



The Accomplishments of the Prophet ﷺ: The Proofs of Prophethood Series

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In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

Introduction

“Ye shall know them by their fruits.”¹ Muhammad’s ﷺ positive impact on the world was another blessed fruit harvested from his ministry. In addition to his personal actions and impeccable character, a further proof of his prophethood is found in the answer to this question: what exactly did this man accomplish? Do his achievements represent extraordinary talent and virtue, or mere hyperbolic attributions by his followers? Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), the Córdoba polymath, after illustrating how Muhammad ﷺ transformed the world around him in a historically unparalleled way, writes,

The biography of Muhammad ﷺ, for anyone who deeply considers it, necessitates believing him and testifying that he is certainly the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. If he ﷺ had no other miracle but his biography, it would have sufficed.²

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was not just extraordinary in terms of his political reach on the world stage, but he was also a demonstrably greater influence on religiosity and spirituality than any other founder of the major faiths, and on social wellbeing at large. He ﷺ was unique in human history for having excelled in numerous roles simultaneously: a spiritual leader, a head of state, a general, a diplomat, a family man, and an educator. Jesus Christ (as) was a tremendous spiritual figure, but not a general or head of state. Alexander “the Great” and many other iconic political leaders were not heralded for their moral virtue or spiritual motivation. On the contrary, many great kings, rulers, and emperors were ruthless, arrogant, or otherwise intoxicated by power and delusions of grandeur. But there was something different about Muhammad ﷺ—something that leaves those who discover it awestruck. It was the fact that no single aspect established his legacy, but instead a myriad of outstanding feats that converged in one person. This is what fascinated and bewildered so many over the past millennium and a half, leaving

¹ Matthew 7:16 (King James Version).

² ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl fil-milal wal-ahwā’ wal-niḥal* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānji, 1929), 2:73.

them wondering: Could such a person have existed outside of legends? Is there any other plausible explanation for this? Perhaps he really was sent by God?

John William Draper (d. 1882), an English-American historian, wrote,

Four years after the death of Justinian, A.D. 569, was born at Mecca, in Arabia, the man who, of all men, has exercised the greatest influence upon the human race... To the declaration that there is but one God, he added, “and Mohammed is his Prophet.” Whoever desires to know whether the event of things answered to the boldness of such an announcement, will do well to examine a map of the world in our own times. He will find the marks of something more than an imposture. To be the religious head of many empires, to guide the daily life of one-third of the human race, may perhaps justify the title of a messenger of God.³

There is no leap of faith here. To say that sheer luck is responsible for all these things being accomplished by any one individual can only be claimed by someone uninformed about reality or perverted by prejudice. Consider the enigma of a man who himself was illiterate, born in a backwards and feuding Arabia, isolated from the arts, philosophies, politics, warfare, and education of the surrounding empires. Consider that this very man steps forward—overnight—with a call whose profundity, impact, and permanence remain peerless. The speed at which his religion spread, the global command of his call until today, and the positive influence of this single individual were—and will remain—unparalleled in human history. Draper was certainly not the only non-Muslim historian in the West who recognized this. Samuel P. Scott (d. 1929), an American scholar and jurist, wrote,

In any event, if the object of religion be the inculcation of morals, the diminution of evil, the promotion of human happiness, the expansion of the human intellect; if the performance of good works will avail in that great day when mankind shall be summoned to its final reckoning, it is neither irreverent nor unreasonable to admit that Mohammed was indeed an Apostle of God.⁴

³ John W. Draper, *A History of the Intellectual Development of Europe* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1875), 329–30.

⁴ Samuel P. Scott, *History of the Moorish Empire in Europe* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1904), 1:126–27.

As Alphonse de Lamartine (d. 1869), a French historian, skillfully put it,

If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in modern history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man moved not only armies, legislations, empires, peoples and dynasties, but millions of men in one-third of the then inhabited world; and more than that, he moved the altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and souls. On the basis of a Book, every letter of which has become law, he created a spiritual nationality which has blended together peoples of every tongue and of every race. He has left to us as the indelible characteristic of this Muslim nationality, the hatred of false gods and the passion for the One and immaterial God. This avenging patriotism against the profanation of Heaven formed the virtue of the followers of Muhammad: the conquest of one third of the earth to his creed was his miracle. The idea of the unity of God proclaimed amidst the exhaustion of fabulous theogonies, was in itself such a miracle that upon its utterance from his lips it destroyed all the ancient temples of idols and set on fire one third of the world...

His life, his meditations, his heroic stance against the superstitions of his country, and his boldness in defying the furies of idolatry; his firmness in enduring them for thirteen years at Mecca, his acceptance of the role of public scorn and almost of being a victim of his fellow-countrymen: all these and, finally his incessant preaching, his wars against odds, his faith in his success and his superhuman security in misfortune, the forbearance in victory, his ambition, which was entirely devoted to one idea and in no manner striving for an empire; his endless prayers, his mystic conversations with God, his death and his triumph after death; all these attest not to an imposture but to a firm conviction which gave him the power to restore a dogma. This dogma was twofold, the unity of God and the immateriality of God; the former telling what God is, the latter telling what God is not; the one overthrowing false gods with the sword, the other starting an idea with words. Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images, the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire; that is Muhammad. As

regards all the standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask: is there any man greater than he?⁵

A love larger than life

Has anyone in human history ever been as deeply loved as the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ? Many underestimate, or perhaps are unfamiliar with, the esteem and emulation he has garnered for a second millennium now. Others may realize it, then hastily assume that just-as-impressive shares of adoration must have been achieved by somebody else in human history. But a more critical examination tells another story.

