Maryam, as his concubine and had had discourse with Christian delegations. Even if Muslim apologists are correct in their depiction of the early *ummah* as an oasis of order within a desert of pagan chaos and cruelty, seen within a wider frame of reference, Islam's inflexible and arbitrary laws were laid down within region where a more nuanced and flexible approach to defining morality and judicial development were well established.

If Mohammed had wished to develop a more compassionate and enlightened code than that which he did there were precedents there for him to follow.

⁴⁵ Throughout almost the entirety of Mohammed's ministry the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires were engaged in their longest war (602-28). When Mohamed is said to have made the *Isra*, his miraculous overnight trip to Jerusalem, some time between the death of Khadija (619) and the Hijra (622), he would have found himself within the Sasanian Empire, which had seized Jerusalem in 614.

The ratio legis

Muslims and non-Muslims frequently misunderstand the true message of the Quran which in essence is a message of peace and tolerance. Moreover many of the most serious allegations made against Mohammed are based upon disputed or misunderstood sources.

There are many, whom one might, for want of a better term, refer to as 'moderate' Muslims, who strive to promote interpretations of the Quran that are consistent with peace and tolerance and dispute the validity of hadiths that portray Mohammed as an unsympathetic figure. One common problem with such interpretations is that they tend to rely upon complex arguments that contradict all commonly used translations of the Quran and fourteen centuries of established Islamic teaching. Even if such arguments had intellectual validity they would still face the problem of being novel and unorthodox. A greater problem is that disputing the meaning of individual words or the reliability of certain hadith lacks plausibility when the interpretations offered are inconsistent with the broad thrust of the Quranic message and the vast bulk of sources concerning Mohammed to the extent that they effectively amount to a modern re-writing of the Quran and the whole early Islamic narrative.

It is not possible to list all the arguments that are made under this heading but three commonly cited examples are given, each followed by an outline of the reason why it should be rejected.

- i. The references to violent jihad in the Quran relate to a time when the early Muslim community was under threat of annihilation. Several verses endorsing violence make explicitly reference to this threat and express the aspiration that mercy should be shown to former enemies. Therefore the verses in the Quran endorsing violence are implicitly limited to actions taken in reasonable self defence and the military expeditions of Mohammed constitute such actions.***

Despite many Quranic verses endorsing violence there are none that state a general principle that violence in general may only be used in self-defence. For reasons that have been set out above, making every allowance possible for the position Mohammed found himself in, it is implausible to see his military campaigns as exclusively, or even substantially defensive in nature.

- ii. ***Islam teaches the equality of women in God's eyes and greatly enhanced the positions of women from that in which they had previously held, for example giving them property rights following a divorce.***

There are insufficient sources concerned the social structure of pre-Islamic Arabia to form a firm conclusion concerning how the rights of women changed under Islamic law (although the role played by Khadija suggests that single women in pre-Islamic Mecca were by no means devoid of rights). However, the claim that women in seventh century Arabia enjoyed an improved position under Islam than they had previously held does not constitute an argument that the Quran is consistent with the standards of gender equality promoted in modern liberal democracies. It is impossible to read the specific provisions of the Quran giving separate and inferior rights to women than to men as endorsing a general principle that women should have equal rights to men.

- iii. ***4:34: The instruction to men to 'beat' disobedient wives may mean to tap lightly with a twig or even not to touch at all.***

If the Quran had been written with the intended meaning that violence used by husbands against their wives was impermissible it could have said so in simple terms. It simply makes no sense that it instead included a verse the ordinary translation of which states exactly the opposite. Moreover, the endorsement of beating clearly comes as the third item in a list of escalating sanction against disobedient wives. Furthermore, if the Quran had been intended to convey that women had equal rights to men within a marriage there would be no requirement for a divine sanction by which husbands may punish their wives for disobedience at all.

Comparison with the Bible and Christianity

There is divinely sanctioned violence in the Old Testament as well as the Quran but this does not prevent Christianity presenting itself as a religion of peace. In fact Jesus and the Old Testament prophets are revered as prophets of Islam and Judaism, Christianity and Islam should all be seen as variations of one Abrahamic faith.

This 'argument' typifies the *tu quoque*⁴⁶ fallacy.

