

The Messenger of Monotheism

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The Messenger: A Tale Retold by Kader Abdolah
(World Editions, 285 pages, 2016)

The Qur'an: A Journey by Kader Abdolah
(World Editions, 382 pages, 2016)

I

The Prophet Muhammad brought the message of monotheism to the tribes of Arabia some fourteen centuries ago. In doing so, he raised the Arabs from primitive superstition and world-historical insignificance to become the leading agents of a force for progress that dominated the region stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the Atlantic Ocean for a thousand years. This was a colossal, awesome achievement, eclipsed only by the rise of Europe under the impetus of science and the industrial revolution.

The epic story of the Jews as told in the Bible had brought monotheism to the Roman Empire and thus brought a new level of civilization to its successor, the Byzantine Empire. In the process, the Jewish people who had created that story were defeated in battle and driven to exile, so that only a radically expurgated variant of their faith flourished as Christianity in the victorious empire. But the diaspora Jews preserved their older ways, and both Jewish and Christian communities in Arabia were a major civilizing influence in the world of Muhammad during his formative years before he became an evangelist for the God of Abraham.

Orphaned at an early age and married when young to a much older woman, Muhammad said he never learned to read and write, yet he made his mark on history by composing what by common consent is the greatest book in the Arabic language, the Qur'an. This poetic and allusive collection of over a hundred suras is the transcript of the revelations Muhammad received from Allah, the God of Abraham, during his twenty-three years of self-proclaimed service as the Messenger of Islam, in which role he reported words from above, often of unparalleled beauty, which others would transcribe and preserve as the written record of oral accounts of aural revelations that no one but Muhammad could authenticate directly. The obvious epistemological issues this methodology exposes were swept aside in the evident zeal with which Muhammad persisted through years of understandably hostile or indifferent responses from the surrounding community until at last his message got through.

When Muhammad began his mission, Arab religious life was pagan and centered mostly on the Kaaba, a temple in Mecca containing a motley crowd of stone idols that attracted the veneration of numerous worshipers and sustained a regular seasonal influx of visitors. After railing for years against this tradition, Muhammad was finally exiled from Mecca with a few faithful followers to his home town of Medina, where he rallied his movement and, years later, returned to Mecca with an army to defeat the locals. Muhammad personally entered the Kaaba and smashed one of the stone idols. His followers did the rest, and the Kaaba was duly rededicated as a mosque in veneration of Allah. The Prophet had won, and he died.

II

In *The Messenger*, Kader Abdolah tells this tale through the reimagined eyes and ears of Muhammad's adopted son Zayd, who served throughout the story as the scribe tasked with recording for posterity the messages Muhammad received during his revelations. Zayd also became the foil in an episode that revealed more about Muhammad than pious accounts based on a sanitized reference in the Qur'an might suggest, when Muhammad became desirous of Zayd's wife and took her off to bed, to join the company of the Prophet's fifteen wives and the numerous female slaves upon whom he bestowed his sexual favors. What may have seemed in the context of pagan Arab tribal life like a routine exercise in *droit du seigneur* becomes in Zayd's telling a window on a life that in modern terms makes Muhammad seem less like an exalted religious figure and more like an outrageous sexual predator. When we put this episode beside the faithfully reported stories of Muhammad and his band of rebels slaughtering communities of Jews in order to satisfy a zeal to purge the world of infidels, and beside the suras the Messenger began to dictate during his years of martial endeavor in Medina, when visions of grisly killings and flames of hellfire contrast with formulaic scenes of gardens stocked with comely virgins to suggest a mind grown rotten with fantasies of lust and violence, we sense the outlines of a historical figure of monstrous proportions.

