Session 3: Islamic Narrative of Redemptive History

I. Introduction

A. Historical Context

1. Leading up to the life of Muhammad were the continual wars between the Byzantines and the Sassanids (c. 500–628), and Muhammad's ministry largely took place during the Great War of 602–628. Between the Byzantines and Sassanids were the Arab vassal states of the Ghassanids (Byzantine) and Lakhmids (Sassanid). Most of Arabia was considered irrelevant and unworthy of expending resources.

2. Jewish communities were scattered throughout the Middle East, most prominently in Arabia itself because of its remoteness and independence. Jewish emigration to Arabia generally happened in waves: 1) after the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 BC, 2) after the Roman conquest of Judea in 63 BC, 3) after the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 AD, 4) after the Bar Kochba Revolt in 135 AD, 5) after the Ghassanid persecution in Syria around 300 AD, and 6) with the rise of the Himyarite Kingdom in Yemen around 380 AD.

3. "Virtually every tribe in Arabia had members who converted to one of the major monotheistic religions or slaves who had come from a monotheistic background. Stories about Christian monks, priests, and Jewish rabbis abound in these early histories. After the suppression of the Jewish Kings of Yemen by the Christian Abyssinians, the gradual trend in Arabia was toward conversion to Christianity. F. E. Peters notes, 'In CE 600 an observer might easily have predicted that within three or four decades the Arabs would be as Christian as the Celts or later Slavs.'"[1]

4. Muhammad originally understood himself in a direct line with the previous Jewish and Christian prophets: "you [Prophet] are not told anything that the previous messengers were not told" (Q. 41:43).[2] Muhammad claimed that he was simply reviving the original "religion of Abraham" (Q. 1:130, 135; 4:125), purifying the religion of the Jews and Christians.

B. Muhammad's Early Life (570–610)

1. Muhammad was born to a prominent family within the Quraysh tribe of Mecca. His father died before birth, and his mother died at age six. He was raised by his uncle Abu Talib, who trained him as a merchant.

2. At the age of 25 (595), a wealthy Meccan widow named Khadijah (age 40) proposed to him. He accepted, which led to more free time for study and prayer. In 605 he helped place the Black Stone, which exalted him to religious leader status. In 610 he received his first

[1] Sahaja Carimokam, *Muhammad and the People of the Book* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2010), 20; quoting F. E. Peters, *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), xi.

[2] All qur'anic quotations are taken from *The Qur'an*, trans. M.A.S. Abdul Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

"revelation" in a cave outside of Mecca named Hira. Initially he thought it was demon, but he was reassured by Khadijah and her Christian cousin, Waraqah ibn Nawfal.

II. Progression of Quranic Revelations

A. Early Meccan Period (610–618)

1. Suras 96, 74, 111, 106, 108, 104, 107, 102, 105, 92, 90, 94, 93, 97, 86, 91, 80, 68, 87, 95, 103, 85, 73, 101, 99, 82, 81, 53, 84, 100, 79, 77, 78, 88, 89, 75, 83, 69, 51, 52, 56, 70, 55, 112, 109, 113, 114, 1.[3]

2. In the early Meccan period, Muhammad's message is highly apocalyptic, emphasizing almost exclusively the eschatological "Day,"[4] the judgment of the wicked in "Hell,"[5] and the rewarding of the righteous in a paradisal "Garden."[6]

3. Quite akin to Jewish apocalypticism, human history is understood as moving unidirectionally toward a final cataclysm between God and humanity in which divine recompense is ultimately meted out—i.e. "the Day of Judgment" (Q. 1:4; 56:55; 74:46; 82:15; 83:11), or simply "the Judgment" (Q. 51:6; 95:7; 107:1). This approach to redemptive history creates the two age dichotomy (Q. 53:25; 75:20f.; 79:25; 87:16f.; 92:13), the classic litmus test of apocalyptic thought.

