

The Jewish View of Muhammad
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The impact of Muhammed upon Judaism: Were I to limit myself only to this very circumscribed topic, I could end before I began. Muhammed as an individual, his personality and his teachings, his revelation and his Kuran, have had just about no direct impact on the theology of historical Judaism. No direct impact. Muhammed plays absolutely no role in Judaism. We do not think about him or talk about him. He is completely off the radar screen. He is not a prophet and not a teacher and not a role model within Jewish thought.

But we may legitimately expand the canvas to talk about how Jews and Judaism view Muhammad. Not just how he impacts us Jews, but how we Jews view him.

What do Jews say and feel about Muhammad? Almost nothing has been written about this. We will discuss one or two Jewish sources on the subject, and most of the time we will spend on teasing out what Jews would think about Muhammad from Islamic sources that talk about what Muhammad thought and said about Jews.

Muhammad was a pure and absolute monotheist. Judaism clearly recognizes that, going back to a responsa of the great Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, known as Maimonides, in the 12th century. Muhammad established a pure monotheist religion and in doing so

helped spread the original message of Judaism to the four corner of the earth.

Judaism has struggled mightily with the issue of Jesus as part of the Christian trinity – is this monotheism or is it not – but there has been no such question in Jewish thought vis a vis Muhammad. He never declared himself godlike and no one every thought to worship him in any way. He considered himself only a prophet and so did his followers. And his prophecy proclaimed again and again that Allah Ahkbar – The one and only God is great.

For Jews Muhammad's message of undiluted monotheism is pure truth. Muhammad brought that truth to peoples and places that Judaism did not and could not have reached. Judaism appreciates the role of Muhammad in advancing the whole world towards knowledge of the one God. This we saw in a legal text of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon that discusses both Jesus and Muhammad that I cited in last month's session.

But would the Jewish view of Muhammad be only positive? Not at all! And the bad blood between Jews and Muhammad goes back to the very beginning. Islamic tradition, as recorded in an 8th century book called the Life of Muhammad by ibn Ishaq, tells us that a Jewess tried to kill Muhammad by poisoning his food. And although she did not succeed immediately, the tradition teaches that his later death was attributable in part to the effects of the poison.

That certainly shows us very clearly how she viewed Muhammad. Not so positively. And generations of Jews have probably shared her sentiments.

Now you might ask why would a nice Jewish girl poison the prophet of Islam. Well, because Muhammad and his warriors attacked her Jewish tribe and subjugated it, while killing her husband in battle and taking many women captive, herself included. So this particular Jewish woman, by the name of Zaynab daughter of Harith, found herself married to Muhammad against her will. Now that's a pretty good reason to try to poison him I would say. It's called revenge.

Let's read the passage. The event takes place not too long after the battle. The widow/mourner/captive/bride is assigned to prepare a meal of roast lamb for the prophet Muhammad and some of his close companions:

Zaynab bat al-Hàrith, the widow of Sallàm ben Mishkam prepared for him a roast lamb, having first inquired what joint he preferred. When she learned that it was the shoulder she put a lot of poison in it and poisoned the whole lamb. Then she brought it in and placed it before him. He took hold of the shoulder and chewed a morsel of it, but he did not swallow it. Bishr ibn al-Barà who was with him took some of it as the prophet had done, but he swallowed it, while the prophet spat it out, saying, "This bone tells me that it is poisoned." Then he called for the woman and she confessed, and when he asked her what had induced her to do this she answered: "You know what you have done to my people. I said to myself, if he is a

(mere) king I shall ease myself of him and if he is a prophet he will be informed (of the presence of the poison, and will save himself).” So the prophet let her off. Bishr died from what he had eaten.

But that is not the end of the story. Four years later when Muhammad was dying of his final illness and the sister of Bishr ben al-Barà came to visit him, he reportedly said:

“At this time I feel a deadly pain from what I ate with your brother at Khaybar.”