During his life, the Prophet's ﷺ Companions longed to sacrifice life and limb to defend him. When he ﷺ was struck unconscious during the Battle of Uḥud, for instance, his Companions displayed extraordinary heroism as they rushed to his rescue. Abū Dujānah (rA) welcomed volleys of arrows landing in his back as he hovered over the Prophet ﷺ. Anas ibn al-Naḍr (rA) dove into the crowds until over ninety wounds were found on his martyred body. Abū Talḥah (rA) shielded the Prophet ﷺ from injury with his bare chest when he found nothing else, and pleaded with him, “Do not look, O Messenger of Allah! Let it be my neck [struck] rather than yours!” Talḥah ibn ‘Ubaydillāh (rA) lifted the Prophet ﷺ onto a boulder, then returned to drive back the onslaught, then returned yet again to bring the Prophet ﷺ to even safer ground. Nusaybah bint Ka‘b (rAh) was a fearless woman who snatched swords away from men and charged at many physically stronger warriors at Uḥud, until she fell to a saber-strike on her collarbone which was the first of many scars of valor she sustained in her life before eventually dying a martyr. By the time the dust had finally cleared, their selfless displays of love for the Prophet ﷺ were immortalized. Upon returning to the city of Madinah, a woman from the Banū Dinār tribe was told that her husband, father, and brother were all killed at Uḥud. She responded, “But what happened to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ?” They replied, “He is safe and well, just as you wish him to be.” She said, “Show him to me; I must see for myself.” When she finally saw him ﷺ, she said, “Every tragedy besides losing you is insignificant, O

⁵ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire De La Turquie* (Paris: Librairie du Constitutionnel, 1854), 1:277–80.

Messenger of Allah.”⁶ This single day’s events, not all captured here, are but a microcosm reflecting the ethos of love and endearment that surrounded the final prophet of God ﷺ for the duration of his twenty-three-year ministry.

A few years after Uhud, ‘Urwah ibn Mas‘ūd came as an envoy of the then enemy tribe of Quraysh, seeking to negotiate a treaty with Muhammad ﷺ. After spending three days among the Muslims, he returned to Mecca and briefed Quraysh with these observations:

O council of Quraysh, I have visited Chosroes in his kingdom, and Caesar in his kingdom, and the Negus in his kingdom. But by God, I have never seen a king so revered among a people like Muhammad. He does not wash himself except that they rush to catch the droplets of water [falling from his body], nor does one of his hairs fall except that they take it. Whenever he speaks, they immediately lower their voices, and none stares at him directly out of reverence for him. He has offered you good terms, so accept them, for I do not see them ever deserting him. Now make your decision.⁷

Even decades after the Prophet’s ﷺ death, we find a Companion like ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ (rA) laying on his own deathbed reminiscing about his life prior to Islam, recalling how he transformed from being a militant adversary of the Prophet ﷺ to one of his greatest followers. Amidst his recollections, he says,

Then, no one was dearer to me than the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, and none was more exalted in my eyes than him. I could not even stare at him directly out of reverence for him, and thus if I am asked to describe his features, I would not be able to describe them, for I have never eyed him fully.⁸

The Companions who outlived the Prophet ﷺ burned with similar passion and longing; an entire generation who remained incapable of hearing his name without their hearts trembling, their eyes overflowing with tears, anticipating reuniting with him in the hereafter. Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ (rA) was a freed Ethiopian slave who was among the first handful to accept Islam at the hands of the Prophet ﷺ, tolerating unthinkable torture for defying his masters and embracing the religion of

⁶ Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Wāqidi, *Kitāb al-maghāzī* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ālamī, 1989), 1:292.

⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 3:193, no. 2731.

⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:112, no. 121.

Muhammad. He would survive to become the very first *mu'adhin* (caller to prayer) in Muslim history. Loving Muhammad ﷺ flowed in Bilāl's veins and surviving him brought him sorrow that only a reunion could heal. Nine years later, as Bilāl (rA) lay on his own deathbed in Damascus, he heard his wife say, "O my grief! O my Bilāl!" To that, he retorted, "O my joy! Tomorrow I meet my loved ones: Muhammad and his Companions!"⁹

Countless thousands have since inherited this love of the Final Prophet ﷺ en route to becoming icons of truth, justice, and contribution in world history. Among these were vanguards who developed profound insight into sacred truths, performed tangible and intellectual wonders, and ascended to rare heights in the footsteps of their beloved, the unlettered Prophet ﷺ. Innumerable pious sages, meticulous scholars, literary geniuses, selfless altruists, accomplished statesmen, and virtuous generals believed emulating Muhammad ﷺ was the gateway to true excellence in all endeavors and indispensable for being a torchbearer for humanity. Even today, nearly a third of this planet continues to govern their lives—in one respect or another—in ways that reflect their veneration of Muhammad ﷺ. Muslims certainly do not worship Muhammad, only God, but see his persona as their earthly pivot of faith, and his example as the paragon of virtue and thereby their conduit to God's pleasure. Dr. Jonathan Brown of Georgetown University writes,

