
Documents

Considering the Evidence: Voices of Islam



Like every other great religious tradition, Islam found expression in various forms. Its primary text, the Quran, claimed to represent the voice of the divine, God's final revelation to humankind. Other early Islamic writings, known as *hadith*, recorded the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. Still others reflected the growing body of Islamic law, the *sharia*, which sought to construct a social order aligned with basic religious teachings. Devotional practices and expressions of adoration for Allah represented yet another body of Islamic literature. All of this gave rise to differing interpretations and contending views, generating for Islam a rich and complex literary tradition that has been the source of inspiration and debate for almost 1,400 years. From this immense body of work, we present just a few samples of the voices of Islam.

Document II.1

The Voice of Allah

To Muslims, the Quran contains the very words of God. The term *quran* itself means "recitation" in Arabic, and the faithful believe that the angel Gabriel spoke God's words to Muhammad, who then recited them. Often called "noble" or "glorious," the Quran, compiled into an established text within thirty years of the Prophet's death, was regarded as a book without equal, written in the most sublime Arabic. Copying it was an act of piety, memorizing it was the starting point for Muslim education, and reciting it was both an art form and a high honor. Organized in 114 Surahs (chapters), the Quran was revealed to Muhammad over a period of some twenty-two years. Often the revelations came in response to particular problems that the young Islamic community and the Prophet were facing. The selections that follow convey something of the Quran's understanding of God, of humankind, of the social life prescribed for believers, of relations with non-Muslims, and much more.

- What are the chief characteristics of Allah, to Muslims the single source of all life and being?
- What religious practices are prescribed for Muslims in these passages? What are their purposes in the life of believers?

- What specific prescriptions for social life do these selections contain? Notice in particular those directed toward the weakest members of society. How would you describe the Quran's view of a good society?
- What attitude toward Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslim peoples do these passages suggest?
- What circumstances surrounding the birth of Islam might help to explain the references in the Quran to fighting and warfare?
- The sacred texts of all religious traditions provide ample room for conflicting understandings and interpretations. What debates or controversies might arise from these passages? Consider in particular views of women, of religious practice, of warfare, and of relationships with Jews and Christians.

The Quran

Seventh Century C.E.

Surah 1

In the name of God, the Most Gracious and the Dispenser of Grace. All praise is due to God alone, the sustainer of all the worlds... Lord of the Day of Judgment. Thee alone do we worship; and unto Thee alone do we turn for aid. Guide us in the straight way, the way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessing, not of those who have been condemned, nor those who go astray.

Surah 2

This divine writ [the Quran]—let there be no doubt about it—is [meant to be] a guidance for all the God-conscious who believe in [the existence of] that which is beyond the reach of human perception, and are constant in prayer, and spend on others out of what We provide for them as sustenance; and who believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon thee, [O Prophet,] as well as in that which was bestowed before thy time...

Verily, those who have attained to faith, as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the

Christians...—all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve...

And they say, “Be Jews”—or, “Christians”—“and you shall be on the right path.” Say: “Nay, but [ours is] the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God.” Say: “We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob, and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus; and that which has been vouchsafed to all the [other] prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them...”

Verily, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth, and the succession of night and day: and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man: and in the waters which God sends down from the sky, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless, and causing all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon: and in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth: [in all this] there are messages indeed for people who use their reason...

Source: Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Bristol: The Book Foundation, 2003), Surahs 1, 2, 4, 5.

True piety does not consist in turning your faces toward the east or the west, but truly pious is he who believes in God, and the Last Day; and the angels, and revelation, and the prophets; and spends his substance—however much he himself may cherish it—upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and the beggars, and for the freeing of human beings from bondage. . . .

Fasting is ordained for you as it was ordained for those before you, so that you might remain conscious of God. . . .

