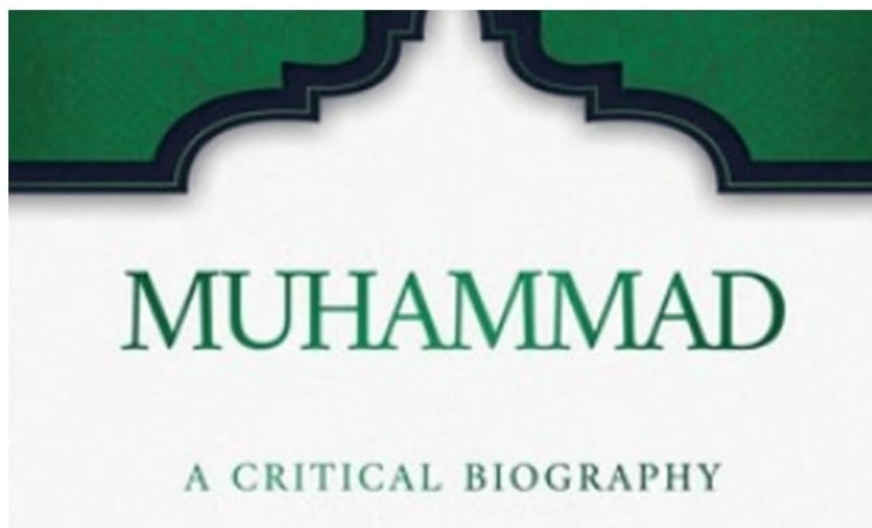


Getting to Know Muhammad

A book review by Bruce Bawer

From Robert Spencer, another must-read on Islam



In my apartment, I have over a hundred highly informative books about Islam written by a range of authors in a variety of languages. In addition, I've read countless additional volumes about the Religion of Peace, many of them excellent. But if someone were to ask me which five or six books they should turn to in order to set about educating themselves in regard to the essential facts of the faith, its history, and its theology, I'd reply that they could hardly do better than to dig, first of all, into the incomparable *oeuvre* of Robert Spencer – which includes such definitive titles as *Stealth Jihad: How Radical Islam is Subverting America without Guns or Bombs* (2008), *The Complete Infidels' Guide to the Koran* (2009), *The History of Jihad: From Muhammad to ISIS* (2018), *Confessions of an Islamophobe* (2017), and *The Critical Qur'an: Explained from Key Islamic Commentaries and Contemporary Historical Research* (2022). All of these books, while informed by a comprehensive and indeed unparalleled knowledge of the topic, are written for the educated common reader in a lucid and coherent way that helps the reader to

begin to make sense of Islam. Well, no, come to think of it, that's not exactly the right way to put it: just as there's no humor in Islam, there's no sense in Islam, either.

Put it this way: in one book after another, Spencer spells things out without pretense or affectation. And as if all this weren't enough, he's also written two invaluable books about the putative prophet himself: *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion* (2006) and *Did Muhammad Exist?: An Inquiry Into Islam's Obscure Origins* (2012). Now he's published a third, entitled [Muhammad: A Critical Biography](#), which he describes as "the first critical biography of Muhammad." The first thing that needs to be known about Islam's beloved founder is that the man's very existence, as Spencer demonstrated at length in his 2012 book, is shrouded in doubt. Since the Koran mentions him by name only four times, the story of his life – assuming he *did* live – has had to be cobbled together, from the outset, from the secondary but nonetheless highly revered documents known as the hadiths and the so-called "sira literature."