The Messenger became a warlord, bent on turning the Arabian brand of monotheism into an engine of destruction. Filled with newfound zeal for Allah, Muslim warriors defeated their more peaceful neighbors in all directions, and were turned back only by the savage hordes of horsemen who roamed the steppes of central Asia. When centuries later the armies of the Mongol warlord Genghis Khan stormed southward into the heartlands of Islam, bent on conquest, and had their murderous way in orgies of bloodletting, their descendants converted to Islam. Generations later, the notorious Timur, known to Europeans as Tamerlane, who saw himself as the heir of Genghis Khan, styled himself the Sword of Islam and went on to exceed the brutal cruelty of his illustrious forebear. Descendants of these ferocious folk soon became integrated within the Mughal, Persian and Ottoman empires that imposed their brands of Islam on India, Persia and Turkey and the lands in between over subsequent centuries of mostly despotic rule. These civilizations were the legacy of the fierce faith of the Messenger.

The Christian Jesus of the Gospels said we should judge a tree by its fruit. So judged, the brand of religion that Muhammad brought into the world was not an unalloyed success. The heights of its civilizing influence, in Baghdad during the Abbasid dynasty, when the study of astronomy and mathematics reached new heights, and in Cordoba during the Umayyad dynasty, when the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (the great Rambam) did good work, have to be set against the depths of genocide and other crimes perpetrated by Muslims during conquests and subjugations that have been eclipsed in world history only by the mechanized and industrialized crimes of the vociferously irreligious Communist and Nazi regimes in the twentieth century. Judged against the fruits of Judeo-Christian civilization, which continue still to benefit the modern world, a reasonable observer might easily conclude that Islam is a tainted creed that bears the trace of its inferiority in the increasingly offensive later suras that subvert and disgrace the otherwise mild and poetic text of the Qur'an.

The scribe Zayd of Abdolah's tale cannot be held to blame for the lapses that disfigure Muhammad's book. The Prophet's own methodology is responsible for the failings that fatally subvert the entire project, as prescient Jews at the time of its unfolding already observed. The familiar biblical tales that add back story to the Messenger's revelations from Allah are retold in

naive and superstitious glosses that offend all common sense and degrade their significance to the point of meaninglessness. The tales seem to be brought into the suras mainly to add a reassuring sense of continuity and respectability, as if Allah were simply the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus, presented anew for simple folk who didn't want the key message drowned in irrelevant detail. This is a failed endeavor, of course, because the spin Muhammad imparts to the tales dissolves them into cloudy, dreamlike images that cease to reflect the biblical concept of God and come to reflect instead the more primitive and punitive deity of Muhammad's imagination.

III

Even in a secular worldview informed by modern science, there is a clear meaning to the central concept of monotheism that Muhammad espoused, indeed a meaning that seems sufficient to explain the value of monotheism in general to communities of believers over the generations. The core insight that recovers this meaning in a secular context was supplied by the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, who regarded it, along with the "transcendental" psychology he used to frame it and give it systematic meaning, as a breakthrough comparable in magnitude to the Copernican insight that the Earth orbits the Sun, rather than vice versa. In brief, his idea is that the self — the "I" — is the logical instrument for reflecting and understanding God.

Kant's more general point was that the concepts we use to bring reality to clear focus shape this reality so deeply that the idea of our somehow apprehending reality without them, as if to see the truth behind them more clearly, is hopeless. We have no choice but to see reality through the lenses of our concepts, and the best we can do to sharpen our view is to work on those concepts, using logic and science to buff them up for maximum clarity. The biblical God — the "I am that I am" of Mosaic tradition — becomes a superself of mythic proportions, magnified in every subsequent theology to big up the divine ego to yet more cosmic dimensions, until in the view of later philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche the entire enterprise collapsed under the weight of its own absurdity. In the Kantian view, the divine ego is a construct from the ego of the believer, seen through the rose-tinted lenses of wishful thinking and heroic grandiosity and then projected to infinity, perhaps through trepidation at the blasphemy of seeking to identify with the divine image. That is to say, the believer uses his own ego, along with those of neighbors and priests, as mirrors to reflect the divine countenance. In Kantian jargon, the human or phenomenal ego is the categorical prototype for conceiving the divine or transcendental ego.