Throughout the Muslim world, it is customary to say "May the peace and blessings of God be upon him" after mentioning the Prophet. As a result, during the Friday communal prayer any mention of the Prophet's name by the preacher during the sermon will elicit a collective murmur of prayers for Muhammad from the congregation. In such settings, the person of the Prophet becomes the common focus of Muslims' ritual attention. Remembering Muhammad and honouring his Sunnah act as the earthly focal point from which attention is directed upward to God.¹⁰

Today, Muslims' adulation of the man who connected them with their Creator has made *Muhammad* the most popular baby name in London and other regions of the

⁹ 'Alī ibn al-Ḥasan ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 10:475–76.

¹⁰ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 106.

U.K. in 2019, where Muslims to date only account for a small minority of the population.¹¹ If one combines all the variant spellings of the name, Muhammad is likely the most popular name in the entire world.¹² Generation after generation, his devout followers continue exploring his every word, rigorously pursuing everything traceable to him, and mimicking his lifestyle down to the motions of his fingers during prayer. How many figures in human history have won such adoration, an adoration that translated into actions, for fifteen centuries and counting?

David George Hogarth (d. 1927), a British scholar and archeologist, said,

Serious or trivial, his daily behavior has instituted a canon which millions observe this day with conscious mimicry. No one regarded by any section of the human race as Perfect Man has ever been imitated so minutely. The conduct of the founder of Christianity has not governed the ordinary life of his followers. Moreover, no founder of a religion has been left on so solitary an eminence as the Muslim Apostle.¹³

It is fascinating that Muhammad's name foretold this phenomenon before its occurrence. *Muhammad* literally means 'the oft-praised one,' and no human being has ever received greater praise and recognition. Even without the exposure opportunities of social media, without an account on Twitter or Facebook or Instagram or WhatsApp, Muhammad ﷺ has amassed 1.8 billion followers in today's world. Does it not stir amazement to consider how, 1,400 years after he passed away, there is no second that passes except that he is praised all around the world? In the Muslim *adhān* (call to prayer) which takes place every second around the world, followed by the *ṣalāh* (ritual prayer) itself, supplicating for Muhammad ﷺ and testifying to his prophethood is echoed day and night. One should marvel at just how emotionally attached people remain to Muhammad ﷺ, and how they continue to express the most passionate defense of him when he is slighted.

¹¹ Office for National Statistics, "Baby Names in England and Wales: 2019," www.ons.gov.uk.

¹² Paul Lagasse and Columbia University, "Muhammad, Prophet of Islam," in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 8th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹³ David G. Hogarth, *Arabia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 52.

In fact, God Himself foretold this by saying, “And We have raised for you your repute.”¹⁴ This verse was revealed during the early Meccan years, at a time when the Muslims were a mere handful of weak people and it was unsure what would happen to Islam, making it even more incredible to think how the verse is fulfilled now, when Muhammad ﷺ is mentioned and remembered by hundreds of millions of people all over the world. Even non-Muslim scholars of Islam, such as the German orientalist Theodore Noldeke, acknowledge the early date of this chapter from the Qur’an. He considered it to be the twelfth of its 114 chapters, and the standard Egyptian chronology of the Qur’an lists it as the eleventh.¹⁵

History’s greatest success story

A momentary glance at just the Prophet’s ﷺ life and his worldly success has commanded attention from scholars worldwide, even among those who may not recognize the great substance and truth in his teachings. As Karen Armstrong, an acclaimed author on comparative religion, puts it,

Islam is a religion of success. Unlike Christianity, which has as its main image, in the west at least, a man dying in a devastating, disgraceful, helpless death... Mohammed was not an apparent failure. He was a dazzling success, politically as well as in spirituality, and Islam went from strength to strength.¹⁶

Michael Hart, the contemporary American historian who authored *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, succinctly illustrates this mind-boggling success story as follows:

My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels. Of humble origins, Muhammad founded and promulgated one of the world’s great religions and became an immensely

¹⁴ Qur’an 94:4 (author’s translation).

¹⁵ See Carl Ernst, *How to Read the Qur’an: A New Guide, with Select Translations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 39–41.

¹⁶ Karen Armstrong, “Transcript: Bill Moyers Interviews Karen Armstrong,” *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)*, March 1, 2002.

effective political leader. Today, thirteen centuries after his death, his influence is still powerful and pervasive. The majority of the persons in this book had the advantage of being born and raised in centers of civilization, highly cultured or politically pivotal nations. Muhammad, however, was born in the year 570, in the city of Mecca, in southern Arabia, at that time a backward area of the world, far from the centers of trade, art, and learning. Orphaned at age six, he was reared in modest surroundings. Islamic tradition tells us that he was illiterate. His economic position improved when, at age twenty-five, he married a wealthy widow. Nevertheless, as he approached forty, there was little outward indication that he was a remarkable person.

