



The Islam Research Group

What Is Islam?



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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 Qur'an reproduced in the body of this booklet are, unless otherwise stated, taken from *The Study Qur'an* 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 Qur'an.

Very many verses in the Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an*]?"

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

³ Also: {4.59, 83, 24.63}.

The Qur'an

The Qur'an 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 the following themes.

❖ Cosmology

The Qur'an describes God's creation of the '*seven heavens and the earth*', and his creation of angels, jinns and a '*single soul*' from which was created a mate and from whom proliferated the world's races.

❖ Biblical and non-biblical allusions

There are very many references to stories that it seems to be assumed to have been well known to the original audience. These include allusions to:

- stories from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, including those of Adan and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, Joseph, Moses and Aaron, Solomon, Jonah and Jesus, who is described as the messiah, born of a virgin⁴ and due to return as '*a portent of the Hour*'⁵ on the Last Day, but whose divinity is emphatically rejected.
- stories which already existed in Jewish or Christian literature, such as:
 - the Christian fable of the seven sleepers of Ephesus,⁶
 - the apprenticeship of a disciple (in the Qur'an a young Moses), to a '*servant of God*',⁷
 - the legend of the imprisonment of the tribes of Gog and Magog by Alexander the Great (which story has Biblical origins but is essentially secular),⁸
- some stories involving biblical characters that appear to be original, such as Solomon's conference of the birds and his death leaning upon his staff, whilst jinn laboured for him;⁹
- 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, as well as a reference to a prophet Luqman, and an account of God's destruction of an army marching with an elephant¹⁰.

All of these stories are presented as a history of divine revelation, of which the Qur'an is the continuation, occasional correction and the final culmination;

⁴ {3.47, 19.21}

⁵ {43.61}

⁶ {18.9-26}

⁷ {18.65-82}

⁸ {18.85-97}

⁹ {27.15-45} and {34.10-14}

¹⁰ Surah 105

❖ Warning of Judgment on the Last Day

The Quran contains graphic depictions of the sensual pleasures awaiting believers in gardens of paradise¹¹ and agonising torments to be suffered by disbelievers in the hellfire¹², following a bodily resurrection and judgment by God. The criteria determining who will go to heaven and who to hell is unclear: it appears that both belief and obedience to the law is involved, and God may be merciful to some - but *'singles out for His mercy whomsoever He will'*.¹³

The only certainty in Quranic soteriology would seem to be that the *'shaheed'* - those who die whilst fighting jihad - will have all their sins forgiven and be admitted to Paradise at the moment of their death¹⁴, se

❖ Instructions for believers to live their lives by (the *'Sharia'*)

• *Virtuous behaviour*

The Qur'an contains generally worded exhortations to righteousness and virtues such as honesty,¹⁵ patience¹⁶, forgiveness¹⁷ and generosity to selected categories of people (parents, travellers, orphans, neighbours etc);¹⁸

• *Religious obligations: 'the five pillars of Islam'*

It also instructs believers to pray and observe certain religious obligations. The latter are traditionally referred to as *'the five pillars of Islam'* and comprise:

- confessing the Shahada (see introduction),
- praying zakat ('obligatory welfare payments')¹⁹
- praying five times a day²⁰
- fasting during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan,²¹ and
- making the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.²²

¹¹ {37.48, 38.52, 44.54, 52.17-27, 55.56-78, 56.11-40, 78.31-37}.

¹² {4.55-7, 14.49-50, 36.63-7, 40.70-72, 56.90-94, 67.7}.

¹³ {2.105}

¹⁴ {2.245, 4.74, 9.111, 61.12}.

¹⁵ {83.1-6, 17.35, 55.8-9}.

¹⁶ {2.109, 3.186, 41.34}

¹⁷ {13.22, 23.96, 28.54, 41.34, 42.40}

¹⁸ {4.36, 2.177, 23.4, 27.3, 30.39, 31.4}

¹⁹ {4.77, 9.5, 9.11, 9.60 and {22.41}

²⁰ Five times is never specified but is derived from: {2.238, 11.114, 24.58 and 30.17-18} read together.

²¹ {2.183}

²² {3.97}

- **Sharia laws**

The Qur'an prescribes a regime of laws for the organisation of society, including punishments for some offences.

These laws include:

- The prohibition of fornication/adultery²³, theft, gambling and the consumption of alcohol, ²⁴ consumption of certain categories of food. Homosexuality is not prohibited in the form of an instruction, but is repeatedly denounced as a sin²⁵, and must presumably be dealt with, at the very least, as a form of fornication;
- Laws of inheritance, marriage (including polygamy²⁶ and the implicit permissibility of marriage to girls before their first period)²⁷ and divorce²⁸, the witnessing of documents²⁹ and rules governing the slaughter of animals.

