

**W. Montgomery Watt.**

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**ASSESSMENT**

**APPEARANCE AND MANNER**

Muhammad, according to some apparently authentic accounts, was of average height or a little above the average. His chest and shoulders were broad, and altogether he was of sturdy build. His arms were long, and his hands and feet rough. His forehead was large and prominent, and he had a hooked nose and large black eyes with a touch of brown. The hair of his head was long and thick, straight or slightly curled. His beard also was thick, and he had a thin line of fine hair on his neck and chest. His cheeks were spare, his mouth large, and he had a pleasant smile. In complexion he was fair. He always walked as if he was rushing downhill, and others had difficulty in keeping up with him. When he turned in any direction, he did so with his whole body. He was given to sadness, and there were long periods of silence when he was deep in thought; yet he never rested but was always busy with something. He never spoke unnecessarily. What he said was always to the point and sufficient to make his meaning clear, but there was no padding. From the first to last he spoke rapidly. Over his feelings he had a firm control. When he was annoyed he would turn aside; when he was pleased, he lowered his eyes. His time was carefully apportioned according to the various demands on him. In his dealings with people he was above all tactful. He could be severe at times, though in the main he was not rough but gentle. His laugh was mostly a smile.

Of the many stories illustrating his gentleness and tenderness of feeling, some at least are worthy of credence. The widow of his cousin Ja'far ibn-Abi-Talib herself told her granddaughter how he broke the news of Ja'far's death. She had been busy one morning with her household duties, which had included tanning forty hides and kneading dough, when Muhammad called. She collected her children --she had three sons by Ja'far -- washed their faces and anointed them. When Muhammad entered, he asked for the sons of Ja'far. She brought them, and Muhammad put his arms round them and smelt them, as a mother

would a baby. Then his eyes filled with tears and he burst out weeping. ' Have you heard something about Ja'far ? ' she asked, and he told her he had been killed. Later he instructed some of his people to prepare food for Ja'far's household, ' for they are too busy today to think about themselves '.

He seems to have been specially fond of children and to have got on well with them. Perhaps it was the yearning of a man who saw all his sons die as infants. Much of his paternal affection went to his adopted son Zayd. He was also attached to his younger cousin 'Ali ibn-Abi-Talib, who had been a member of his household for a time; but he doubtless realized that 'Ah had not the makings of a successful statesman. For a time a grand-daughter called Umamah was a favourite. He would carry her on his shoulder during the public prayers, setting her down when he bowed or prostrated, then picking her up again. On one occasion he teased his wives by showing them a necklace and saying he would give it to the one who was dearest to him; when he thought their feelings were sufficiently agitated, he presented it not to any of them, but to Umamah.

He was able to enter into the spirit of childish games and had many friends among children. He had fun with the children who came back from Abyssinia and spoke Abyssinian. In one house in Medina there was a small boy with whom he was accustomed to have jokes. One day he found the small boy looking very sad, and asked what was the matter. When he was told that his pet nightingale had died, he did what he could to comfort him. His kindness extended even to animals, which is remarkable for Muhammad's century and part of the world. As his men marched towards Mecca just before the conquest they passed a bitch with puppies; and Muhammad not merely gave orders that they were not to be disturbed, but posted a man to see that the orders were carried out.

These are interesting sidelights on the personality of Muhammad, and fill out the picture formed of him from his conduct of public affairs. He gained men's respect and confidence by the religious basis of his activity and by qualities such as courage, resoluteness, impartiality and firmness inclining to severity but tempered by generosity. In addition to these he had a charm of manner which won their affection and secured their devotion.

#### **THE ALLEGED MORAL FAILURES**

Of all the world's great men none has been so much maligned as Muhammad. We saw above how this has come about. For centuries Islam was the great enemy of Christendom, since Christendom was in direct contact with no other organized states comparable in power to the Muslims. The Byzantine empire, after losing some of its best provinces to the Arabs, was being attacked in Asia Minor, while Western Europe was threatened through Spain and Sicily. Even before the Crusades focused attention on the expulsion of the Saracens from the Holy Land, medieval Europe was building up a conception of ' the great enemy '. At one point Muhammad was transformed into Mahound, the prince of darkness. By the twelfth century the ideas about Islam and Muslims current in the crusading armies were such travesties that they had a bad effect on morale. Practical considerations thus combined with scholarly zeal to foster the study and dissemination of more accurate information about Muhammad and his religion.