Most Arabs at that time were pagans, who believed in many gods. There were, however, in Mecca, a small number of Jews and Christians; it was from them no doubt that Muhammad first learned of a single, omnipotent God who ruled the entire universe. When he was forty years old, Muhammad became convinced that this one true God (Allah) was speaking to him and had chosen him to spread the true faith. For three years, Muhammad preached only to close friends and associates. Then, about 613, he began preaching in public. As he slowly gained converts, the Meccan authorities came to consider him a dangerous nuisance. In 622, fearing for his safety, Muhammad fled to Medina (a city some 200 miles north of Mecca), where he had been offered a position of considerable political power... When Muhammad died, in 632, he was the effective ruler of all of southern Arabia. The Bedouin tribesmen of Arabia had a reputation as fierce warriors. But their number was small; and plagued by disunity and internecine warfare, they had been no match for the larger armies of the kingdoms in the settled agricultural areas to the north. However, unified by Muhammad for the first time in history, and inspired by their fervent belief in the one true God, these small Arab armies now embarked upon one of the most astonishing series of conquests in human history.¹⁷

Therefore, it was also the swiftness of Islam's expansion which beckoned the wonderment of many Western historians, and Muslims who cite it as a miraculous proof for the truth of Islam's claims. And as Lamartine said earlier, it was not just the astonishing series of conquests and their striking rapidity that made

¹⁷Michael H. Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History* (New York: Citadel Press, 2001), 3–10.

Muhammad unique, but also the meager means through which he ﷺ accomplished this, the selfless relinquishing of any material gains and the retention of his transcendent purpose despite all these accomplishments, that marked his greatness. Bosworth Smith (d. 1908), a reverend schoolmaster and author, writes,

Head of the State as well as the Church; he was Caesar and Pope in one; but he was Pope without the Pope's pretensions, and Caesar without the legions of Caesar. Without a standing army, without a bodyguard, without a palace, without a fixed revenue, if ever any man had the right to say he ruled by a right Divine, it was Mohammed; for he had all the power without its instruments and without its supports...¹⁸ By a fortune absolutely unique in history, Mohammed is a threefold founder of a nation, of an empire, and of a religion.¹⁹

Many have echoed Smith's fascination with Muhammad's ﷺ unique rise to power, and his enduring influence wherever his message went, irrespective of whether it had political support there. Edward Gibbon, whose writings are not void of hostility towards Muhammad ﷺ, could not help but document his admiration of Islam's resilience on the world stage. He writes,

It is not the propagation but the permanency of his religion that deserves our wonder, the same pure and perfect impression which he engraved at Mecca and Medina is preserved after the revolutions of twelve centuries by the Indian, the African and the Turkish proselytes of the Koran...²⁰

After the renowned Mahatma Gandhi (d. 1948) found himself in prison with the Prophet's biography, he was able to identify the secret behind the Prophet ﷺ overcoming insurmountable odds and reaching such stations of global success. It was the combination of political control and not allowing that political power to control him. Muslims believe that only God could have fused these two phenomena inside one man, and that He reinforced his claim to prophethood with these material and moral triumphs. In Gandhi's words,

¹⁸ Bosworth Smith, *Mohammed and Mohammedanism* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1874), 235.

¹⁹ Smith, *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*, 237.

²⁰ Edward Gibbon, *The Rise and Fall of the Saracen Empire* (London, 1870), 54.

I wanted to know the best of the life of one who holds today an undisputed sway over the hearts of millions of mankind... I became more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam in those days in the scheme of life. It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the Prophet, the scrupulous regard for pledges, his intense devotion to his friends and followers, his intrepidity, his fearlessness, his absolute trust in God and in his own mission. These and not the sword carried everything before them and surmounted every obstacle.²¹

Restoring the unity of God

The Final Prophet ﷺ accomplished the rare feat of providing the world with impeccable clarity on the identity of God, His oneness, and His perfection. It was a clarity that aligned with both human nature and rationality, and thus became the hallmark of Islam. He taught a simple and intuitive theology that described to people their Creator, and the path to Him, in a way that spread like wildfire across the globe. Islamic monotheism became the religion of Arabia in just twenty years of preaching, in stark contrast to the Roman Empire needing about three centuries to become majority Christian. This attests to Muhammad ﷺ coming with a unique proposal, one that struck such a deep chord in humanity that it effectively stripped them of some of their most hindering tendencies—such as the blind conformity that cultures at times perpetuate, and the idolization of ancestors that has occurred in so many civilizations. Muhammad ﷺ unearthed for a vulnerable world their long-lost sanctuary; direct access to the One True God, the Most Merciful. He ﷺ refused to rest until they knew that only through singling God out in devotion would they find contentment and satisfaction, and that only through Him would their moral compasses be set aright. For those who understand that only disorder can exist outside an authentic God-centric lifestyle, this is the singular accomplishment of Muhammad ﷺ. Restoring the unity of God in people’s lives resulted in restoring order and meaning to life, as it did away with the notion of life being a destination-less journey. And for those who struggle to see the utility of an authentic theology in our age, perhaps they should consider the

²¹ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1960–1994), 29:133.

emerging fascination with “spiritual intelligence” in the turmoil-filled modern world, along with the significantly lower homicide and suicide rates in Muslim countries.²²