Two themes within this legal structure are particularly controversial in modern times. These laws

- consistently place women in an inferior position to men, such that:
 - a man may divorce his wife as of right, whereas a wife must attempt to negotiate her release from a marriage with a payment,
 - **{4.34}** recommends that man beat a wife from whom he fears disobedience,
 - female relatives consistently receive half the share of an inheritance than their male counterpart,
 - a female witness of a financial document is regarded as half as reliable as a male; and
- presume, and arguably require, the existence of slavery, which it announces as God's blessing upon the slave owner;³⁰ on four occasions the Qur'an permits a man to have intercourse with *'those whom his right hands possess'* without this constituting adultery.³¹

²³ **{4.15, 24.2}**

²⁴ **{5.90}**

²⁵ **{7.80-84, 26.160-172, 27.54-58, 29.28}**

²⁶ **{4.3}**

²⁷ **{65.4}**

²⁸ **{2.228-229}**

²⁹ **{2.282}**

³⁰ **{16.71}**

³¹ **{4.24, 23.1-9, 70.19-35, 33.50}**

- **Sanctions**

The Qur'an prescribes that some offences should have fixed punishments ('*hudud*'):

Offence	Fixed punishment
fornication/adultery	either a hundred lashes or confinement until death ³²
making an unsupported allegation of sexual impropriety	eighty lashes ³³
theft	amputation of the thief's hand ³⁴

- Non hudud offences are dealt by a system of *lex talionis* called qisas. The Quran recites similar words:

*'A life for a life, and an eye for an eye, and a nose for a nose, and an ear for an ear, and a tooth for a tooth, and a (similar) retribution for wounds.'*³⁵

to those that appear in the Book of Exodus and, long preceding Exodus, the Code of Hammurabi, c. 1750 BC.

With the alternative that the wrong be excused – possibly in return for a payment (*diyah*).

- Those who '*wage war against God and His Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land*' should be dealt with by one of four sanctions:

death,
 crucifixion,
 the amputation of an alternate hand and foot, or
 exile.³⁶

³² {4.15, 24.4}

³³ {24.4}

³⁴ {5.38}

³⁵ {5.45}

³⁶ {5.33}

❖ Instructions concerning unbelievers

One of the Qur'an's most distinctive motifs is contrasting believers and unbelievers, who are described variously as:

'kuffar' (literally 'those who cover up the truth),

'mushrikun' (literally those who associate, presumably associate something with God, which is often translated as polytheist or idolaters, but may, at least in some cases, more readily be understood as those who believe in the divinity of Jesus)

hypocrites,

'People of the Book' (a phrase usually interpreted as a collective term referring to Jews, Christians, Sabians (the meaning of which is disputed) and Magi (commonly supposed to be Zoroastrians)

or specifically as Jews or Christians

Unbelievers are referred to in almost every surah of the Qur'an, in which:

- they are denounced, including as *'the worst of creatures'*³⁷
- believers are told to avoid alliance with unbelievers and twice advised to employ a double standard being *'humble towards the believers, hard towards the unbelievers ... fearing not the blame of any blamer'*,³⁸
- a system of punishments for homicide is set out prescribing sanctions for killing believers, believers with whom the killer was at war and unbelievers with whom the believer had a covenant: implicitly excluding any punishment for killing an unbeliever with whom the killer did not have a treaty.
- In very many verses Muslims are told to struggle (*wage 'jihad'*) or fight against unbelievers.

These exhortations to fighting were clearly announced within a specific context of conflict. Some include restrictions 'not to transgress' (presumably rules of war, although these are not set out in the Qur'an itself) and to desist from fighting if the other party also desists. However, eight reasons for fighting are given, the majority of which are clearly inconsistent with the restriction of fighting to self defence. These are:

1. righteous retribution,³⁹
2. to capture Mecca,⁴⁰

³⁷ {2.65}

³⁸ {48.29, 5.54}

³⁹ {22.39-41, 9.12}

⁴⁰ {4.74-6},

3. to expand the territory where the rule of Islam prevails and eliminate rebellion therein,⁴¹
4. to remove an obstacle or challenge to the practice of Islam,⁴²
5. as a demonstration of God's power,⁴³
6. as a test for believers,⁴⁴
7. to reward Muslims with the spoils of war ⁴⁵{and
8. most commonly, to punish unbelievers for their disbelief⁴⁶, including

❖ **Instructions specific to Mohammed and his wives**

Several instructions refer to the personal situation of God's messenger, deemed by Muslims to be Mohammed.