4. "The last day, or the day of resurrection and judgment, was always in Muhammad's mind and on his tongue, so much so that he coupled the belief in the last day with the belief in Allah, and it was the 'obsession' which he communicated to his followers and companions."[7]

   Every soul is held in pledge for its deeds, [39]but the Companions of the Right will stay [40]in Gardens and ask [41]about the guilty. [42]"What drove you to the Scorching Fire?" [43]and they will answer, "We did not pray; [44]we did not feed the poor; [45]we indulged with others [in mocking the believers]; [46]we denied the Day of Judgment [47]until the Certain End came upon us." [48]No intercessor's plea will benefit them now. [49]What is the matter with them? Why do they turn away from the warning, [50]like frightened asses [51]fleeing from a lion? [52]Each one of them demands that a scripture be sent down to him and unrolled before his very eyes— [53] No! Truly they have no fear of the life to come— [54]but truly this is a reminder. (Q. 74:38-54)

[3] In approaching the Qur'an, I am assuming the chronological outline of German orientalist Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930), which is generally accepted (with minor variations) by both Christian and Muslim scholars.

[4] Q. 51:12f., 60; 52:9, 45; 55:39; 56:50; 68:39, 42; 69:15-18; 70:42f.; 73:14; 74:8; 75:1, 6, 10–12,22–24; 77:13f., 15, 19, 24, 28, 34–38, 40, 45–47; 78:17f., 38–40; 79:35, 46; 80:34, 37f.; 82:19; 83:5; 85:2; 86:9; 88:2, 8; 83:10, 15; 89:23, 25; 99:4, 6; 100:10; 102:8.

[5] Q. 52:13; 55:43; 56:94; 74:31; 78:21; 79:36,39; 83:16; 85:10; 89:23; 96:18; ; 102:5. Also commonly referenced as the "Fire" (Q. 52:13; 69:30; 73:12; 74:26f.; 82:14; 84:12; 88:4; 90:20; 92:13; 101:11; 104:6; 111:3), or the "torment" (Q. 52:18; 73:13; 78:40; 84:24; 85:10; 88:23).

[6] Q. 52:18; 56:12,89; 68:34; 69:21f.; 70:35,37; 78:33; 85:11; 88:10; 89:30.

[7] Morris S. Seale, *Qur'an and Bible: Studies in Interpretation and Dialogue* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 92.

When the sky is ripped apart, [2]obeying its Lord as it rightly must, [3]when the earth is leveled out, [4]casts out its contents, and becomes empty, [5]obeying its Lord as it rightly must, [6]you humans, toiling laboriously towards your Lord, will meet Him: [7]whoever is given his record in his right hand [8]will have an easy reckoning[9]and return to his people well pleased, [10]but whoever is given his record from behind his back [11]will cry out for destruction— [12]he will burn in the blazing Fire. [13]He used to live among his people well pleased. [14]He thought he would never return [to his Lord]— [15]indeed he will! His Lord was watching him. [16]I swear by the glow of sunset, [17]by the night and what it covers, [18]by the full moon, [19]you will progress from stage to stage. [20]So why do they not believe? [21]Why, when the Qur'an is read to them, do they not prostrate themselves [to God]? [22]No! The disbelievers reject the Qur'an— [23]God knows best what they keep hidden inside— [24]so give them news of a painful torment. [25]But those who believe and do good deeds will have a never-ending reward. (Q. 84:1-25)

For those who persecute believing men and women, and do not repent afterwards, there will be the torment of Hell and burning. [11]But for those who believe and do good deeds there will be Gardens graced with flowing streams: that is the great triumph. [12][Prophet] your Lord's punishment is truly stern— [13]it is He who brings people to life, and will restore them to life again— [14]and He is the Most Forgiving, the Most Loving. (Q. 85:10-14)

B. Middle Meccan Period (618–620)

1. Suras 54, 37, 71, 76, 44, 50, 20, 26, 15, 19, 38, 36, 43, 72, 67, 23, 21, 25, 17, 27, 18.

2. The second Meccan period continues the same apocalyptic themes (though more refined and focused), only now Muhammad begins to incorporate Old Testament and Jewish apocryphal material to justify his own ministry.

3. Just as the prophets of old proclaimed the coming divine judgment, so also was Muhammad a "warner" (Q. 50:2; cf. 27:92; 38:65; 67:26). And conversely, just as the prophets of old were commonly rejected, so also were the Meccans rejecting Muhammad.