And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression, for verily, God does not love aggressors. And slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away, for oppression is even worse than killing. And fight not against them near the Inviolable House of Worship^o unless they fight against you there first; but if they fight against you, slay them: such shall be the recompense of those who deny the truth. But if they desist, behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. Hence, fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone; but if they desist, then all hostility shall cease, save against those who [willfully] do wrong. . . .

And perform the pilgrimage. . . . [to Mecca] in honor of God; and if you are held back, give instead whatever offering you can easily afford. . . .

There shall be no coercion in matters of faith. . . .

Do not deprive your charitable deeds of all worth by stressing your own benevolence and hurting [the feelings of the needy], as does he who spends his wealth only to be seen and praised by men. . . .

God has made buying and selling lawful and usury^o unlawful. Hence, whoever. . . desists [from

^o**Inviolable House of Worship:** a mosque.

^o**usury:** the lending of money to be paid back with interest.

usury], may keep his past gains, and it will be for God to judge him; but as for those who return to it they are destined for the fire. . . . God deprives usurious gains of all blessing, whereas He blesses charitable deeds with manifold increase.

Surah 4

[R]ender unto the orphans their possessions. . . and do not consume their possessions together with your own: this, verily, is a great crime. . . .

Men shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, and women shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, whether it be little or much. . . .

And as for those of your women who become guilty of immoral conduct, call upon four from among you who have witnessed their guilt; and if these bear witness thereto, confine the guilty women to their houses until death takes them away or God opens for them a way [through repentance]. And punish [thus] both of the guilty parties; but if they both repent and mend their ways, leave them alone: for, behold, God is an acceptor of repentance, a dispenser of grace. . . .

And it will not be within your power to treat your wives with equal fairness, however much you may desire it; and so, do not allow yourselves to incline toward one to the exclusion of the other, leaving her in a state, as it were, of having and not having a husband.

Surah 5

Do not take the Jews and Christians for your allies: they are but allies of one another—and whoever of you allies himself with them becomes, verily, one of them.

Document 11.2

The Voice of the Prophet Muhammad

As an expression of Islam, the sayings and deeds of Muhammad, known as the *hadiths*, are second in importance only to the Quran. In various collections of hadiths, Muslims hear the voice and witness the actions of their prophet. While they do not have the authority of divine revelation, these statements have served to guide and inspire Muslims to this day.

In the several centuries following his death, an enormous number of stories about Muhammad circulated within the Islamic community. Scholars gradually developed methods of authentication designed to discover which of these stories most reliably represented the Prophet's words and actions. Considerable controversy accompanied this process, and no single collection of hadiths has ever achieved universal acceptance. One of the earliest and most highly respected of these collections was the work the Persian scholar al-Bukhari (810–870). Traveling extensively throughout the Islamic world, al-Bukhari is said to have collected some 600,000 stories, memorized 200,000 of them, and finally authenticated and published 7,275. The selections that follow suggest something of the range and variety of the hadiths.

- What portrait of Muhammad emerges from this record of his sayings and actions?
- How do these hadiths reflect or build on the teaching of the Quran in Document 11.1?
- What religious and social values do these hadiths highlight?
- In what ways do these hadiths reflect common themes in many of the world's "wisdom traditions," and in what respects are they distinctly Islamic?

The Hadith

Eighth and Ninth Centuries

The Apostle of Allah... was asked which [good] work was the most excellent, and he answered: "Belief in Allah and in His Apostle." He was asked: "And then which?" He replied: "Jihād in the way of Allah." He was again asked: "And then what?" and he replied: "An acceptable pilgrimage..."

Source: Arthur Jeffery, ed. and trans., *A Reader on Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), 81–86.

If a slave serves honestly his [earthly] master and worships earnestly his [heavenly] Lord, he will have a double recompense.

He who shows concern for the widows and the unfortunate [ranks as high] as one who goes on Jihād in the way of Allah, or one who fasts by day and who rises at night [for prayer].

A [true] believer views his sins as though he were sitting beneath a mountain which he fears may fall

on him, but as evil-doer views his sins as a fly that moves across his nose.