[Alfred Guillaume (ed. and trans.), *The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishàq’s Sîrat Rasûl Allâh*, London 1955, page 516]

So this particular Jewish woman did not hold Muhammad in very high regard, to say the least. Neither did most of the other Jews at her time. Actually the truth is that for most of the life of the Muhammad since he came to Medina, his followers and the Jewish tribes of the region were in violent conflict, with great loss of life on both sides. To say that they did not get along would be an understatement. In the end, Muhammad exiled all the Jews from the areas under his control. That’s pretty harsh.

How did this happen? It is actually not so complicated.

When Muhammad arrived in Medina, where there were many Jews organized along tribal lines, he expected them to welcome him and to accept his prophetic status. His mission was to convert Jews no less than it was to convert the pagans. After all, the Jews were a

monotheistic people who had their own prophets. They would recognize a prophet when they saw one.

It may even be that he saw his mission at the outset as reconstituting the Avrahamic covenant in its original purity, removing the dross and error introduced to it by the accretions of Judaism and Christianity. He would bring together all the different tribes and sects of Jews, Christians and pagans under the umbrella of the true religion of Abraham.

But the Jews rejected him. There were some Jewish converts to the new religion, but by and large Muhammad's claim of prophecy seems not to have been taken too seriously by the vast majority of Jews. They scoffed at his sermon's, ridiculed his claims of receiving revelations, and referred to him as a prophet to the illiterate. They actively campaigned against him. The Jews are depicted in the Qur'an and the early Islamic histories as publicly humiliating Muhammad.

And so Muhammad was bitterly disappointed. The Jewish rejection of the prophet was a very serious issue, for the Jews were known and respected by the Arabs as a wise and ancient community of monotheists with a long prophetic tradition. Their rejection of Muhammad constituted a major blow to his mission. And the stage was set for further conflict.

So let's back up: Why could the Jews not accept Muhammad?

The Jews could not validate Muhammad's prophethood because they observed him reciting

revelation that, while certainly reminiscent of and even parallel in many cases to their own scripture, did not conform with the revelations of the Hebrew Bible. Just as important, the canon of Jewish scripture had been closed for centuries and no new revelation had since been accepted. From the honest and authentic standpoint of the Jews, therefore, Muhammad was a false prophet who could not be accepted nor even trusted.

But from the honest perspective of Muhammad and his followers, who absolutely believed in his status of prophet, the Jewish rejection was tantamount to the rejection of God. When Jews critiqued him for reciting divine revelation that did not comport with the revelation of the Torah, he responded that the Jews had distorted their own revelation. Muhammad was convinced that his revelation was true, and he therefore was equally convinced that the Jews were purposefully distorting their own revelation to discredit him publicly.

Let's see a few verses from the Quran; those from Sura 3 are imbedded in a long diatribe against Christians and Jews:

Sura 2:135

They say: "Be Jews or Christians if you want to do the right thing." Tell them (O Muhammad): No! I follow the religion of Abraham the upright one.

Sura 3:65

You people of the book: Why do you argue over Abraham? He was the first, before the Torah and the Gospel were revealed. Don't you understand?

Sura 3: 70

O people of the book, why do you disbelieve in the revelations of Allah, when you yourselves bear witness (to their truth)?

Sura 3: 78

There is a group among them who distort Scripture with their tongues so that you would think that it is from scripture when it is not from Scripture; and they say it is from Allah when it is not from Allah; and they knowingly tell a lie against Allah.

We are learning these verses to understand why the Jews did not have a very positive view of Muhammad, not then and not later. It is one thing to propound a new religious truth. It is another thing to claim that an older religion has falsified its own Scripture and belief system. Muhammad did not simply promulgate a monotheistic religion for the Arabian pagan masses. He nullified Judaism and claimed that he came to supersede it. And he vilified those who did not accept his revelation and his leadership. That claim set the stage for real conflict, then and for the centuries to come.

