

2006

Islam

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Recommended Citation

Azizah Y. al-Hibri & Raja' M. El Habti, *Islam, in Sex, Marriage, and Family In World Religions* (Don S. Browning, M. Christian Green, & John Witte Jr. eds., 2006).

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Chapter 3

ISLAM

Azizah Y. Al-Hibri and Raja' M. El Habti

INTRODUCTION

PROPHET MUHAMMAD: THE LAST PROPHET OF ISLAM

Islam is the youngest of the three Abrahamic religions and views itself as the final reiteration and elaboration of the same message that was revealed to Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets of Christianity and Judaism. The holy book of Islam is the Qur'an, which is viewed by Muslims as the literal word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad through the Archangel Gabriel.

Muhammad, a disadvantaged orphan, was born in sixth-century Makkah (Mecca) of noble descent to the tribe of Quraysh. This is the same tribe that would, after the revelation, wage ruthless attacks against him and his followers until they migrated from Makkah to Madinah (Medina) upon the invitation of its inhabitants. Because of his modest means and existing social conditions, the Prophet was illiterate, but soon developed a reputation for hard work, wisdom, and trustworthiness. Thus he was known as "al-Amin" (the Trustworthy One), even before he received the revelation.

Ancient biographical sources about the Prophet tell us that his reputation earned him the trust of Khadijah Bint Khuwailid, a rich Makkan businesswoman who hired him to run her trade to Damascus. Impressed by his com-

petence, moral values, and demeanor, she proposed to him in marriage, and he accepted. She was twenty years his senior but the marriage was highly successful. It was monogamous, and lasted twenty-five years until her death. It gave the Prophet the only progeny he had. The Prophet's relationship with Khadijah affected his view of women as equal human beings (see, for example, his statements in section 2, "Creation and the Identity of Origin of Women and Men"). At home he cut meat, mended his shoes, and played with his children. When faced with a crisis affecting the new Muslim community, he sought and took the advice of a woman. In his farewell address the Prophet repeatedly enjoined Muslim men to treat Muslim women kindly.

THE REVELATION

According to Islamic history books, when the Prophet was about forty years of age, he took a trip to the wilderness, as was his habit, to think and reflect. While in Cave Hira', the Archangel Gabriel appeared to him and spoke the first word of the Qur'an: "Read!"¹ The illiterate prophet was taken aback, and Gabriel repeated his order: "Read in the name of your God, the Creator." The experience shook up the Prophet who broke into sweat and returned to Khadijah asking her to cover him up. When he recounted his experience in the cave to her, she assured him that he had received a revelation. Khadijah soon embraced that revelation and became the first Muslim. This marked a trend in the life of the early Muslim community, in which women played a leadership role in various parts of community life, including religious and political leadership.

The Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-three years.² The central point of that revelation was deep monotheism that rejected any partnership with God. The Qur'an is clear in asserting that Jesus is a prophet, not a divinity, who was born to the Virgin Mary (19:16-35). According to the Qur'an, Mary was a pious woman who "guarded her chastity," and Jesus was born to her after Gabriel "breathed into her of Our Spirit" (21:91). The Qur'an attributes various miracles to Jesus (5:109), including that of speaking in the cradle to quell suspicions about his mother Mary (19:27-33).

SEX, MARRIAGE, AND FAMILY IN THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an states that God created all humanity from a single *nafs* (soul or spirit), created from like nature its mate, and from the two made humanity into nations and tribes so that they may get to know each other, that is, to enjoy and learn from each other's diversity (4:1; 49:13). The only proper criterion for preference among people is that of piety, a quality achievable by anyone (49:13). The Prophet himself stated, in a famous reported *hadith*, that women are the twin halves of men. Absent from the Qur'an is the view that woman was created from Adam's rib.