Since that time much has been achieved, especially during the last two centuries, but many of the old prejudices linger on. Yet in the modern world, where contacts between Christians and Muslims are closer than ever before, it is urgent that both should strive to reach an objective view of Muhammad's character. The denigration of him by European writers has too often been followed by a romantic idealization of his figure by other Europeans and by Muslims. Neither denigration nor idealization is an adequate basis for the mutual relations of nearly half the human race. We are now back at the questions with which we began. We have an outline of the facts on which ultimate judgements must be based. What are our ultimate judgements to be ?

One of the common allegations against Muhammad is that he was an impostor, who to satisfy his ambition and his lust propagated religious teachings which he himself knew to be false. Such insincerity makes the development of the Islamic religion incomprehensible. This point was first vigorously made over a hundred years ago by Thomas Carlyle in his lectures *On Heroes*, and it has since been increasingly accepted by scholars. Only a profound belief in himself and his mission explains Muhammad's readiness to endure hardship and persecution during the Meccan period when from a secular point of view there was no prospect of success. Without sincerity how could he have won the allegiance and even devotion of men of strong and upright character like Abu-Bakr and 'Umar ? For the theist there is the further question how God could have allowed a great religion like Islam to develop on a basis of lies and deceit. There is thus a strong case for holding that Muhammad was sincere. If in some respects he was mistaken, his mistakes were not due to deliberate lying or imposture.

The other main allegations of moral defect in Muhammad are that he was treacherous and lustful. These are supported by reference to events like the violation of the sacred month on the expedition of Nakhlah (624) and his marriage to Zaynab bint-Jahsh, the divorced wife of his adopted son. About the bare facts there is no dispute, but it is not so clear that the facts justify the allegations. Was the violation of the sacred month an act of treachery or a justified breach with a piece of pagan religion ? Was the marriage with Zaynab a yielding to sexual desire or a mainly political act in which an undesirable practice of 'adoption' belonging to a lower moral level was ended ? Sufficient has been said above about the interpretation of these events to show that the case against Muhammad is much weaker than is sometimes thought.

The discussions of these allegations, however, raise a fundamental question. How are we to judge Muhammad ? By the standards of his own time and country ? Or by those of the most enlightened opinion in the West today ? When the sources are closely scrutinized, it is clear that those of Muhammad's actions which are disapproved by the modern West were not the object of the moral criticism of his contemporaries. They criticized some of his acts, but their motives were superstitious prejudice or fear of the consequences. If they criticized the events at Nakhlah, it was because they feared some punishment from the offended pagan gods or the worldly vengeance of the Meccans. If they were amazed at the mass execution of the Jews of the clan of Qurayzah, it was at the number and danger of the blood-feuds incurred. The marriage with Zaynab seemed incestuous, but this conception of incest was bound up with old practices belonging to a lower,

communalistic level of familial institutions where a child's paternity was not definitely known; and this lower level was in process being eliminated by Islam.

From the standpoint of Muhammad's time, then, the allegations of treachery and sensuality cannot be maintained. His contemporaries did not find him morally defective in any way. On the contrary, some of the acts criticized by the modern Westerner show that Muhammad's standards were higher than those of his time. In his day and generation he was a social reformer, even a reformer in the sphere of morals. He created a new system of social security and a new family structure, both of which were a vast improvement on what went before. By taking what was best in the morality of the nomad and adapting it for settled communities, he established a religious and social framework for the life of many races of men. That is not the work of a traitor or 'an old lecher'.

It is sometimes asserted that Muhammad's character (declined after he went to Medina, but there are no solid grounds for this view. It is based on too facile a use of the principle that all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The allegations of moral defects are attached to incidents belonging to the Medinan and not the Meccan period, but according to the interpretation of these incidents given in this book they marked no failure in Muhammad to live to his ideals and no lapse from his moral principles. The persecuted preacher of Mecca was no less a man of his time than the ruler of Medina. If nothing is recorded of the preacher to show us how different his attitude was from that of nineteenth-century Europe, it does not follow that his ideals were any loftier (by our standards) than those of the reforming ruler. The opposite is more likely to be the case since the preacher was nearer to the pagan background. In both Meccan and Medinan periods Muhammad's contemporaries looked on him as a good and upright man, and in the eyes of history he is a moral and social reformer.