Moreover the assumption that the Old Testament imports violence into Christianity ignores the fact that Jesus and the early church preached against the enforcement of Mosaic Law. It is inconceivable that the Jesus described in the New Testament might have in other circumstances organised his disciples into an armed band who robbed, beheaded and enslaved those who defied his will. Although the Quran appropriates the name of Jesus, its message of arbitrary rules enforced by violence is in fact the polar opposite of Jesus' message of universal and unlimited compassion and dislike of religious legalism. It is noteworthy that in the Quran Jesus is said to have escaped crucifixion. This alone indicates

⁴⁶ The response to a criticism of attacking the critic. If person A makes a criticism of person B it is no rebuttal of the criticism for person B to accuse person A of having acted in a similar or worse manner themselves.

that the prospect of a prophet submitting to death at the hands of his enemies was inconsistent with the Quran's repeated message that God would help his followers achieve his will by military victories.

Religious subjectivism

It is inappropriately simplistic to attach any precise meaning to sacred texts. Religion is an essentially existentialist activity and the words of scripture, properly treated as such, are merely a medium for a highly individual spiritual experience that defies definitive objective interpretations.

This argument was presented by Maajid Nawaz in *Islam and the Future of Tolerance* (2015) as follows:

“My honest view is that Islam is not a religion of war or of peace – it’s a religion. Its sacred scripture, like those of other religions, contains passages that many people would consider extremely problematic. Likewise all scriptures contain passages that are innocuous. Religion does not inherently speak for itself; no scripture, no book, no piece of writing has its own voice. I subscribe to this view whether I’m interpreting Shakespeare or interpreting religious scripture.”

Within the ambit of religion it is probably fair to say that almost any text, object or event has the potential to inspire mystical or spiritual insights and experiences that are, by their nature, unique to the person having them. The more profound a written idea, the more complex the range of meaning and insight that is liable to be derived from it. No doubt the very act of treating something as ‘sacred’ can become self-fulfilling, itself sufficient to provoke religious experience. However, this does not mean that scriptures, once classified as ‘sacred’, should be treated for all purposes as the equivalent of a blank page, devoid of any objective meaning.

It is submitted that all of the surahs of the Quran that have been cited in this paper have reasonably clear meanings, especially when read within the context provided by the *sira* and *hadith*. Many were drafted to be applied as laws, some were announced specifically to resolve ambiguities raised from previous unclear surahs. It is salutary to always bear in mind that one Muslim might listen to or read the Quran and thereupon be inspired through prayer to act with compassion and kindness. However, this prospect does not invalidate the observation that another Muslim, who was to give the words their plain ordinary meaning and take them as their guide would conclude that it was their religious duty to act in a way that was inconsistent with the values of liberal democracy.

The conflation of Islam with Muslimness

The vast majority of Muslims are law abiding, decent, kind and believe in democratic institutions. Non-Muslims' views of Islam often ignore the fact that centuries of Islamic civilisations have developed traditions that are far more significant to most Muslims than an outsider can understand through a superficial reading of texts.

It cannot be doubted that there are very many Muslims who are as described in the above statement. However this circumstance does not change the text of the Quran or the recorded history of the life of Mohammed.

Conclusion and comment

The Quran, as it is read by those who believe that it is the final revelation of God, delivered in God's own words, and read in the context of the recorded life of Mohammed:

- i. envisages a clearly defined community of 'believers' (subsequently called Muslims);**
- ii. instructs Muslims to worship God and engage in specific religious practices including regular prayers, the payment of alms, fasting and pilgrimage,**
- iii. instructs Muslims to behave to others within that community with honesty, patience, generosity and kindness,**
- iv. imposes upon that community a requirement to live according to a set body of laws deemed and to enforce those laws upon its members by sanctions; and**
- v. contains multiple instances of laws and guiding principles that are incompatible with the values of free and tolerant societies governed according to democracy and the rule of law.**

Uncomfortable, as it no doubt is, for some to hear, Mohammed, whom Muslim and non-Muslim alike accept as the principal exemplar of a life lived according to Islamic values, engaged in conduct that would today constitute some of the gravest crimes under UK and international law including waging wars of aggression, torture, slavery, sexual intercourse with a child and the sexual abuse of prisoners.