Dating back, at the earliest, to the eighth century, long after the generally accepted date of Muhammad's death, the hadiths originally numbered – mind-bogglingly – in the hundreds of thousands, only a small fraction of which came to be considered canonical. Spencer calls the amount of alleged biographical information contained within them "breathtaking," but notes as well that many of them, instead of showing evidence of being based on reliable oral traditions, were patently invented out of whole cloth for a number of reasons – for example, to support the author's claim to a caliphate. "The sheer scale of fabrication," maintains Spencer, "is staggering." Yet even though the historicity of the hadiths and sira literature is exceedingly dubious, the professors of Islamic and Middle East Studies in today's Western colleges and universities – whose departments, not incidentally, receive their funding, to a great extent, from such centers of

objective historical scholarship as Saudi Arabia and Qatar – treat all of the assertions in them as factual. Consequently, what these supposed educators are serving up in their classrooms is not history at all but Islamic apologetics.

For over two centuries, serious scholars of Judaism and Christianity have engaged in the critical study of biblical texts – which means, among much else, acknowledging internal contradictions in the books of the Bible, comparing historical claims made in the scriptures to those made in other sources dating to antiquity, and determining the order in which the gospels were written. But such close analysis is essentially forbidden in the academic study of Islam. Muslims are obliged to believe – or at least to profess to believe – that every last statement in the Koran that reads like an assertion of historical fact is, however utterly contrary it may be to the fundamental laws of physics, not meant to be taken as a flight of fancy but, rather, as literal history.

A remarkable number of faculty members who teach Islam, whether they identify as Muslims or not, feel obliged to treat the purportedly historical statements in the documents that the religion has agreed to consider sacred with this same mindless credulity. Yes, they acknowledge that some of the sura (the chapters of the Koran) are theologically inconsistent with others, and in those cases they follow the long-established practice of declaring that the older sura are abrogated – that is to say, superseded – by later sura (which tend to be a lot more intolerant, brutal, and violent). And on the rare occasions when such professors dare to reject – or, let's say, to proffer strained and dubious interpretations of – certain passages of the Koran or hadiths or sira literature, they do so, as a rule, only in order to present a picture of the faith and its founder that will be somewhat more palatable to the delicate sensibilities of Western students who may balk at the notion of revering a psychopath who had sex with children and, when it came to being a murderous megalomaniac,

was right up there with Hitler and Stalin.

The contentions in the Islamic texts that are considered holy but that are deeply questionable are nothing less than multitudinous. Muhammad is said to have been born in Mecca and to have spent the first decades of his life there. But Mecca is mentioned only once in the Koran. Why? Furthermore, traditional Muslim texts repeatedly depict Mecca as having been a major international trading center during the period when Muhammad lived there and started preaching Islam. Yet this claim seems almost surely to be erroneous, given that “virtually nothing” is said about the city in contemporary records from, say, Greece, Rome, and Persia. Time and again, indeed, material that is presented in the hadiths and sira literature, and embraced by the faithful, as solid biographical information about Muhammad reveals itself to be, as Spencer puts it, “myth, fable, folk tales, sermonizing, factionalism, and guesswork.” The number of canonical Islamic texts that strain credulity to the breaking point, and whose less than realistic counterparts in the Bible are today read by almost all Jews and Christians as symbolic or allegorical, is beyond impressive: twenty-first-century Muslims are obliged to attest, for example, that Muhammad was “born circumcised.” (That must have been one hell of a gifted *mohel*.) Another tale that believers are obliged to consider historical has Muhammad traveling to Paradise and meeting Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and other figures from the Jewish and Christian scriptures – none of whom, incidentally, said anything to him that he considered worth passing along.

There’s more – lots more. The references in various approved texts to Muhammad’s birth, to the circumstances of his first marriage, and to the early days of his career as a prophet contradict one another wildly. Was the first angel who allegedly delivered divine revelations to him Gabriel or some other member of the heavenly host? Which sura was the first to be revealed? Who was Muhammad’s first male follower? (His

first follower, according to tradition, was a female – namely, his first wife, Khadija.) In the hadiths and sira documents, the answers to these questions are all over the place. Another curious conundrum: if Islam began in Mecca, then why was the Koran composed in a dialect of Arabic that is very different from the Meccan dialect of the time but that is strikingly similar to the dialect that was spoken in Petra, in what is now southern Jordan (which is over 800 miles away – or 32 hours by camel – from Mecca).