So much must be said in fairness to Muhammad when he is measured against the Arabs of his time. Muslims, however, claim that he is a model of conduct and character for all mankind. In so doing they present him for judgement according to the standards of enlightened world opinion. Though the world is increasingly becoming one world, it has so far paid scant attention to Muhammad as a moral exemplar. Yet because Muslims are numerous, it will sooner or later have to consider seriously whether from the life and teaching of Muhammad any principles are to be learnt which will contribute to the moral development of mankind.

To this question no final answer has yet been given. What has been said so far by Muslims in support of their claims for Muhammad is but a preliminary statement and has convinced few non-Muslims. It is still open to the Muslims of today, however, to give the rest of the world a fuller and better presentation of their case. Will they be able to sift the universal from the particular in the life of Muhammad and so discover moral principles which make a creative contribution to the present world situation? Or, if this is too much to expect, will they at least be able to show that Muhammad's life is one possible exemplification of the ideal for all humanity? If they make a good case, some Christians will be ready to listen to them and to learn whatever is to be learned.

In this enterprise the difficulties confronting Muslims are immense. A combination of sound scholarship and deep moral insight is needed, and this combination is rare. My personal view is that Muslims are unlikely to be successful in their attempt to influence world opinion, at least in the sphere of morals. In the wider sphere of religion they have probably something to contribute to the world, for they have retained emphases -- on the reality of God, for example -- which have been neglected or forgotten in important sections of the other monotheistic religions; and I for one gladly acknowledge my indebtedness to the writings of men like al-Ghazali. But towards convincing Christian Europe that Muhammad is the ideal man little, indeed nothing, has so far been accomplished.

### **THE FOUNDATIONS OF GREATNESS**

Circumstances of time and place favoured Muhammad. Various forces combined to set the stage for his life-work and for the subsequent expansion of Islam. There was the social unrest in Mecca and Medina, the movement towards monotheism, the reaction against Hellenism in Syria and Egypt, the decline of the Persian and Byzantine empires, and a growing realization by the nomadic Arabs of the opportunities for plunder in the settled lands round them. Yet these forces, and others like them which might be added, would not in themselves account for the rise of the empire known as the Umayyad caliphate nor for the development of Islam into a world religion. There was nothing inevitable or automatic about the spread of the Arabs and the growth of the Islamic community. Without a remarkable combination of qualities in Muhammad it is improbable that the expansion would have taken place, and the military potential of the Arabs might easily have spent itself in raids on Syria and Iraq with no lasting consequences. These qualities fall into three groups.

First there is Muhammad's gift as a seer. Through him -- or, on the orthodox Muslim view, through the revelations made to him -- the Arab world was given a framework of ideas within which the resolution of its social tensions became possible. The provision of such a framework involved both insight into the fundamental causes of the social malaise of the time, and the genius to express this insight in a form which would stir the hearer to the depths of his being. The European reader may be 'put off' by the Qur'an, but it was admirably suited to the needs and conditions of the day.

Secondly, there is Muhammad's wisdom as a statesman. The conceptual structure found in the Qur'an was merely a framework. The framework had to support a building of concrete policies and concrete institutions. In the course of this book much has been said about Muhammad's far-sighted political strategy and his social reforms. His wisdom in these matters is shown by the rapid expansion of his small state to a world-empire after his death, and by the adaptation of his social institutions to many different environments and their continuance for thirteen centuries.

Thirdly, there is his skill and tact as an administrator and his wisdom in the choice of men to whom to delegate administrative details. Sound institutions and a sound policy will not go far if the execution of affairs is faulty and fumbling. When Muhammad died, the state

he had founded was a ' going concern ', able to withstand the shock of his removal and, once it had recovered from this shock, to expand at prodigious speed.

The more one reflects on the history of Muhammad and of early Islam, the more one is amazed at the vastness of his achievement. Circumstances presented him with an opportunity such as few men have had, but the man was fully matched with the hour. Had it not been for his gifts as seer, statesman, and administrator and, behind these, his trust in God and firm belief that God had sent him, a notable chapter in the history of mankind would have remained unwritten.