In this world be as a stranger, or as one who is just passing along the road.

In two things an old man's heart never ceases to be that of a youth, in love of this world and in hoping long. . . .

To look at a woman is forbidden, even if it is a look without desire, so how much the more is touching her.

Said he—upon whom be Allah's blessing and peace—"Avoid seven pernicious things." [His Companions] said: "And what are they, O Apostle of Allah?" He answered: "Associating anything with Allah, sorcery, depriving anyone of life where Allah has forbidden that save for just cause, taking usury, devouring the property of orphans, turning the back on the day of battle, and slandering chaste believing women even though they may be acting carelessly."

No one who enters Paradise will ever want to return to this world, even could he possess the earth and all that is on it, save the martyrs who desire to return to this world and be killed ten times so great is the regard in which they find themselves held.

To be stationed on the frontier for one day during Holy War is better than (to possess) this world and all that is on it. A place in Paradise the size of one of your whip-lashes is better than this world and all that is on it. . . .

If a man sees something in [the conduct of] his ruler which he dislikes let him put up with it patiently, for there is no one who separates himself

even a span from the community and dies [in that separation], but dies a pagan death. . . .

Said the Prophet. . . : "I had a look into Paradise and I saw that the poor made up most of its inhabitants, and I had a look into Hell and saw that most of its inhabitants were women. . . .

Treat women-folk kindly for woman was created of a rib. The crookedest part of a rib is its upper part. If you go to straighten it out you will break it, and if you leave it alone it will continue crooked. So treat women in kindly fashion. . . .

Said the Apostle of Allah. . . : "O band of youths, let him among you who is able to make a home get married, and let him who is not able betake himself to fasting for he will find in that a quencher [of his passions]."

The worst of foods is that of a feast to which the rich have been invited and the poor overlooked. . . .

Said the Apostle of Allah—upon whom be Allah's blessing and peace—"Do not wear silks and satins, and do not drink from gold and silver vessels nor eat from dishes made thereof, for these things are theirs in this world but ours in the world to come." . . .

Said the Prophet—upon whom be Allah's blessing and peace—"He who drinks wine in this world and repents not of it will be forbidden it in the world to come." . . .

Al-Aqra' said: "I have ten sons but never have I kissed any one of them." The Apostle of Allah—upon whom be Allah's blessing and peace—looked at him, and then said: "He who does not show tenderness will not have tenderness shown him."

Document II.3

The Voice of the Law

While Christian scholarship emphasized theology and correct belief, learned Muslims gave more attention to law and correct behavior. That law was known as the sharia, an Arabic term that referred to a path toward water, which is the source of life. To many Muslims, that was the role of law—to construct the good society within which an authentic religious life could find expression.

The sharia emerged as the early Islamic community confronted the practical problems of an expanding empire with a very diverse population. But

no single legal framework developed. Rather, four major schools of Islamic law crystallized, agreeing on fundamentals but differing in emphasis. How much weight should be given to the hadiths and which of them were most reliably authentic? What scope should reason and judgment have in applying religious principles to particular circumstances? Despite disagreement on such questions, each of the four approaches to legal interpretation sought to be all-embracing, providing highly detailed guidance on ritual performance, personal behavior, marriage and family matters, crime and punishment, economic transactions, and political action. The selections that follow, drawn from various legal traditions, illustrate this comprehensive nature of Islamic law and its centrality in an evolving Islamic civilization.

- What do you find most striking about the legal prescriptions in these passages?
- In what ways do these selections draw on and apply the teachings of the Quran and the hadiths?
- How does the role of law in early Islamic civilization differ from that of modern Western society?
- Why do you think the role of law was so central, so highly detailed, and so comprehensive in Islamic civilization?
- What do this document and Document 11.2 suggest about the problems that the early Islamic community confronted?

The Sharia Ninth Century

On Prayer

The five prayers are obligatory for every Muslim who has reached the age of puberty and has the use of reason, except for women who are menstruating or recovering from childbirth.