The value for a community of thus transcendentalizing the ego is plain to see. Collective celebrations in communal acts of worship of the divine ego are ways to celebrate the sublime heights to which an ego — any ego — can aspire once it attracts the predication of those attributes traditionally reserved for the Most High. Worship becomes a matter of collective self-help, spurning fetishes and idols of every kind and raising the view of the believer to an inspiring conception of what a self might be, kindling a flame of desire so glorious that even the most incorrigible curmudgeons are moved to repent of their sins and mend their ways. Monotheism gets to the heart of the matter with a focus on the innermost core of the believer's psychology, the sense of self, or the soul in traditional terminology, where the effect of a transformation can be most profound. Monotheists can scoff at rain gods or war gods: No drought or defeat can harm them once their soul finds union with God.

The Kantian insight makes short work of the great "I am" and readily explains the pragmatic value of faith, hope and charity, as motivated by Christian love. It also trivializes the task of explaining the psychology of Muhammad the revelator. Evidently, the trance into which Muhammad fell

when he received divine dictation was a self-administered automatism to disable the reflexive awareness that would otherwise quail at the audacity of speaking for the creator of the universe. This state of assertive implacability was essential to the task but humanly hard to maintain — even Moses needed a burning bush as a prop to help him out with his divine transmissions.

Updated to build on more modern logic and science, the Kantian insight becomes the twofold claim that, firstly, the logic of the self can be framed without reference to the contingencies of human biology in such a way as to highlight the centrality of a supreme unifying concept, and that, secondly, the psychology of human motivation, though rooted in a cerebral neural network irrigated with body fluids, can be reworked through reflection on such exalted concepts in a sufficiently “sacred” setting to achieve the transformative effects that monotheism at its best has brought believers for millennia. So, first, the self is a logical construct more general than we humans often imagine, and second, neuroscience can show us how sacred dramas can unlock the plasticity of human neural organization to achieve psychic transformations in the believer. This seems an eminently reasonable perspective from which to seek to explain the astonishing success of monotheism in the historical record.

That the self can naturally aspire to union with the divine image is readily attested in the literature of religious mysticism. Clarification of the logic of such aspiration is a more recent achievement of our species. The logic of the self and of self-reference more generally has been a tricky topic in academic circles for hundreds of years, at least since 1637 CE, when René Descartes made the “I” the central concept of Western philosophy with his slogan *cogito ergo sum*. At the time, however, the logic and science he inherited from Aristotle fell far short of what he would have needed for a systematic theory of the self.

Things changed in the nineteenth century, when mathematics and logic converged in what we now call set theory. In 1903 the Cambridge fellow Bertrand Russell famously stopped the Jena mathematician Gottlob Frege in his logical tracks with an easy derivation of a paradox of self-reference in Frege’s pioneering formalization of the logic of arithmetic, which Frege had pursued for years in a massive work dedicated to establishing Kant’s assertion that arithmetic was in essence just logic, and which in modern terms proved that the logical foundation of arithmetic is set theory. Russell then took up the challenge of establishing the same claim in collaboration with his Cambridge colleague Alfred North Whitehead, to produce a weighty and prestigious trilogy claiming to do a better job.

Opinions differed on their claim, and other mathematicians worked on better formalisms. In 1931, starting from such work, the young Vienna logician Kurt Gödel used the logic of self-reference once more to derive a yet more subversive paradox that essentially sunk the hope that Frege and others had nursed of putting mathematics on an absolutely firm foundation. The logical vortex of self-reference had drilled through all of reality as we know it in mathematics and science.

To cap it all, in 1936 the young Cambridge mathematician Alan Turing then used Gödel’s result to prove that any and all computers faced a fundamental limit on what they could calculate. The result has direct implications for us, since we humans are in scientific essence biological robots and hence are subject to the same logical limits as any embodied computer. The logic of self-reference undermines the semantic foundations of anything substantial we seek to say about ourselves and our reality.