Alphonse de Lamartine says on this point,

Never has a man proposed for himself, voluntarily or involuntarily, a goal more sublime, since this goal was beyond measure: undermine the superstitions placed between the creature and the Creator, give back God to man and man to God, reinstate the rational and saintly idea of divinity in the midst of this prevailing chaos of material and disfigured gods of idolatry... Never has a man accomplished in such short time such an immense and long-lasting revolution in the world, since less than two centuries after his prediction, Islam, preaching and armed, ruled over three Arabias and conquered to God’s unity Persia, the Khorasan of Transoxania, Western India, Syria, Egypt, Abyssinia, and all the known continent of Northern Africa, many islands of the Mediterranean, Spain, and part of Gaul.²³

Edward Gibbon adds,

The Mahometans have uniformly withstood the temptation of reducing the object of their faith and devotion to a level with the senses and imagination of man. ‘I believe in One God and Mahomet the Apostle of God’ is the simple and invariable profession of Islam. The intellectual image of the Deity has never been degraded by any visible idol; the honors of the prophet have never transgressed the measure of human virtue, and his living precepts have restrained the gratitude of his disciples within the bounds of reason and religion.²⁴

This purest conceptualization of monotheism was inculcated by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ: a purely personal relationship with God, one void of any intermediary or human interference. This strict monotheism placed all men and women on equal footing before God and with equal access to God. This helped shape the egalitarian nature of Islam, providing a social narrative in which the

²² Don Soo Chon, “National Religious Affiliation and Integrated Model of Homicide and Suicide,” *Homicide Studies* 21, no. 1 (February 2016); David Lester, “Suicide and Islam,” *Archives of Suicide Research* 10, no. 1 (2006).

²³ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire De La Turquie*, 1:276–77.

²⁴ Edward Gibbon, *The Rise and Fall of the Saracen Empire*, 54.

holiness of men was not evidenced by their material possessions or social class, but rather by their acts of piety and righteousness.

Furthermore, the theology he ﷺ brought corrected competing theologies about God, resulting in one coherent monotheistic worldview. This was the explanatory power of Islam which gave it immense appeal: its compelling ability to satisfy existential questions about God and creation. As for its spiritual appeal, that too was a driving force behind its continued imprint on the minds and hearts of people. After all, the greatest miracle of Muhammad ﷺ was the Qur'an which stands as God's verbatim address to humanity, available to all who choose to study it until the end of time.

Revolutionizing human rights

After rectifying their relationship with their Maker, mending people's relationships with one another was the natural next step. This accomplishment of the Final Prophet ﷺ was not merely one of advocating for virtues such as kindness, empathy, and humility in people's interpersonal exchanges, but one that also involved establishing a pragmatic system to ensure that these abstract concepts would unfold on the ground. He ﷺ fraternized with all people, despite their differences, and purged their prejudices. He ﷺ famously said in his Farewell Sermon,

O people, your Lord is One and your father Adam is one. There is no distinction for an Arab over a foreigner, nor a foreigner over an Arab, and neither white skin over black skin, nor black skin over white skin, except by righteousness. Have I not delivered the message?²⁵

Islam affirmed a universal human brotherhood, a brotherhood that recognized the dignity of every human being and demanded an end to every form of bigotry based on race, color, or class. What is more, the universal brotherhood that Islam established was based on cooperation between people for the betterment of society as a whole. Humanity has suffered countless injustices due to discrimination based on lineage (ethnic patriotism), financial standing (socioeconomic elitism), and/or

²⁵ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad*, 38:474, no. 23489, authenticated by al-Arnā'ūt in the comments.

skin color (racial supremacy). Historically, these distinctions led to more than just bitter arguments, but also endless hatred, conflict, and generations of carnage. Islam came to a people who were knee-deep in feudal tribalism and bigotry, and within two decades transformed that society into a model of social harmony in which people were liberated from the shackles of discrimination, and “superiority” was based only on piety—which only God could judge, and all could compete for. Arnold Toynbee (d. 1975), a professor of international history at the University of London, writes in *Civilization on Trial*,

The extinction of race consciousness as between Muslims is one of the outstanding moral achievements of Islam, and in the contemporary world there is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue.²⁶

What the Prophet ﷺ did was more brilliant than simply eliminating bigotry and racism; he went beyond that to argue that racial and linguistic diversity should be appreciated and embraced. Allah says in the Qur’an, “And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed, in that are signs for those of knowledge.”²⁷ The late Malik Shabazz, better known as Malcolm X, recognized this in his famous 1964 *Letter from Mecca*, in which he wrote,

America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered white—but the white attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.²⁸

It was not just racism that the Prophet ﷺ eradicated but classism as well. In an era when universal human rights norms are often applied with a double standard and weaponized for political and economic gain, there is no time like the present to appreciate the actual moral accomplishments of Muhammad. Unlike political elites

²⁶ Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 205.

²⁷ Qur’an 30:22.