If Muslims deny the necessity of prayer through ignorance, one must instruct them; if they deny it willfully, they have apostatized. . . .

If Muslims abstain from saying the prayers from negligence, one should ask them three times to repent; if they repent, it is well, and if they refuse, it is lawful to put them to death.

Source: John Alden Williams, trans. and ed., *The Word of Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 71, 80–82, 88–89, 94–95, 98–101, 104–5.

On *Zakat*^o

The obligation pertains only to a free Muslim who has complete ownership of the property on which it is due. . . . *Zakat* is due only on animals, agricultural products, precious metals, objects intended for sale, the products of mines, and treasure troves.

Whoever has the obligation to pay *zakat* and is able must pay it; if not, they commit a fault for which they must answer. If anyone refuses to pay it and denies its obligatory character they have committed apostasy and may be put to death. If they refuse it from avarice, they shall have the amount taken from them and be given a sentence at the judge's discretion.

^o*Zakat*: alms for the poor.

On Marriage

[Marriage] is contracted by means of declaration and consent. When both parties are Muslims, it must be contracted in the presence of two male or one male and two female Muslim witnesses who are free, sane, and adult. . . .

It is not lawful for a man to marry two women who are sisters or to cohabit with two sisters who are his slaves. . . .

A man may not marry his slave-girl unless he sets her free first, and a woman may not marry her slave, since marriage has as its object that the children belong equally to both parents, and ownership and slavery are not equal states.

Similarly, marriage with an idolatress is forbidden, until she accepts Islam or a religion of the Book.

It is not lawful for a man already married to a free woman to marry a slave. . . . However, a man may lawfully marry a free woman after a slave.

A free man may marry four women, free or slave, but no more. It is unlawful for a slave to marry more than two women. . . .

On Government

There are ten things a Caliph^o must do in public affairs:

- 1) Maintain religion according to its established principles.
- 2) Apply legal judgments for litigants so that equity reigns without aiding the oppressor or weakening the oppressed.
- 3) Protect the flock. . . . so that people may gain their living and move from place to place securely.
- 4) Apply the *hudud*, or punishments of the Law, so as to secure God's prohibitions from violation.
- 5) Fortify the marches so that the enemy will not appear due to neglect, shedding the blood of any Muslim or protected person.

^o**Caliph:** successor to Muhammad as political leader of the Islamic community.

- 6) Wage *jihad* against those who reject Islam so that they become either Muslims or protected people.
- 7) Collect the *zakat* and taxes on conquered territory. . . . without fear or oppression.
- 8) Administer treasury expenditures.
- 9) Delegate loyal and trustworthy people.
- 10) Directly oversee matters and not delegate his authority seeking to occupy himself with either pleasure or devotion. . . .

It is necessary therefore to cause the masses to act in accord with divine laws in all the affairs, both in this world and in the world to come. The authority to do so was possessed by the prophets and after them by their successors.

On Things Disliked in the Law

It is not permitted to men or women to eat or drink or keep unguents^o in vessels of gold or silver. . . .

It is not permitted for a man to wear silk, but it is permitted for a woman. . . .

It is not permitted for a man to wear gold or silver, except for silver on a ring, or on a weapon.

It is not permitted for a man to look at a strange woman.^o . . . A woman frequently needs to bare her hands and face in transactions with men. Abu Hanifa said it was also permitted to look at her feet and Abu Yusuf said it was permitted to look at her forearms as well. . . . However, if a man is not secure from feeling lust, he should not look needlessly even at the face or hands, to avoid sin. He is not allowed to touch her face or hands even if he is free from lust, whether he be young or old.

On the Economy

It is disliked to corner the market in food for humans or animals if it occurs in a town where this may prove harmful to the people. It is disliked to sell weapons in a time of trouble.

^o**unguents:** ointments.

^o**strange woman:** a woman from outside one's immediate family.