Then there's the matter of the so-called Satanic Verses, which, in utter contradiction to everything said about infidels in the now-standard text of the Koran, described the gods to which certain non-Muslims prayed as authentic and deserving of worship. Did Muhammad concoct these verses knowingly and willingly – or was he under the sway of Satan when he propounded them? In any event, he reversed himself soon enough on these verses – and by doing so raised a couple of uncomfortable queries in the minds of believers. On the one hand, if he was indeed fooled by Satan in this instance, who was to say that the entire Koran hadn't been dictated to him by the great deceiver? On the other hand, if he invented those verses out of whole cloth, how could anyone be sure that this was not the case with every single word of the Koran? The episode and its implications were so ticklish for Muslims that it was eventually dropped, more or less, down the memory hole – until the novelist Salman Rushdie brought it all up again, thereby ushering in the latest chapter in the centuries-old fractious relationship between the Christian West and the Islamic world.

Another story that many Muslims would prefer to see disappear is that of Muhammad's wife Aisha, who, according to "numerous Islamic traditions," including some of the most widely credited hadiths, was six years old when she "married" the prophet and nine years old when the "marriage" was consummated. This whole icky business, as Spencer notes, puts

today's Western academic apologists for Islam in quite a pickle. It causes few problems, however, for a great many Islamic leaders, who, far from finding such a union appalling, "point to Muhammad to justify marrying children." After all, to refrain from wholeheartedly countenancing child marriage, they argue, would be – God forbid – to "impugn the reputation of Muhammad himself."

There's plenty more in Spencer's book, of course: seemingly endless accounts of bloodthirsty conquests, acts of barbaric hostility toward Christians and Jews – the latter of whom Muhammad (who may have been a role model in many ways, but not when it came to subtlety) called "brothers of monkeys and pigs and worshipers of evil" – and the heartless execution of otherwise devoted Muslims who'd inadvertently said or done something that rubbed the boss the wrong way. So it went. Over the years, Muhammad took more wives, ordered the wanton destruction of pagan idols, and (generally speaking) dialed the medieval propensity for murder, mayhem, and massacres up to eleven, acquainting his followers and rivals alike with "the power of intimidation, terror, and violence." Not least, he drove into believers' minds for all time the notion that they were superior to non-believers and that their first duty as stewards of the faith was to conquer the world, and crush the infidel, in his name. These tenets, needless to say, had, and continue to have, a multiplicity of implications for those of us who would prefer never to have heard the word Islam or the name of Muhammad.

But back to the \$64,000 question: did the man even exist? Spencer observes that the recurrence from one canonical document to another of certain assertions about Muhammad's life could be interpreted as an indication that they were all based on an oral tradition founded in fact; alternatively, he points out that the whole story bears an extraordinary resemblance to that of Moses in the Old Testament, while adding that another scholar, Robert Kerr, has suggested that

“the life of Muhammad is patterned after a figure closer to hand than Moses: the Roman emperor Heraclius,” the key dates of whose life correspond to a surprising extent to the key dates in the canonical accounts of Muhammad’s life.

In any case, concludes Spencer, the total lack of any reference to Muhammad in “any remotely contemporary literature, and the abundance of contradictory materials, leads to the inevitable conclusion that in the hadith and sira literature, we are dealing with a collection of fables with apologetic intent, not scrupulously remembered or carefully compiled history.” In short, Muhammad probably never even existed – a fact that makes it all the more ironic that the era in which we are living is increasingly being shaped (and not for the better, to say the least) by those who not only believe fervently that he *did* exist but who regard him as the ideal man. Which makes them and their passionately held beliefs a supremely dangerous force – and makes this cogent, compelling, and comprehensive study of the tales of their religion’s purported father, and the roots of the doctrines that he is said to have transmitted to humankind from the One True God himself, a book of the first importance.

First published in [Front Page magazine](#)