Psychology cannot help the would-be revelator escape the bounds of logic. In his historic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) William James analyzed historical instances of

religious revelation and showed that many were more plausibly seen as cases of pathological mental dysfunction. Modern brain-scan studies of people undergoing typical religious experiences show activity in brain regions that are also active during epileptic seizures and other dysfunctions, suggesting the same conclusion. It seems that a fantasy of ultimate union with the divine presence is more likely psychic dysfunction than revealed truth.

It may seem intuitively obvious that what Muhammad aimed to do in his channeling of the divine message was impossible, that no human interpreter can claim such absolute authority, however convincing the inner phenomenology of revelation and reportage. But it takes logic to nail the refutation of his audacious claim, and that logic turns on self-reference. Muhammad failed as a messenger because the feedback loops in the circuitry of his auditory cortex were coiled too tightly. He heard the message, he verified the authenticity of the message, and he transposed the inner voice into external words for his scribe to record. If perchance the message were, "This message is false," the loop would become vicious and the revelation self-defeating. Muhammad was logically unable to sort fact from fiction.

To be a prophet of God is not to be an outstanding champion. Once he had achieved some success as a warlord, Muhammad was admired within his community, both as a commander of men and as a lover of women, but his claim to speak with the authority of God was something else: It was methodologically unsound and therefore untenable. He may have imagined his successes elsewhere lent credibility to his utterances and entitled him to dispense with the process of peer review and criticism that today rightly surrounds any maker of extraordinary claims in scientific or academic life, but on this point he was wrong.

However, the logic of the matter does not end there, for the ambition of making claims on behalf of the self of the entire universe, or as Muhammad would have it of speaking for Allah, is not itself subverted merely because one way of making such claims is subverted. A self is reflected in its world – this insight was formulated with crystalline clarity by the young Ludwig Wittgenstein in his writings on the logic of Frege and Russell. A phenomenal self is the mirror image of its phenomenal world, but brought, in Kant's terminology, to a synthetic unity of apperception. A self brings a world to a unity, in a cognitive achievement that brings the manifold of phenomena to a mathematical point, to the One – that offers it up to God, so to speak.

The German philosophers who followed Kant said a lot about God and the self, but did so within the unruly semantics of natural language. It took a further century of work in logic and philosophy to clear up the claims and emerge with a more focused view of what revelators could and could not achieve. In short, set theory and related disciplines give us a conceptual frame in which we can make claims about God and the world, albeit as formal definitions lacking empirical content.

We can get a glimpse of how this goes with a very austere formalism. The set theorists who followed Frege converged on a structure called the cumulative hierarchy of pure sets, which reposes on a single set, the empty set, and billows upward into a transfinite paradise that exceeds all bounds known to man. This hierarchy is ranked by a function first formulated by the mathematician John von Neumann, which defines each rank as the class of all sets and subsets of members of any previous rank. The backbone of this structure is the transfinite sequence of ordinal numbers, each of which is defined as the class of all its predecessors. Neumann, like Gödel, distinguished sets from classes: both sets and classes contain sets as members, and sets are members of further classes in turn. Each set is a class when seen from below and a member when seen from above. The difference is that we do not see the classes from above, so we can picture the "proper" classes that are not also sets as topping out the whole billowing stack.

The idea that makes this formalism more than what Hermann Hesse would have called a glass bead game is that we are perforce inside this mushroom cloud. The formal semantics of any language or theory we care to use can be mapped into this structure – insofar as that theory is consistent, at least. The objects we recognize map into a ranked initial segment of the structure and the concepts we employ are classes in that segment. To add more jargon, the sets exist but the classes have being: everything that exists is a set but anything that is without full-blown existence is a proper class. Think of the ordinal axis, the backbone of the hierarchy, as a timeline projecting into the transfinite future: everything that exists is in the past from some later standpoint, but proper classes are always out in the future.