There is no harm in selling fruit juice to someone who will make wine of it, since the transgression is not in the juice but in the wine after it has been changed. . . .

Earning a living by changing money is a great danger to the religion of the one who practices it. . . . It is the duty of the *muhtasib*^o to search out the money changers' places of business and spy on them,

^o**Muhtasib:** an inspector of the markets.

and if he finds one of them practicing usury or doing something illegal. . . . he must punish that person. . . .

Owners of ships and boats must be prevented from loading their vessels above the usual load, for fear of sinking. . . . If they carry women on the same boat with men, there must be a partition between them.

Sellers of [pottery] are not to overlay any that are pierced or cracked with gypsum. . . . and then sell them as sound.

Document II.4

The Voice of the Sufis

Alongside the law, there ran a very different current of Islamic thinking and expression known as Sufism. The Sufis, sometimes called the “friends of God,” were the mystics of Islam, those for whom the direct, personal, and intoxicating experience of the divine source was of far greater importance than the laws, regulations, and judgments of the sharia (see pp. 485–86, 496). Organized in hundreds of separate orders, or “brotherhoods,” the Sufis constituted one of the transregional networks that linked the far-flung domains of the Islamic world. Often they were the missionaries of Islam, introducing the faith to Anatolia, India, Central Asia, and elsewhere.

Among the most prominent exemplars of Sufi sensibility was Rumi (1207–1273), born in what is now Afghanistan and raised in a Persian cultural tradition. Rumi's family later migrated to Anatolia, and Rumi lived most of his adult life in the city of Konya, where he is buried. There he wrote extensively, including a six-volume work of rhymed couplets known as the *Mathnawi*. Following Rumi's death, his son established the Mevlevi Sufi order, based on Rumi's teachings and known in the West as the “whirling dervishes,” on account of the turning dances that became a part of their practice (see Visual Source 8.5 on p. 376).

Rumi's poetry has remained a sublime expression of the mystical dimension of Islamic spiritual seeking and has provided inspiration and direction for millions, both within and beyond the Islamic world. In the early twenty-first century, Rumi was the best-selling poet in the United States. The selections that follow provide a brief sample of the Sufi approach to religious life.

- How would you define the religious sensibility of Rumi's poetry?
- How does it differ from the approach to Islam reflected in the sharia?
- What criticisms might the orthodox legal scholars (ulama) have made regarding the Sufi understanding of Islam?

Inscription in Rumi's Tomb

Thirteenth Century

Come, come, whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.

Source: A frequently quoted inscription hanging inside the tomb of Rumi and generally, though not universally, attributed to him; translator unknown.

It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vow a
thousand times,
Come, yet again, come, come.

RUMI

Poem

Thirteenth Century

I searched for God among the Christians and on
the Cross and therein I found Him not.
I went into the ancient temples of idolatry; no
trace of Him was there.

Source: M. M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*,
(Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966), 2:838.

I entered the mountain cave of Hira and then went
as far as Qandhar but God I found not. . . .
Then I directed my search to the Kaaba, the resort
of old and young; God was not there even.
Turning to philosophy I inquired about him from
ibn Sina but found Him not within his range. . . .
Finally, I looked into my own heart and there I
saw Him; He was nowhere else.

RUMI

“Drowned in God,” Mathnawi

Thirteenth Century

Dam the torrent of ecstasy when it runs in
flood,
So that it won't bring shame and ruin.
But why should I fear ruin?
Under the ruin waits a treasure.
He that is drowned in God wishes to be more
drowned.
While his spirit is tossed up and down by the
waves of the sea,

Source: From Kabir Helminski, ed., *The Pocket Rumi
Reader* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 89.

He asks, “Is the bottom of the sea more delightful
or the top?”
Is the Beloved's arrow more fascinating, or the
shield?
O heart, if you recognize any difference between
joy and sorrow,
These lies will tear you apart.
Although your desire tastes sweet,
Doesn't the Beloved desire you to be desireless?
The life of lovers is in death:
You will not win the Beloved's heart unless you
lose your own.