These include:

- allowing him to exceed the maximum number of wives (four) set for all other believers,⁴⁷
- prescribing rules for people visiting his house,⁴⁸
- forbidding the marriage to his widows after his death,⁴⁹
- doubling the punishment on his wives should any commit fornication,
- warning his wives that that they risk being divorced and substituted with wives more '*submitting, believing, dutiful, penitent, devout – virgins and matrons*'⁵⁰ should they be adverse to him.

⁴¹ {2.191-3, 2.217, 8.12-7, 24.55, 48.28, 59.4},

⁴² {2.217, 9.12, 4.89},

⁴³ {8.7-8, 8.57, 8.67, 48.18-20},

⁴⁴ {47.4},

⁴⁵ {3.145, 33.27, 48.18-20}

⁴⁶ {3.141, 4.102, 4.141, 9.26, 9.12}, 66.9}

⁴⁷ 33.50

⁴⁸ 33.33

⁴⁹ 33.53

⁵⁰ 66.5

The Recorded Life of Mohammed

The significance of the recorded life of Mohammed.

The life of Mohammed is important for the interpretation of the Qur'an for at least three reasons:

1. The Qur'an contains many verses that are clearly directed towards particular situations, including references to specific individuals and places (Abu Lahab, Zaid, Mecca, Medina and Badr). Some refer to an ongoing conflict fought between a sacred sanctuary and a place described as 'Medina' - literally '*the city*', all of which requires the context to understand.
2. Although the Qur'an 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. Therefore, an account of the circumstances in which the Qur'an was announced is necessary to provide guidance as to which of two conflicting verses came the later, and therefore may be regarded as being the abrogating rather than abrogated verse.

3. Some verses, as described in the introduction, bestow praise the announcer of the Qur'an, give repeated instructions to be obedient '*to God and His Messenger*', frame verses to accommodate his particular circumstances and, crucially, describe him as '*a beautiful example for those who hope in God and the Last Day and remember God much*'.⁵¹

The life of Mohammed provides many instructions in addition to those contained in the Quran, that Muslims may regard as binding (for example conducting ritual ablutions or avoiding the wearing of silk and gold).

⁵¹ {33.21}

For all these reasons, the Qur'an is read, by almost all Islamic scholars, not as a free-standing text, but within the context of the recorded life of Mohammed.

Such is the importance attached to Mohammed's biography, that a particularly strong tradition concerning his rulings - for example the many reports that he ordered adulterers to be stoned to death or that he stated that a man should not be killed for killing his son or his grandson - have traditionally had the practical effect of overruling the text of the Qur'an. On other occasions such reports can resolve contradictions: for example the instruction that Muslims should make certain provisions regarding their estate and the order that an estate be distributed amongst the deceased persons relatives according to ordained shares (Mohammed ruled that a person may dispose of one third of their estate by a will, with the residual estate divided according to ordained shares).

Sources of the life of Mohammed

However, 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 Mohammed 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:

- the *hadith* generally consist of short accounts 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*.

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

Mohammed at Mecca

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 Qur'an. 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.⁵²

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

⁵² 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.

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.

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 fitna⁵³ 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.”

⁵³ 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,⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁴ 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁵ {2.217}

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

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 Qur'an 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.⁵⁶

The traditional list of the wives⁵⁷ of Mohammed, after Khadija, include:

- **Sawda;**
- **Aisha**, (said in several *hadith*⁵⁸ 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;⁵⁹
- **Ramla** and
- **Barrah** (after her marriage to Mohammed renamed **Maymuna**) who were both close relatives of Abu Sufyan, the commander of the Meccan forces.

⁵⁶ {**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 Gad 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."*

⁵⁷ 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'.

⁵⁸ 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.

⁵⁹ The Battles of Kaybar and Mustiliq, respectively.

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 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.

Inconsistency with the values of individual liberty and secular democracy

It would appear to be self-evident that the passages from the Qur'an referred to above, given their natural meaning in the belief that they were verbatim instructions from God, is 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 .

Moreover, when read in the context of 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, is similarly inconsistent with liberty and democracy.

In particular:

endorsement of slavery, the physical chastisement of wives by their husbands for disobedience and the severe punishment of consensual sexual activity between adults, including homosexual acts, offends the principle of individual 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, affording 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 Qur'an'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 encourage sectarianism and partisanship and are inconsistent with the creation of a peaceful, well integrated society.

What the Qur'an does not say

It is also worth noting what the Qur'an does *not* say. In the Meccan Surahs the Qur'an 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.

Inevitably there are a range of views concerning the interpretation of each of the instructions cited. Each 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 Qur'an, 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 Qur'an, and**
- **the rule's application by the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence;**
- **and any explanation provided by leading classical Qur'an 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.

