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# Inconsistencies in Washington Irving's characterization of Mahomet in the first volume of Mahomet and His Successors

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Inconsistencies in Washington Irving's  
characterization of Mahomet in the first volume of  
Mahomet and His Successors

by

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## INTRODUCTION

## Statement of Purpose

In 1849 Washington Irving published the first volume of Mahomet and His Successors, his contribution to the study of Islam and its Prophet. This volume, though one of two, can stand alone as a biography similar in scope to the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus, Life of George Washington and Oliver Goldsmith: A Biography; in it Irving focuses on the life of Mahomet, beginning with a description of the land which gave birth to the Prophet and ending with his death. The second volume, which was hastily thrown together after the publication of the first and presented to the public in 1850, leaves the discussion of the Prophet behind, exploring instead the early spread of the Islamic empire. The book has little of the thematic focus of the first, and bears the marks of being rushed into print: it is a poorly organized collection of battles and intrigues, and shows virtually none of the "toning" which Irving is famous for.

But, though the first volume shows more polish than the second, it is far from successful. Although there are many aspects of the biography which could be examined this essay will focus on only one: the problems Irving has in

developing his central character, Mahomet. This is potentially the work's greatest weakness, since the Mahomet, like Irving's other biographies, is essentially a character study. In his final chapter, where he sums up his conclusions about the Prophet, Irving develops a pretty consistent portrait, one built around a Mahomet who is a sincere reformer, deluded by a belief in his own mission as a prophet. But in the rest of the book Irving's occasional lack of control over his tone and his materials affects the impressions made on his reader in a way which undermines that characterization. My essay will look at some of the specific ways in which Irving weakens the consistency of his portrait of the Prophet.

#### Structure

Because Mahomet and His Successors is not widely read, the remainder of the Introduction will provide a general overview of the work. The Discussion section will then focus on specific problems in Irving's development of Mahomet's character, beginning with "Irving's Mahomet," a summary of Irving's final assessment of Mahomet, against which the subsequent points will be gauged. The remainder of the Discussion will loosely follow the chronology of Mahomet's life. "The Christian Lens" begins with Irving's

discussion of pre-Islamic Arabia, then "Mahomet's Followers" takes up the discussion in the earliest days of his mission, as Mahomet is making his first converts. "The Invention of the Koran" deals with revelations which begin in these early days of the Prophet's career. Finally, "The Religion of the Sword" focuses on the period after the Moslem migration to Medina, and concludes with Mahomet's last days.

#### Place of Mahomet in Irving's Career

Stanley T. Williams suggests that Irving first began studying the life of Muhammad in 1826, during his first stay in Madrid (223-24). Although ostensibly working on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus, Irving was also compiling information for a number of other writings dealing with Spanish and Arabian history, including A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada, the "Chronicle of the Omniades," and the life of Mahomet (Irving's spelling, which will be used throughout). As early as 1827, Irving's journal indicates that he was at work on a biography of the Prophet (Pochmann and Feltskog 522). The work was far from complete when Irving left Spain for England in 1829, but he apparently kept at it sporadically, developing it in conjunction with a Spanish sketch book which took its final

form as The Alhambra. By 1831 he felt prepared to publish "The Legendary Life of Mahomet," though, as Pochmann and Feltskog point out, this hardly meant that the book was finished, even in Irving's eyes. Irving's letters to his publisher indicate that he seemed to count on doing quite a bit of revising when "it was returned to him in proof" (525). After a falling out with his usual publisher, Irving managed to place The Alhambra with a British firm, but made no further attempt at that time to publish the work on Mahomet.

Irving shelved his study of Mahomet until his return to Spain, as the U.S. ambassador, in 1842. Although at first his post kept him unexpectedly busy, he fell ill in 1843 and, as he himself indicates in his preface to Mahomet, found time to return to his biography on the Prophet. For the next few years he periodically worked on Mahomet and His Successors and, at the same time, on the Life of Washington (Pochmann and Feltskog 534). He had also at that time made arrangements to publish the book with George P. Putnam in New York, and did so in 1849. The second volume (which is not dealt with in this essay) was quickly thrown together and published in 1850 (Bowden 460).