Using the Evidence: Voices of Islam

1. **Defining differences within Islam:** In what different ways do the various voices of Islam represented in these documents understand and express the common religious tradition of which they are all a part? What grounds for debate or controversy can you identify within or among them?
2. **Comparing religious traditions:** How would you compare Islamic religious ideas and practices with those of other traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity?
3. **Considering gender and Islam:** How do these documents represent the roles of men and women in Islamic society? Pay particular attention to differences in emphasis.
4. **Seeking additional sources:** Notice that all of these documents derive from literate elites, and each of them suggests or prescribes appropriate behavior. What additional documents would you need if you were to assess the impact of these prescriptions on the lives of ordinary people? What specific questions might you want to pose to such documents?

Visual Sources

Considering the Evidence: Islamic Civilization in Persian Miniature Paintings



Iran, homeland of the ancient Persian Empire and its successors, entered the world of Islam rather differently than did Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and North Africa. In the latter regions, converts to Islam gradually abandoned their native languages, adopted Arabic, and came to be seen as Arabs. In Iran or Persia, by contrast, Arab conquest did not involve the cultural Arabization of the region, despite some initial efforts to impose the Arabic language (see Map 11.1, p. 481). By the tenth century, the vast majority of Persians were Muslims, but the Persian language, Farsi (still spoken in modern Iran), flourished, enriched now by a number of Arabic loan words and written in an Arabic script. In 1010, that language received its classic literary expression when the Persian poet Ferdowsi completed his epic work, the *Shahnama* (*The Book of Kings*). A huge text of some 60,000 rhyming couplets, it recorded the mythical and pre-Islamic history of Iran and gave an enduring expression to a distinctly Persian cultural identity.

That culture had an enormous influence within the world of Islam. Many religious ideas of Persian Zoroastrianism—an evil satanic power, final judgment, heaven and hell, paradise—found their way into Islam, often indirectly via Jewish or Christian precedents. In Iran, Central Asia, India, and later in the Ottoman Empire, Persian influences were pervasive. Persian administrative and bureaucratic techniques; Persian court practices with their palaces, gardens, and splendid garments; Persian architecture, poetry, music, and painting—all of this decisively shaped the high culture of these eastern Islamic lands. One of the Abbasid caliphs, himself an Arab, observed: “The Persians ruled for a thousand years and did not need us Arabs even for a day. We have been ruling them for one or two centuries and cannot do without them for an hour.”³⁴

Prominent among the artistic achievements of Persian culture were miniature paintings—small, colorful, and exquisitely detailed works often used to illustrate books or manuscripts. One art historian described them as “little festivals of color in images separated from each other by pages of text.”³⁵ This artistic style flourished especially from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, when Persia was invaded and ruled by a succession of Mongol or Turkic dynasties. These invasions, especially that of the Mongols in the thir-

teenth century, were highly destructive. Great cities were devastated, libraries burned, and artists forced to flee. But the new rulers also proved to be generous patrons of the arts and served as carriers of Buddhist and Chinese artistic forms that enriched Persian painting.

During these centuries, the artists who created these Persian miniatures drew heavily on Persian mythology, poetry, and history as subjects for their paintings. Landscapes, influenced by Chinese techniques, also appeared in Persian miniatures. Scenes from the life of the Prophet Muhammad were likewise among the themes explored by Persian artists, although explicitly Islamic subject matter was represented in only a small proportion of these paintings. Particularly helpful to historians, images of daily life also found a place in Persian miniature painting, providing glimpses into social life in the Arab or Persian centers of Islamic civilization.

Visual Sources 11.1 and 11.2, dating from the early to mid-sixteenth century and measuring about eight by eleven inches, illustrate this focus within Persian miniature painting. Visual sources such as these are often most revealing in their detail, as artists depicted elements of daily life not often recorded elsewhere. Both of them, however, are idealized images that reflect enduring values within the Islamic world rather than referring to specific times or places.