In the centuries since Mohammed, several schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) have developed to interpret and apply the laws set out in the Qur'an. 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 Qur'an by analogy or restricting them by reference to the context in which they were set down, or applied by early generations of Muslims.

Counter arguments considered

A number of arguments are commonly made as to why the words of the Qur'an 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 Qur'an contrary to modern standards since Mohammed lived in a harsh environment long ago, and the Qur'an was revealed to guide people within that environment. To judge the Qur'an 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 Islam is the belief that the Qur'an contains the verbatim instructions from God, with the Angel Jibril and Mohammed acting merely as interlocutors. It is intended to be normative: the final revelation of God's will, the correction of earlier revelations that had become misunderstood and corrupted.

To this end, the Qur'an's rules are often expressed in unambiguous terms, designed to be obeyed and enforced, with little scope for flexibility in interpretation.

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 Qur'an 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. Any attempt to read the Qur'an in a way that is consistent with the standards of modern liberal democracies requires, a wholesale replacement of its core message. This is inconsistent with a belief that it is the revelation of God's will. to guide followers, and potentially all humanity, towards living in the divinely ordained manner.

- ii. The second rebuttal is that, by the end of his life, that traditional Islamic narrative has it that Mohammed had achieved unfettered power to govern the Arabian Peninsula as God's messenger and a perfect example. Had Mohammed, with his unique knowledge of the true meaning of the Qur'an, desired to outlaw torture and slavery or grant women equal rights to men or express tolerance of homosexuality or free speech, he had the rare opportunity of so doing. Even had he been, for some unknown reason, unable so to do, he or the Qur'an could have expressed the instruction that these should be goals for the Muslim community to work towards. It is inconsistent to hold Mohammed as a '*beautiful example*' whilst ignoring what he did and didn't do.
- iii. A third rebuttal of this argument is that it is not merely the specific rules of the Qur'an 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 Qur'an. The Gospels were in circulation, and the references to Jesus in the Qur'an 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.⁶⁰

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.

⁶⁰ 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an endorsing violence are implicitly limited to actions taken in reasonable self defence and the military expeditions of Mohammed constitute such actions.***

This is based upon a misrepresentation of the words of the Quran and the traditional Islamic narrative of Mohammed's life:

- Although some Quranic verses justify violence by self defence, as pointed out above, many other justifications such as revenge, spreading Islam, demonstrating power, self-enrichment, and testing believers, are given. All fighting, whether referencing defensiveness or not, is presented within the context of believers' right to wage war against unbelievers. Despite endorsing violence there are none that state a general principle that violence in general may only be used in self-defence.
- The traditional narrative of Mohammed's life records him engaging in brigandage against Meccan caravans, launching raids against tribes that had done him no harm and assassinating critics. It is not merely inconsistent with this narrative, but manifestly implausible to believe that Mohammed's condition would have changed from destitute migrant to unchallenged ruler of Western Arabia merely by restricting himself to self-defence. On the contrary, even after he had established himself as ruler, he continues to

launch military expeditions to Yemen to the south and against Byzantium in the north.

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 Qur'an is consistent with the standards of gender equality promoted in modern liberal democracies. It is impossible to read the specific provisions of the Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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*⁶¹ 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an Jesus is said to have escaped crucifixion. This alone indicates that the prospect of a prophet submitting to death at the hands of his enemies was inconsistent with the Qur'an'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

⁶¹ 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.

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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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, the existence of law-abiding, decent and kind Muslims may be attributable to

ignorance of the teachings of the Qur'an,

laxity in applying them

or a more or less conscious desire to rely only upon those verses that support their law-abiding, decent kind conduct,

the construction of arguments (for example that jihad is only permissible when instructed by a caliph, or that a Muslim in a non-Muslim land should abide by the laws of that land, until such time as Muslims are the majority population) that do not fundamentally alter the meaning of Islam.

does not change the text of the Qur'an or the recorded history of the life of Mohammed.

Those who do pose a threat to liberty and democracy through their knowledge of the teachings of Islam and commitment to following them, whether through genuine zeal, habit, cultural affinity or self-interest, should not be protected from criticism by the conduct of those who do not.

Conclusion and comment

The Qur'an, 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 zakat, fasting and pilgrimage,**
- iii. contains some early, general instructions to believers to behave to others with honesty, patience, generosity and kindness,**
- iv. but also contain many later 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, and to enforce those laws upon its members by sanctions; and**
- v. contains multiple verses demonstrating extreme hostility to non-believers – including dehumanising of them, a denial of their right to life and instructions to wage war upon them for the furtherance of Islam.**

Moreover, 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.