What suffering will come to those who obscure the truth when the dreadful Day arrives! [38]How sharp of hearing, how sharp of sight they will be when they come to Us, although now they are clearly off course! Warn them [Muhammad] of the Day of Remorse when the matter will be decided, [39]for they are heedless and do not believe. [40]It is We who will inherit the earth and all who are on it: they will all be returned to Us. [41]Mention too, in the Qur'an, the story of Abraham. He was a man of truth, a prophet… [58]These were the prophets God blessed—from the seed of Adam, of those We carried in the Ark with Noah, from the seed of Abraham and Israel—and those We guided and chose. When the revelations of the Lord of Mercy were recited to them, they fell to their knees and wept, [59]but there came after them generations who neglected prayer and were driven by their own desires. These will come face to face with their evil, [60]but those who repent, who believe, who do righteous deeds, will enter Paradise. They will not be wronged in the least: [61]they will enter the Gardens of Lasting Bliss, promised by the Lord of Mercy to His servants—it is not yet seen but truly His promise will be fulfilled. (Q. 19:37-61)

Truly, this Qur'an has been sent down by the Lord of the Worlds: [193]the Trustworthy Spirit brought it down [194]to your heart [Prophet], so that you could bring warning [195]in a clear Arabic tongue. [196]This was foretold in the scriptures of earlier religions. [197]Is it not proof enough for them that the learned men of the Children of Israel have recognized it? [198]If We had sent it down to someone who was not an Arab, [199]and he had recited it to them, they still would not have believed in it. [200]So We make it pass straight through the hearts of the guilty: [201]they will not believe in it until they see the grievous torment, [202]which will suddenly hit them when they are not expecting it. (Q. 26:192-202)

Messengers before you were also ridiculed, but those who mocked them were overwhelmed in the end by the very thing they had mocked. (Q. 21:41)

C. Late Meccan Period (620–622)

1. Suras 32, 41, 45, 16, 30, 11, 14, 12, 40, 28, 39, 29, 31, 42, 10, 34, 35, 7, 46, 6, 13.

2. The third Meccan period continues the same apocalyptic themes of eschatological judgment, Hell, and Paradise with a similar amount of biblical and apocryphal material (though more detailed) as in the second Meccan period.

3. The biographies tell of two events at the beginning of this period (c. 620) that shake Muhammad to the core: the death of his wife Khadija and his uncle Abu Talib. Khadija was the first person to encourage Muhammad in his revelations, and Abu Talib functioned as a Muhammad's protector, restraining the incessant religious persecution of the Meccans.

   "The apostle had not been given permission to fight or allowed to shed blood before the second 'Aqaba [treaty]. He had simply been ordered to call men to God and to endure insult and forgive the ignorant… When the Quraysh became insolent towards God and rejected His gracious purpose, accused His prophet of lying, and ill-treated and exiled those who served Him and proclaimed His unity, believed in His prophet, and held fast to His religion, He gave permission to His apostle to fight and to protect himself against those who wronged them and treated them badly."[8]

D. Medinan Period (622–632)

1. Suras 2, 98, 64, 62, 8, 47, 3, 61, 57, 4, 65, 59, 33, 63, 24, 58, 22, 48, 66, 60, 110, 49, 9, 5.

2. After the migration (*hijra)* to Medina, Muhammad's revelations take on a much more militant tone. They also become quite polemical against the Jews and Christians, now generally referenced as "people of the book."[9] The Jews and Christians often claim to receive

[8] Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 212.

[9] Q. 2:105, 108; 3:64f., 69–72, 75, 98f., 110, 113, 199; 4:47, 123, 153, 159, 171; 5:5, 15, 19, 59, 65, 68, 77; 9:29; 29:46; 33:26; 57:29; 59:2, 11; 98:1, 6.

Muhammad as a prophet, but they are actually "hypocrites,"[10] a term only used during the Medinan period.