²⁸ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine, 1992), 370.

today who often settle for citing human rights verbiage, we find the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ operating at the height of his power with the universal dignity of every human being in mind. There was a pristine equity in his call, one that even validated the wealth of the wealthy and the power of the powerful, if this wealth was not the fruit of exploitation or hoarding, and if this power did not translate into domination or authoritarianism. He uplifted the downtrodden and humbled the affluent, joining them at a beautiful middle called brotherhood. And for generations after the Final Prophet ﷺ returned to God, you could find a civilization infused with justice and security for the rich, poor, Muslim, and non-Muslim alike—a lived example of what many human rights advocates aspire to today. With dictates like, “Pay the worker his due wages before his sweat dries,”²⁹ the Prophet ﷺ eradicated many widely condoned financial inequities of his time. The Prophet’s ﷺ economic justice played an important role in improving the general standard of living in the early centuries of Islam, as prosperity is seldom reflected in the general population when financial corruption exists. We find in the *Journal of Economic History*,

In the aftermath of the Justinian Plague, during the early centuries of Islam, real wages and per capita incomes in Iraq and Egypt rose well above the subsistence level and well above those for Roman and Byzantine Egypt in the centuries preceding the plague. This environment of high wages and high incomes contributed to and, in turn, was supported by the productivity increases associated with the Golden Age of Islam. As population levels began to recover first in Iraq and then in Egypt, real wages and per capita incomes began to come down. However, because of the period of intensive growth from the eighth through the tenth centuries, productivity, incomes, and standards of living remained significantly above subsistence for long periods of time.³⁰

Abū Dharr (rA), a leading Companion of the Prophet ﷺ, could not be differentiated from his laborers as they wore identical clothing. When asked about this, he explained that the Prophet ﷺ had said, “Your servants are your brothers

²⁹ Muḥammad ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1975), 2:718, no. 2443, authenticated by al-Albānī in the comments.

³⁰ Şevket Pamuk and Maya Shatzmiller, “Plagues, Wages, and Economic Change in the Islamic Middle East, 700–1500,” *The Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 1 (2014): 196–229.

whom Allah has placed under your authority. Whoever’s brother is under his authority should feed him with the same food he eats, clothe him with the same clothes he wears, and not burden him beyond his ability. And if you commission him with a task, then assist him.”³¹ Biographers report that another leading Companion, Abū al-Dardā’ (rA), would even say to his riding mount as it died, “O camel, do not prosecute me before your Lord, for I never made you carry more than you could bear!” ‘Urwah ibn Muhammad (rA), the grandson of another great Companion, declared upon assuming the governorship of Yemen, “O Yemenites! This here is my camel. If I exit your lands with anything more than it, then I am a thief.”³²

It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to list the various human rights the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ established and the atrocious conditions he uprooted during his lifetime. Securing dignity and respect for women, and justice for non-Muslims, not to mention rights for even animals and the environment, are each a genre of unique accomplishments, many times even when contrasted with today’s standards.

Molding a model generation

Over the span of just twenty-three years, the Prophet ﷺ successfully nurtured an exemplary generation whose likes humanity had never seen and will never again see. This was a conglomerate of tribes in a remote region of the world surrounded by perilous deserts, largely isolated from the ideas and events of the major civilizations of their era, and further weakened by their disunity and prevailing illiteracy. Within two decades, they somehow transformed the world forever. How could this be possible? They had become the purest servants of God in human history after the prophets, the most dutiful observers of monotheism on the planet. This not only made them the most devout worshippers but also at the forefront of contributing to humanity. At night, they would stand in prayer longing for the Divine, tears streaming down their cheeks in response to His revealed Word. By day, they would live for purposes greater than themselves, exhausting themselves

³¹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:15, no. 30.

³² Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, 40:290.

in philanthropy, education, or as knights who rode to liberate humanity from tyrannical regimes. They established justice, as Isaiah had foretold (see [An Ethical and Historical Necessity: The Proofs of Prophethood Series](#)), and unlocked the virtue of hundreds of thousands of ascetics, reformers, and great thinkers for centuries.

The hallmarks of Islamic civilization were justice and equality, balance and moderation, diversity, progress, and the pursuit of beauty. People traveled across the seas seeking to export these virtues to their homelands, and multitudes of experts testify that the world has never been the same since. Adam Smith (d. 1790), the eighteenth-century English economist who pioneered the West's free market system, admits,

...the empire of the Caliphs seems to have been the first state under which the world enjoyed that degree of tranquility which the cultivation of the sciences requires. It was under the protection of those generous and magnificent princes, that the ancient philosophy and astronomy of the Greeks were restored and established in the East; that tranquility, which their mild, just and religious government diffused over their vast empire, revived the curiosity of mankind, to inquire into the connecting principles of nature.

33

Muslims, centuries later, look back at the Prophet's Companions as the gold standard for tolerance and magnanimity, invoking their precedent even for the rules of engagement during military conflicts. A glimpse of this precedent is narrated by Abū 'Azīz ibn 'Umayr (rA), who was taken captive at the Battle of Badr as a warring idolator. He reports that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ gave clear instructions to his Companions, stating, "Treat the captives kindly," and so whenever his captors had lunch or dinner, they would only eat dates while giving him the bread, in compliance with the Prophet's ﷺ orders.³⁴ As a result, well before global peace summits and in stark contrast to societies around them, Islamic history had shining examples of treating prisoners of war humanely, as well as amnesty and pardon being recognized as the restorative ideal for the human

³³ Adam Smith, *Essays: Philosophical and Literary* (London: Ward, Lock and Co, 1880), 353.