### **WAS MUHAMMAD A PROPHET ?**

So far Muhammad has been described from the point of view of the historian. Yet as the founder of a world-religion he also demands a theological judgement. Emil Brunner, for example, considers his claim to be a prophet, holds that it ' does not seem to be in any way justified by the actual content of the revelations ', but admits that, ' had Mohammed been a pre-Christian prophet of Arabia, it would not be easy to exclude him from the ranks of the messengers who` prepared the way for the revelation '. Without presuming to enter into the theological complexities behind Brunner's view, I shall try, at the level of the educated man who has no special knowledge of either Christian or Islamic theology, to put forward some general considerations relevant to the question.

I would begin by asserting that there is found, at least in some men, what may be called ' creative imagination '. Notable instances are artists, poets and imaginative writers. All these put into sensuous form (pictures, poems, dramas, novels) what many are feeling but are unable to express fully. Great works of the creative imagination have thus a certain universality, in that they give expression to the feelings and attitudes of a whole generation. They are, of course, not imaginary, for they deal with real things; but they employ images, visual or conjured up by words, to express what is beyond the range of man's intellectual conceptions.

Prophets and prophetic religious leaders, I should maintain, share in this creative imagination. They proclaim ideas connected with what is deepest and most central in human experience, with special reference to the particular needs of their day and generation. The mark of the great prophet is the profound attraction of his ideas for those to whom they are addressed.

Where do such ideas come from ? Some would say ' from the unconscious '. Religious people say ' from God ', at least with regard to the prophets of their own tradition, though a few would go so far as to claim with Baron Friedrich von Hugel, ' that everywhere there is some truth; that this truth comes originally from God .' Perhaps it could be maintained that these ideas of the creative imagination come from that life in a man which is greater than himself and is largely below the threshold of consciousness. For the Christian this still implies some connexion with God, for, according to Saint John, in the Word was life, and Jesus said ' I am the Life '.

The adoption of one of these views does not settle all the questions at issue. What about those ideas of the creative imagination which are false or unsound ? Baron von Hugel is careful to say only that truth comes from God. Religious tradition has also held that ideas might come from the devil. Even if the creative imagination is an instrument which may be used by God or Life, that does not necessarily imply that all its ideas are true or sound. In Adolf Hitler the creative imagination was well developed, and his ideas had a wide appeal, but it is usually held that he was neurotic and that those Germans who followed him most devotedly became infected by his neurosis.

In Muhammad, I should hold, there was a welling up of the creative imagination, and the ideas thus produced are to a great extent true and sound. It does not follow, however, that all the Qur'anic ideas are true and sound. In particular there is at least one point at which they seem to be unsound the idea that 'revelation' or the product of the creative imagination is superior to normal human traditions as a source of bare historical fact. There are several verses in the Qur'an (II. 51; 3. 39; I2. 103) to the effect that 'this is one of the reports of the unseen which We reveal to thee; thou didst not know it, thou nor thy people, before this'. One could admit a claim that the creative imagination was able to give a new and truer interpretation of a historical event, but to make it a source of bare fact is an exaggeration and false.

This point is of special concern to Christians, since the Qur'an denies the bare fact of the death of Jesus on the cross, and Muslims still consider that this denial outweighs the contrary testimony of historical tradition. The primary intention of the Qur'an was to deny the Jews' interpretation of the crucifixion as a victory for themselves, but as normally explained it goes much farther. The same exaggeration of the role of 'revelation' has also had other consequences. The Arab contribution to Islamic culture has been unduly magnified, and that of the civilized peoples of Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Persia, later converted to Islam, has been sadly belittled.

Too much must not be made of this slight flaw. Which of us, conscious of being called by God to perform a special task, would not have been more than a little proud ? On the whole Muhammad was remarkably free from pride. Yet this slight exaggeration of his own function has had grave consequences and cannot be ignored.

Finally, what of our question ? Was Muhammad a prophet ? He was a man in whom creative imagination worked at deep levels and produced ideas relevant to the central questions of human existence, so that his religion has had a widespread appeal, not only in his own age but in succeeding centuries. Not all the ideas he proclaimed are true and sound, but by God's grace he has been enabled to provide millions of men with a better religion than they had before they testified that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God.