"When Islam appeared and their people flocked to it they were compelled to pretend to accept it to save their lives. But in secret they were hypocrites whose inclination was toward the Jews because they considered the apostle a liar and strove against Islam."[11]

They say, 'Become Jews or Christians, and you will be rightly guided.' Say [Prophet], 'No, [ours is] the religion of Abraham, the upright, who did not worship any god besides God.' [136]So [you believers], say, 'We believe in God and in what was sent down to us and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we devote ourselves to Him.' [137]So if they believe like you do, they will be rightly guided. But if they turn their backs, then they will be entrenched in opposition. God will protect you from them: He is the All Hearing, the All Knowing. (Q. 2:135-37)

3. As contentions between Muhammad and the people of the book (especially the Jews) escalated, Muhammad progressively turned away from the roots of his own religion. After many disputations with Jewish rabbis and raids on neighboring Jewish villages, Muhammad received a revelation in 624 to stop praying toward Jerusalem and begin praying toward Mecca.[12]

4. After this Muhammad expelled the Jews from Medina (because they would not convert) and supposedly received the revelation, "O you who believe, take not Jews and Christians as friends. They are friends one of another. Who of you takes them as friends is one of them."[13] Muhammad went on to expel the neighboring Jewish tribe of Banu Nadir, slaughter the Banu Qurayza, and subjugate the Jews of Khaybar.[14] These events seemingly sealed Muhammad's trajectory away from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Fight those of the People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tax and agree to submit. [30]The Jews said, 'Ezra is the son of God,' and the Christians said, 'The Messiah is the son of God': they said this with their own mouths, repeating what earlier disbelievers had said. May God confound them! How far astray they have been led! [31]They take their rabbis and their monks as lords, as well as Christ, the son of Mary. But they were commanded to serve only one God: there is no god but Him; He is far above whatever they set up as His partners! [32]They try to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God insists on bringing His light to its fullness, even if the disbelievers hate it. [33]It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to show that it is above all [other] religions, however much the idolaters may hate this. [34]Believers, many rabbis

[10] Q. 3:166; 4:61, 64, 88, 138–145; 8:49; 9:64–67, 73, 101, 124; 29:11; 33:1, 12, 24, 48, 60, 73; 57:13f.; 59:11; 63:1, 7f.; 66:9.

[11] Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad*, 239.

[12] Ibid., 289.

[13] Ibid., 364.

[14] Ibid., 437, 464, and 515, respectively.

and monks wrongfully consume people's possessions and turn people away from God's path. [Prophet], tell those who hoard gold and silver instead of giving in God's cause that they will have a grievous punishment: [35]on the Day it is heated up in Hell's Fire and used to brand their foreheads, sides, and backs, they will be told, 'This is what you hoarded up for yourselves! Now feel the pain of what you hoarded!' (Q. 9:29-35)

5. Muhammad and his followers also began raiding Meccan caravans, which resulted in a number of battles with the Quraysh, including the Battle of Badr (624), the Battle of Uhad (625), and the Battle of the Trench (627). During a pilgrimage to Mecca in 628, Muhammad and their followers were met by Meccan soldiers and made a treaty at Hudaybiyya. After the Meccans aided a tribal ally of Muhammad, he marched on Mecca with 10,000 men in 630.

E. Death of Muhammad (632)

1. Muhammad died in 632 with his youngest wife Aisha. Abu Bakr became the new leader of the Ummah and ruled until his death in 634, conquering the whole of the Arabian Peninsula.

2. Umar (634-44) extended the Islamic State to Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. Uthman (644-56) extended the empire across North Africa, Persia, and into modern day Turkey and Afghanistan.

III. Conclusions

A. Two Islams (Mecca vs Medina)

B. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity

1. Muhammad seems to have understood himself as a revivalist of true Judaism and a corrector of errant Christianity. When we compare the development of Jewish and Christian thought, it seems that Muhammad's thought roughly aligns with late Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. All three emphasized the eschatological Day, two ages, resurrection of the dead, restored Edenic paradise, and fiery hell.

2. Muhammad, however, stripped from such thought everything that was Jewish, creating a *generic apocalypticism*. This same process of "de-Judaization"[15] was seen in Christian theologians preceding Muhammad (though they rejected both Jewish election and apocalypticism).

3. Muhammad also generally rejected the concept of vicarious atonement, which was a prominent theme in both Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. No atonement and no Jewish election; just God, his messengers, the Day of Judgment, and repentance.

[15] R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 78.