
Since Muslims are supposed to take the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad as a guide and example, it is unsurprising that, for Muslim intellectuals, composing biographies of the Prophet has never lost its appeal. The Qur’an contains little information about the Prophet’s life, and though there has been a concerted effort on the part of commentators to demonstrate that particular verses relate to particular events during the Prophet’s mission, the Qur’an cannot, in truth, be seen as a useful historical source. The earliest biographical sources, and the works which established the basic chronology of both the Prophet’s life and the revelation of verses and chapters from the Qur’an, are works called *Sira*. The popularity of *Sira* has not waned since the earliest of these works, attributed to Ibn Ishaq (773 CE), was composed. There was clearly a need for the foundation myth of the Muslim community to be told, and retold, in order that the religious sense of the twists and turns of Muslim history might be understood anew. Ramadan, in this new biography, presents his own take on the Prophet’s life and the lessons for Muslims that can be drawn from it.

To reduce the story of Muhammad to its bones: The boy who would later found the Islamic religion was born fatherless in late sixth-century Mecca, a city that is, today, part of Saudi Arabia. He was orphaned as a young child and raised by relatives who themselves fell on hard times. This forced him to make his way alone in the competitive economy of Mecca. He eventually gained work as an agent for a wealthy businesswoman, Khadija, who was so impressed with his honesty and competence that she proposed marriage. Muhammad accepted, and so began a happy and monogamous relationship. Always a spiritual person, Muhammad first received angelic visitations at the age of forty, around the year 610 CE. Through
these, he was commanded to bring the message of monotheism and submission—the message of Islam—to hedonistic and idolatrous Mecca. His teachings stressed that he sought to renew the message of previous prophets, but he achieved little through his proselytism except rejection from his own people. This soon gave way to outright hostility, and his followers remained depressingly few. In 622, after Khadija died, Muhammad took the incipient Muslim community out of Mecca, and settled them in Yathrib (later renamed Medina), to the north. From Yathrib, he established himself first as a trustworthy arbiter between communities, and then as the ruler of the entire city state. Soon he was persuading various tribes to join him, receiving pledges of alliance from throughout the Arabian Peninsula. At length, it was only Mecca, Muhammad’s hometown, that arrogantly resisted. His attempts at diplomacy faltered as the Meccans demonstrated their perfidy. Inevitably, this led to conflict. Despite military setbacks, the Muslims were eventually victorious, and Mecca was subdued and established as the sacred city of Islam. When Muhammad, in due course, made his pilgrimage to Mecca, he was unchallenged and in control. Having demonstrated his worldly military success and established the Muslim state, Muhammad passed away in Medina in 632. He left no male heir, but for Muslims, he left a perfect example of a life lived in obedience to God.

Of course, any biography, and the biography of a prophet in particular, is a vessel into which the author can pour his own drink. Ramadan seems aware of this, and admits the personal nature of his literary endeavour in this book. He is, perhaps unashamedly, ahistorical in his approach. He is less worried about how we know the Prophet’s character, and more concerned with the lessons that lie within the Prophet’s actions for Muslims today. This is, however, no hagiography in the rigid sense. Ramadan allows the Prophet to doubt and to struggle with the mission set before him, to weep at the misfortune that befalls him, and to be buoyed by success. This, of course, makes the Prophet human—and he is certainly less one-dimensional than he is in many modern accounts of the Prophet’s life. Despite this, there is little suspense in Ramadan’s version. The
portrayal is not, in truth, dramatic. The reader is not invited to postpone knowledge of the Prophet’s ultimate success. Ramadan’s biography is not wholly “modern,” in that he has not succumbed to the need for a plot or felt compelled to entertain. But in a sense, Ramadan’s personal religious commitment prevents a truly literary exploration of the Prophet’s life—and this is true for most modern Muslim biographers of Muhammad.

The result is a rather moralistic tone throughout the work. Every instance of the Prophet’s life is tapped for an ethical maxim. An example: Muhammad’s relationship with the Jews was always characterised by the “utmost respect,” even when relations had broken down, and “alliances were betrayed.”(95-96) (And there is never any doubt as to who should be blamed for the betrayal.) This respect is then presented as a supra-historical model for relations between Muslims and Jews. Ramadan is, quite bravely, attempting to address at least two audiences simultaneously—but is it convincing for either? Is the reading of this account likely to effect a change in the reader’s view of the “other”? The message of an Islam in tune with modern, Western social democracy—rather than in conflict with it—is comforting for those who do not wish to surrender their judgement to the drip feed of media hostility to Islam; but it does not constitute an argument, merely a personal (perhaps idiosyncratic) version of history. Ramadan is also at pains to demonstrate that Muhammad was a moral guide whose approach is perfectly compatible with contemporary values. He did not “merely order Muslims to respect the ritual” of sacrificing an animal,(203) but to perform the sacrifice swiftly in order to prevent suffering. Muhammad thus showed himself to be a protector of humane killing; he “taught that an animal’s right to be respected, to be spared suffering, to receive the food it needed, and to be treated well could not be negotiated: it was part of the duties of human beings and should be understood as one of the conditions of their spiritual elevation.”(204) Similarly, on gender relations, the various stories of Muhammad’s relationships with women demonstrate that “the Messenger conveyed to women the twofold requirement of spiritual training and of asserting a
femininity that is not imprisoned in the mirror of men’s gazes or alienated within unhealthy relationships of power and seduction.”(213) Ramadan makes interesting points here, although they are not necessarily original in the modern context, and he makes them in a convincing and readable way. However, at times, Ramadan’s project of establishing that the values of the founder of the Muslim faith are compatible with modern secular liberalism does seem a little forced. Clearly, the bulk of his audience is confessional, as he aims to counter the use of the Prophet’s biography for oppressive or discriminatory purposes. For those outside of the tradition, however, this will seem a rather anachronistic account of the Prophet and his activities. There is no sleight of hand here—indeed the moral lessons drawn from Muhammad’s life are clearly and explicitly drawn—and in that sense the book can be seen as intellectually honest. The Prophet is not so much a man of his time; he is not situated in a particular seventh-century environment. Rather, Ramadan portrays the Prophet as a man for all times, who calls upon universal moral truths in his personal, ethical, and political decisions. This, I suppose, is exactly the message Ramadan wishes readers to take away from the book.

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