A universal God can be represented in this structure by the maximal proper class, which Neumann called V . Ranked maximal sets can be denoted by the letter V with a suitable ordinal subscript. The point here is that each ranked V -set is a universal class for anyone whose universe is modeled within its initial segment of the cumulative hierarchy. Each such V -set is an image of the universal God for a being whose semantics is fully reflected in a logical model with that level of inner structure. If our fate as temporal beings is to be trapped within the mushroom cloud, the image of God looming above us is mapped to a V -set within the cloud. Its limitations and its imperfections become flaws in our conception of God. As temporal beings, we are not vouchsafed a glimpse of God outside the cloud.

This relates directly back to Kant's transcendental psychology. Assuming that our phenomenal world can be represented by a consistent theory with a ranked model, the phenomenal world can be mapped to a ranked V -set within the cloud. This mapping gives us a limited conception of God. The best we can do within the scope of our concepts is to imagine God as coterminous with that V -set. From a later and possibly better perspective, our view may seem hopeless blinkered, and indeed quite false.

A natural objection here is that we, as free human beings, can see beyond this whole cloudy metaphor. Kant's answer is that this apparent capability delivers only an illusion. Any cognitive achievement, such as our sneaking a peek outside the mushroom cloud, presupposes a computational substructure that delivers the cognitive contents of the sensorium to the higher unity of synthetic apperception; and that substructure, if its deliverances are consistent, can itself be mapped to a ranked V -set, and so on. Our apparent freedom, as beings who are not yet cast down into ranked existence as finite has-beens, is betrayed in our very act of seeking to pin down our sneak-peek in a consistent cognition.

All is not lost, however. We do what we can, and our best theory of reality, mapped to a maximal V -set for our time, gives us a concept of God that will have to do, for now. As free beings, we pin our fate to it. As scientists, we accept that our hypotheses might be wrong.

So Muhammad was right to intuit that a divine perspective was available in principle, and he was naturally inspired to seek it on a mountaintop, at night, gazing in awe at the stars in the clear desert sky. Any modern cosmologist reflecting on data captured by orbiting astronomical observatories and using the data to theorize about the origin and evolution of the universe can readily sympathize with that intuition. Indeed modern scientists must insist that a sufficiently rigorous methodology of verification and peer review can suffice for us as scientists to make assertions about the reality within which we find ourselves with at least the same claim to transcendent authority that Muhammad claimed for his revelations.

Muhammad was the last prophet because scientists are the new prophets, and they scorn the label. For them, the title of being a scientist is more noble.

IV

Muhammad had a noble ambition, and he performed its duties well, at first. But soon, too soon to maintain the integrity of the full text of his life's work, the Qur'an, hubris set in, and the Messenger began to pollute his grandiose revelations with worthless utterances based on spats with wives and lovers or on disagreements with men of differing opinions, such as infidels the world over, which ended up sabotaging the entire enterprise. If Muhammad had died young, the Qur'an could have been a peerless poetic masterpiece of Arab culture. In fact, the very success in martial terms of the imperial culture to which the book gave rise was enough to betray the divine impulse that sparked it. As things turned out, the Persian poet and Sufi mystic Rumi wrote works that in the judgment of many discerning readers possess comparable if not greater beauty. Moreover, he did so without offending the Jews from whom Muhammad took myths and memes about God while making only token efforts to get them right and to honor his donors for their priceless legacy.

Perhaps a parting of the ways for Jews and Muslims was inevitable. The sad precedent of Christianity suggests as much, for the ideology of the cult established some seventeen centuries ago by Roman authorities on the basis of a tradition that had grown around a peaceful Jewish martyr would seem an ideal candidate for a faith that could maintain friendly relations with Jews, but that was not exactly how history unfolded in subsequent centuries. The whole impulse of monotheism, that we can somehow magnify and glorify the self in sacred ceremonies that exploit the magic of ritual and tradition to cement believers into tight communities of faith, seems freighted with the seed of its own doom. Different such communities differ on matters for which no deeper adjudicating authority is available, so strife and war become the only recourse to settle those differences.