Now we will go one step further. We will read from the Quran about violence against Jews and Christians. We

will read about oppression and curses and retaliation, all from the mouth of Muhammad. Now I am cherry picking and cherry picking is never the way to understand a religion in all its complexity. But right now I am not trying to understand Islam and Jewish Muslim relations in all their complexity. Rather, I am trying to show that the potential is there for Islam to be interpreted as granting license for anti-Semitism and violence against Jews.

And why do I want to show this? Because many Muslims, for centuries in the past as well as in the present, have interpreted Islam in this fashion. The Quran has again and again be cited by Muslims as providing Divine sanction for animosity towards Jews. It is out there in the marketplace and in books and today on the internet it is presented as the true Islam. And Jews have suffered terribly from this.

I am not saying that it is the right interpretation of Islam. I am rather saying that it does have a foundation in the Quran and therefore we must be aware of it. If this cherry picking leads to a wrong interpretation of Islam, then we must band together to prove it wrong. But we cannot do that unless we admit that it grows out of things that really are found in the Quran. Of course Islam has a more benevolent and peace loving side. But peace and harmony will not be served by ignoring or denying the dark verses some of which we will now see.

Sura 5:32-33

Because of that We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone killed a person not in retaliation of

murder, but to spread mischief in the land - it would be as if he killed all mankind, and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind. And indeed, there came to them Our Messengers with clear proofs, evidences, and signs, even then after that many of them continued to transgress in the land!

The recompense of those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and do mischief in the land is only that they shall be killed or crucified or their hands and their feet be cut off on the opposite sides, or be exiled from the land. That is their disgrace in this world, and a great torment is theirs in the Hereafter.

Sura 9:29-35

29. Fight against those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the Last Day, and those who do not forbid that which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger and against those among the people of the Scripture who do not acknowledge the religion of truth, until they pay tribute with willing submission, and are utterly subdued.

30. And the Jews say: 'Ezra is the son of Allah, and the Christians say: Messiah is the son of Allah. That is a saying from their mouths. They imitate the saying of the disbelievers of old. Allah's curse be on them, how they are deluded away from the truth!

34. O you who believe! Verily, there are many of the Jewish rabbis and the Christian monks who devour the wealth of mankind in falsehood, and hinder them from the Way of Allah. And those who hoard up gold

and silver and spend it not in the Way of Allah, announce unto them a painful torment.

35. On the Day when that wealth which has not been spent in the way of Allah will be heated in the Fire of Hell and with it will be branded their foreheads, their flanks, and their backs, (will be said unto them): "This is the treasure which you hoarded for yourselves. Now taste of what you used to hoard."

When Jews have heard these verses quoted against them, and have come face to face with ill willed preaching, persecution, and violent behavior fueled by these verses, we have not responded too positively. But we have almost no literary evidence of the actual negative reactions of Jews to all this. Maimonides and many other Medieval scholars have called Muhammad a madman, but that is about it. It was often too dangerous to say more.

In closing I would like to say that I believe that interfaith dialogue will accomplish little if it is not based on full truth. We must be fully aware of the real conflicts and tensions that exist.

And these conflicts and tensions existed not only in the past, but they continue in the present. In a good part of the world there is until this very day much distrust and animosity between Jews and Muslims. Now we know a bit – a tiny bit - about its roots.

It won't just go away by claiming that it is based on distortions of our respective religions. No, it is based on texts and events that are a real part of our respective religious heritages. We must be aware of the dark texts and the dark attitudes in our own religion and in the religion of our dialogue partners. We must own up to them and struggle with them. If we ignore them, cherry-picking the elements of our religious heritages that say nice things about the other, we will only be sweeping our issues under the rug, and they will soon emerge again.

For me, interfaith dialogue is not and should not be easy. It demands an honesty and an authenticity and a transparency which is religiously and emotionally difficult. It is about looking inside the other, and looking inside the brother and the self. It is about looking at your religion from the perspective of the other, internalizing his perspective, and feeling his pain.

And perhaps even doing something about it.