³⁴ Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-kabīr* (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymīyah, 1983), 22:393, no. 977.

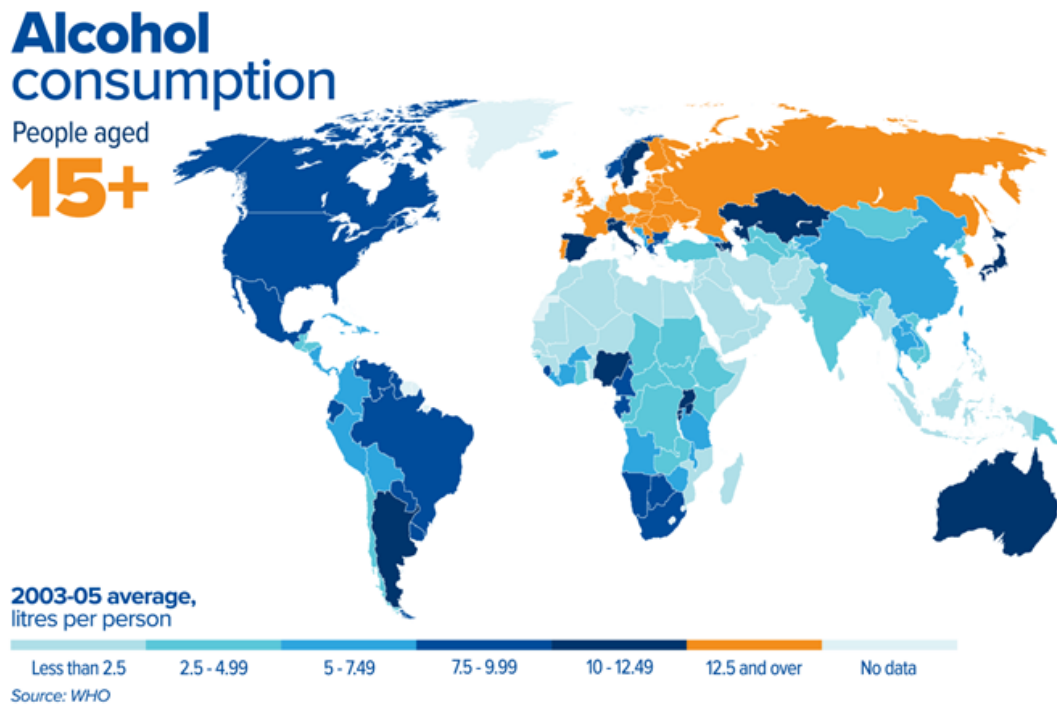
collective. John Esposito, a senior professor of religion at Georgetown University, writes on this,

The Muslim army was as magnanimous in victory as it was tenacious in battle. Civilians were spared; churches and shrines were generally left untouched. The striking differences in military conduct were epitomized by the two dominant figures of the Crusades: Saladin and Richard the Lion-Hearted. The chivalrous Saladin was faithful to his word and compassionate towards noncombatants. Richard accepted the surrender of Acre then continued to massacre all its inhabitants, including women and children, despite promises to the contrary.³⁵

From that model generation emerged a civilization in which virtue and chastity were the norm, and in which alcohol was never widespread. Until this very day, while the World Health Organization estimates that alcohol results in 2.5 million global deaths a year, the impact of Islam on preventing alcohol abuse in Muslim-majority nations (such as those of North Africa and Southeast Asia) is clear.³⁶

³⁵ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 64.

³⁶ “Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health 2018,” *World Health Organization*, September 21, 2018.



Has history ever known anyone else with the ability to tame the beast of alcoholism once it had been unleashed upon a nation? Why were Muslims able to just give it up? The Prophet ﷺ achieved that within his lifetime in a people whose glory and income was interlocked with wine. Following a divinely charted roadmap of gradualism, he ﷺ was able to witness his methodical program culminate in wine flowing in Madinah’s streets as its Muslims emptied what remained of their own wine barrels.³⁷ Has anyone else ever been able to ban the age-old customs of unrestricted polygyny, male-only inheritance laws, and female infanticide—let alone in such a short span of time? All the laws in today’s India, for instance, designed to combat female infanticide have not eradicated the practice after more than a century of strict enforcement.³⁸ Has there ever been another historical parallel before or after the Prophet’s ﷺ era where ethnic chauvinism declined so dramatically in both theory and practice? Many of his contemporaries who were vehement Arab supremacists became people who conceded to the leadership of non-Arabs and former slaves. Sālim (rA), the freed slave of Abū Ḥudhayfah, would lead the senior-most Companions of the Prophet ﷺ in prayer

³⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 6:54, no. 4620; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 3:1205, no. 1578.