Visual Source 11.1 offers a window on the life of desert pastoral nomads of Arabia.³⁶ The style of both clothing and tents indicate that this is an Arab nomadic encampment. The image focuses the viewer's attention on the two older men seated inside the elaborately decorated blue tent in the lower left. Seven cups are lined up in front of the men at the bottom, together with their lids, perhaps to keep the beverage warm or the bugs out. The red tent at the left is decorated with a *simurgh*, a legendary Persian winged creature with the head of a dog and the claws of a lion, said to have lived so long that it had acquired universal knowledge. Outside the tent of the woman at the right of the painting are her slippers, and above her another woman tenderly feeds her child. In perhaps the only directly Islamic reference in the painting, the old man approaching the washerwoman holds prayer beads in his right hand. Notice also some apparent Chinese influence in the painting. The presentation of rocks, clouds, and twisted trees reflects features of Chinese landscape painting, while the blue-and-white ceramic bowl near the woman washing clothes suggests some trade with China.

According to some art historians, this image has yet another level of meaning, for it may have served to illustrate the well-known and ancient Arab love story of Layla and Majnun, tragic star-crossed lovers prevented (like Romeo and Juliet) from marrying by a family feud and united only in death. The young man tending the fire at the upper right may represent Majnun, driven mad and into the wilderness by his unfulfilled love. The woman in the beautiful green



Visual Source 11.1 An Arab Camp Scene (Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of John Goelet)

gown sitting in the doorway of the red tent on the left side of the painting may be Layla. In this interpretation of the image, the meeting of the two older men represents an incident in the story in which Majnun's father, together with his relatives, asks for Layla's hand in marriage from her father.

- What specific features and activities of nomadic life does the painting portray? What marks this image as an idealized version of an Arab camp? What features of nomadic life may have been omitted?
- Do the writing implements at the very bottom left of the painting—books, a pincase, an inkwell—offer a clue to the discussion that the two men may be having?
- What social distinctions are revealed in this painting?
- What differences in the lives of men and women are suggested in this image?
- What other details do you notice as you study this miniature painting?

Unlike the rural scene of Visual Source 11.1, the urban landscape of Visual Source 11.2 corresponds to no identifiable story or narrative. Also a sixteenth-century painting, it reflects the urban bustle and commercial sophistication of Islamic civilization. Here buildings replace tents as the major structures in the painting. Nine separate sources of light—lamps, candles, and torches—mark this as a nighttime scene, but in Persian painting, unlike in European art, light does not reflect on people or objects and does not cast shadows.

Three distinct sections of the painting illustrate various elements of city life. On the left and bottom of the image, a young prince holds court in his court pavilion attended by various turbaned courtiers. Above and to the right of the court scene, characteristic urban activities unfold along a city street. Finally, in the upper left a woman lounges on the balcony of an urban dwelling, while another woman speaks to an older turbaned man. Notice also the mosque in the upper right corner, inscribed with a well-known saying of Muhammad: "He who builds a mosque for God, God will build for him a dwelling in Paradise." There is also an inscription above the building in the lower right from the fourteenth-century Persian Sufi poet Hafiz: "The pupil of my eye is your nesting place; be kind, alight, for it is your home." As in Visual Source 11.1, intriguing details abound: the garden seen through the window in the arched pavilion; various types of musical instruments; the headscarves on women and the henna decorations on their hands; the elaborate geometric designs on buildings; the prayer beads in the hand of the young boy in front of the mosque.



Visual Source 11.2 City Life in Islamic Persia (Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of John Goelet)

- What might a historian interested in daily urban life in the Islamic world notice in this painting? What different social groups can you identify?
- What in particular seems to be going on in the court scene? What products and transactions can you find in or around the several shops that line the street?
- How would you define the roles of women as depicted here? Notice in particular the three young women above the court pavilion, seeking to observe the excitement below, from which they were presumably excluded.
- In what ways are the activities shown in the painting idealized?
- How might you understand the inscriptions of Muhammad and Hafiz in the context of this painting?
- What details do you find most striking in Visual Source 11.2?