The zeal of Muslims who follow closely the words and ways of the Prophet admits of no compromise. Either the entire world submits to Islam and accepts the absolute authority of Allah, with mechanisms yet to be determined to anchor that authority in a practical polity, or we face wars of attrition until every last zealot is either extinguished or converted to a more pacific worldview. All this is a direct expression of the visions of Muhammad as they reveal themselves in the later suras of his book. We should note clearly that this problem, at least, is not shared by the other two strands of the monotheist tradition stemming from Abraham. Jews and Christians have had their differences over centuries of strife, but nothing in the faiths the two communities espouse renders the idea absurd that they might live in peace. Similarly, one might think, a daughter faith (though Muhammad would have spurned that phrase outright on sexist grounds) should find common ground in the supreme being and work out a path to peace from there on back to the world we live in. But Muhammad overdid his zeal for Allah, and his exhortations to punish and kill infidels are too numerous and too explicit to overlook. Islam is an incendiary faith, and somehow we need to transform it, probably beyond recognition, before we can grant it an honored place in the modern world of science and secular polities.

A further feature of Muhammad's mission deserves recognition. The practical benefits of ritual participation in the traditions of monotheism, in terms of elevation and improvement of the self as it strives to grow closer to God, are features of faith that Muhammad surely had in mind when he bemoaned the state of Arab society in his younger years. Raising a people out of idolatry and superstition is a fine achievement, and Muhammad succeeded handsomely in doing this for the tribal society of his time. Had he so much as glimpsed the wider world of the future in which Islam would find its place, he would doubtless have given more thought to the diplomatic side of

managing everyday intercourse with infidels, but of course he was a child of his times. Fourteen centuries on, when his book, the Qur'an, is itself an object of idolatry and superstition, and all the cults of a patriarchic god are viewed by many with suspicion, a man of high ideals and shining vision, as the young Muhammad undoubtedly was, would certainly spurn the present course of Islam and, from a desert mountaintop where the Milky Way spreads a dazzling carpet of stars across the sky, would likely forge a new faith that embraced science and abjured sexism.

V

Kader Abdolah has performed a great service in making Muhammad and his work more understandable and accessible to a modern Western audience. His biography of the Messenger and his annotated edition of the Qur'an, in which the suras are at last put into chronological order and hence made comprehensible as a narrative, are the least we need to put the violence and disorder within Islamic societies that we see daily in the television news into some sort of perspective. We can trace those structural weaknesses of Islam whose consequences we see in horrendous detail in the news back to the original source, in a vision pursued too zealously, too single-mindedly, with too little regard for the ramifications of ideas just blurted out with the claimed authority of God.

Muhammad enjoyed the fruits of his success too soon and too freely. His many brides and slaves may have seemed like the normal appurtenances of a life of leadership, but for a man whose success was based on holy visions and moral authority they were disastrous. Long traditions of austerity and denial in religious communities across what for him was the known world should have cautioned him to renounce either his visionary status or his indulgent lifestyle. To go on, as he did, to lead booty raids against neighboring tribes, to loot and pillage and rampage clear across the deserts of Arabia, was surely not the work of a holy man. To claim the authority of God for his declarations on women and infidels was surely the work of a madman. The life story on display here is a tragic one.

Abdolah is an accomplished and award-winning novelist, originally from Iran but now settled in the Netherlands, where he wrote his two Muhammad books. His careful and delicate handling of incendiary material is a joy to behold, and he has brought the full armory of a mature novelist to bear on telling the story of the Prophet with a judicious blend of sympathetic engagement and forensic detachment. He is reportedly aware of the risk of publishing these books in the world of today, where threats of deadly violence are the default expectation for writers of anything too graphic on the man who created Islam, but the opportunity to do a good job where many bad jobs have been done in the past was evidently too compelling to resist. We may all be grateful that he has done so, for many of us in the world today are in urgent need of a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding of Islam and its origins. Abdolah deserves a Nobel Prize for this work.

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