³⁸ “Because I Am a Girl: The State of the Girl Child in India 2009,” Plan India, 2009, 6.

due to his skill in reciting the Qur'an.³⁹ The caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (rA) once inquired why the Meccan governor had left Ibn Abzā (rA), another freed slave, of all people to preside over the religious capital of Islam during his absence. He told 'Umar that this choice was in light of Ibn Abzā's mastery of the Qur'an and its laws on estate distribution. 'Umar (rA) expressed his approval of this justification by reporting that the Prophet ﷺ did in fact say, "Allah elevates people in rank by virtue of this Qur'an and demotes others because of it."⁴⁰ Mulla 'Alī al-Qārī (d. 1605) commented on this hadith, saying,

This phenomenon is observable in the fact that among our righteous predecessors, most of the scholars were freed slaves, and yet they were the undisputed leaders of the Muslim nation and its fountains of mercy while those with royal ancestry who weren't scholarly were forgotten in their spheres of ignorance.⁴¹

A telling account of these revolutionized norms is the well-documented encounter between 'Aṭā' ibn Abī Rabāh (d. 732), one of the foremost early judges of Mecca, and Sulaymān ibn 'Abdil-Malik (d. 717), the Umayyad caliph who ruled over the largest empire known until that point in human history. 'Aṭā' was a freed slave who was black, blind, disabled, and had been homeless for many years of his early life. However, the dynamics of social mobility had undergone such significant changes with the advent of Islam that, within one generation, none of these social disadvantages could prevent him from enjoying prestige over Sulaymān who was, in the politico-military sense, the most powerful man alive at the time. When he approached 'Aṭā' in Mecca to consult him on religious matters, anxious to confirm that he was performing the Hajj rites correctly, the pious judge answered without ever facing him, to assert that he was not interested in being awarded any fortune or status from the ruler. Not finding the regard and flattery he was accustomed to receiving, Sulaymān turned to his children and said, "My sons, be relentless in

³⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:140, no. 692.

⁴⁰ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:559, no. 817.

⁴¹ 'Alī ibn Muḥammad Qārī al-Harawī, *Mirqāt al-mafūṭīḥ: Sharḥ Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2002), 1:288.

your pursuit of sacred knowledge, for I will never forget our humiliation in front of that black slave.”⁴²

Captured here are just some of the unique successes granted by God to the Final Prophet ﷺ. Impartial readers of history will attest that each one of these is an astonishing accomplishment on its own, and yet these and more were actualized by the generation molded under his ﷺ care. He transformed those under his tutelage from a savage and lawless people to the best community possible. The unparalleled nature of this historical achievement serves as another sign that this could only be an act of God. As Allah says in the Qur’an, “And [He] brought together their hearts. If you had spent all that is in the earth, you could not have brought their hearts together; but Allah brought them together. Indeed, He is Exalted in Might and Wise.”⁴³

Thereafter, Muslim civilizations in general, for almost a millennium but especially during the earlier centuries, were recognized for their distinctive balance of spirituality, morality, justice, fraternity, scientific vibrancy, and progressive thought. It was clear that Islam offered enlightened ideals which, while not always fully embraced and realized, nevertheless inspired some incredible leaps in individual and societal wellbeing.

It is understandable that the underdevelopment—in certain respects—of many Muslim countries today may detract from some people’s ability to appreciate the historical greatness of Islamic civilization. However, we must be careful not to back-project that sad state today onto the terrific and exceptional “golden ages” of the Muslim past. Certainly, if Islam is from the Divine who is perfect but its practitioners after the prophets were not, then it should not be surprising that dark painful moments exist in every epoch of human history. However, only in the last 400-500 years did the Muslim world suffer such great and unprecedented setbacks, and only when Muslims strayed from the proper understanding and practice of Islam. But for as long as Muslims gave due respect to their religion, observing it correctly and religiously, disgraces of today’s magnitude were non-existent. It is a

⁴² ‘Abdul-Rahmān ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifāt al-Ṣafwāh* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2000), 1:415.

⁴³ Qur’an 8:63 (Saheeh International Translation).

demonstrable historical reality that Muslims thrived whenever there was greater adherence to Islam and the guidance of their Prophet ﷺ.⁴⁴ This is unlike Europe and the Americas, for instance, whose renaissance was propelled by separating their faith from public life or dismissing it altogether. It is for this same reason that much of the modern world is averse to the idea of merging “church and state,” because in their collective memory, religion was the very shackle that hindered progress and advancement in the past. Hence, a dominant sentiment especially in the secular West is that the revival of religion necessitates a return to backwardness and stagnation. But in our experience as Muslims, religion and spiritual strength were the driving forces that motivated the early Muslims to excel in both their worldly and otherworldly pursuits. Making that distinction will greatly assist the discerning readers of history to shed the suspicions our current context fosters surrounding the utility of religion in general, and Islam’s profound contributions to the world in particular. People who struggle, irrespective of how many hard facts are presented, to acknowledge these achievements, are likely engaging the conversation from a paradigm in which one is unable to perceive “religion” as anything but a synonym for the man-made systems that have long become obsolete. This psychological baggage is predicated on an inherited civilization trauma from these belief systems and generates the stereotypes and overgeneralizations about “religion” that many people cannot escape today. But ultimately, those with the courage to challenge their presuppositions will continue to recognize that Muhammad ﷺ must have been a prophet of God, and that he and his teachings were responsible for many unique accomplishments and successes.

⁴⁴ See Sayyed Abul Hasan Nadwi, *The Rise and Decline of the Muslims and Its Effect on Mankind* (UK: Islamic Academy, 2003).