The Persian miniature painting in Visual Source 11.3 moves from ordinary life to religious imagination. While explicitly religious themes appear only infrequently in these paintings, the most common religious subject by far was that of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey, said to have taken place in 619 or 620. The Quran refers briefly to God taking the prophet "from the sacred place of worship to the far distant place of worship." This passage became the basis for a story, much embellished over the centuries, of rich and deep meaning for Muslims. In this religious narrative, Muhammad was led one night by the angel Gabriel from Mecca to Jerusalem. For the journey he was given a *buraq*, a mythical winged creature with the body of a mule or donkey and the face of a woman. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, he led prayers for an assembly of earlier prophets including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. (See p. 477 for another illustration of Muhammad's relationship with earlier Jewish and Christian prophets.) Then, accompanied by many angels, Muhammad made his way through seven heavens into the presence of God, where, according to the Quran, "he did see some of the most profound of his Sustainer's symbols." There too Allah spoke to Muhammad about the importance of regular prayer, commanding fifty prayers a day, a figure later reduced to five on the advice of Moses.

From the beginning, Muslims have been divided on how to interpret this journey of the Prophet. For most, perhaps, it was taken quite literally as a miraculous event. Some, however, viewed it as a dream or a vision, while others understood it as the journey of Muhammad's soul but not his body. The Prophet's youngest wife, Aisha, for example, reported that "his body did not leave its place." Visual Source 11.3, dating from the early sixteenth century, is one of many representations of the Night Journey that emerged within Persian miniature painting.



Visual Source 11.3 The Night Journey of Muhammad (© British Library Board)

- How do you understand the halo of fire that surrounds the Prophet's image in the center of the painting? Notice also that a similar halo envelops the head of the angel Gabriel (in blue dress), who is leading Muhammad heavenward.
- What significance might attach to the female head of the buraq?

- What are the accompanying angels offering to the Prophet during his journey?
 - What meaning might the artist seek to convey by the image of the world below and slightly to the right of the buraq?
 - The willingness of Persian artists to represent Muhammad bodily contrasts sharply with a general Arab unwillingness to do so. Nonetheless, the Prophet's face is not shown. Why do you think Muslim artists have often been reluctant to represent the Prophet in human form? How might veiling his face address these concerns? Do you see any similarity with the controversy over icons in the Christian tradition? (See pp. 466–71.)
 - Consider finally the larger meaning of the Night Journey within Islam. What is the significance of Muhammad's encounter with earlier prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus? How does the story explain the second of the five pillars of Islam, the requirement to pray five times a day?
 - Review the discussion of the Sufi tradition of Islam on pages 485–86. How might Sufis have understood the Night Journey? How might it serve as a metaphor for the spiritual journey?
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Using the Evidence: Islamic Civilization in Persian Miniature Paintings

1. **Noticing point of view:** Consider these three visual sources together with the six other photos within the chapter (pp. 475, 477, 484, 487, 494, and 498). What general impression of the Islamic world emerges? What point of view, if any, is reflected in the selection of visual sources? Do they convey a positive, negative, or neutral impression of Islamic civilization? Explain your answer with specific references to the various images.
2. **Making comparisons:** Compare these visual sources to the icons in the Visual Sources section in Chapter 10 (pp. 466–71) in terms of purpose, artistic style, and themes. In particular, how does Visual Source 11.3 and the story of the Night Journey compare to the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Visual Source 10.3, p. 470) as artistic representations of the spiritual quest?
3. **Using images as evidence:** In what ways can historians use these visual sources? What insights about Islamic civilization can we derive from them? How should consideration of artist/author, audience, and purpose affect historians' assessment of these paintings?