This summary glance at the production of Irving's biography of Mahomet is sufficient to show that the work

cannot be neatly allocated to any single period of Irving's career. It was first begun only five years after Irving wrote Tales of a Traveller, yet was one of the last works he published in his lifetime, followed only by Wolfert's Roost and the Life of Washington. It does, however, most resemble Irving's other histories, in theme as well as in form. Mahomet and Columbus, for example, were both influenced by Romanticism. The Mahomet of Irving's biography bears some resemblance, as Pochmann and Feltskog indicate, to the Romantic Great Man archetype, the powerful personality capable of shaping history (538). To demonstrate this archetype, they cite Carlyle's depiction of Mahomet as a spark falling into the powder keg of Arabia, causing the nation to blaze "heaven-high from Delhi to Granada!" (542). But Irving's Mahomet also reflects the tragic side of Romance when, in the latter part of his career, he is corrupted, at least to some extent, by worldly power.

In his book, Washington Irving: An American Study, 1802-1832, William Hedges discusses the Romantic side of Life and Voyages of Columbus, and there are many points where the two works are thematically similar. Hedges identifies a Quixotic element in Irving's Columbus. One facet of this is brought out by Irving, according to



Hedges, through his emphasis of the explorer's piety; a religious Columbus is one whose goals go beyond seeking material wealth to finding a means "to the liberation of Jerusalem and the christianizing of the Grand Khan" (245). In these aspirations Irving's Columbus is clearly out of synch with reality. Irving's Mahomet is also led on by his religious ideals and a zeal for reform. Like Columbus, Mahomet is incapable of maintaining these ideals in their pristine state once the real world intrudes. The attainment of worldly power sullies the Prophet's motives and eventually causes him to declare the "Religion of the Sword."

But the works are most alike in their attempt to simplify the lives they deal with, to boil them down to their essential "meaning." However, the process is different, since Irving in the end idealizes Columbus, Quixotic though he may be, and so avoids careful analysis of motivation. Hedges points out that "Economic, social, political, and intellectual considerations are not investigated." Columbus's arrest by the Portuguese after his first voyage is therefore reduced to yet another form of the "opposition" the hero must overcome as part of his quest, and secondary characters are likewise seen on a virtually allegorical level, as "representatives of the

same force, the principle of evil, which ruins paradises and stains the careers of the best of men" (250).

Mahomet, on the other hand, cannot be idealized to the same extent as Columbus. Columbus is a national hero, and Irving can more or less accept the legends which surround him. On the other hand, accepting Mahomet at face value would mean accepting a Prophet who denied many of the teachings of Irving's own Christianity. Since he clearly cannot accept Mahomet at face value, he must delve into other motivations for the Prophet's actions, as well as find "rational" explanations for the events of his life. But if Irving's Mahomet is less allegorical than his Columbus, the Mahomet still boils down to a character study, and the final assessment of the Prophet does have didactic overtones: Mahomet was corrupted as soon as he moved away from Christian doctrine.

#### Overview of Mahomet and His Successors

Irving's biography begins with a general overview of the land and the people which produced the Prophet. Although the "Preliminary notice of Arabia and the Arabs" chapter could be read as just a general introduction, Irving's purpose is much more specific. The discussion of the Arabs becomes more than mere background, because it

lays the foundations for Mahomet and for the spread of Islam; it establishes Carlyle's powder keg, a necessary step for a secular biography of the Prophet. So Irving focuses on the strength of character of the Arabs, and even more on their militaristic tendencies. "The necessity of being always on the alert to defend his flocks," writes Irving, "made the Arab of the desert familiar from his infancy with the exercise of arms" (9). Irving later capitalizes on this characterization when he explains the popularity of Mahomet's doctrines, since the "religion of the sword" is bound to appeal to a people inured to violence.

Irving also takes time in the first few chapters of the biography to describe the religious climate in Arabia, beginning with the predominant faiths, the Sabeian and the Magian, and going on to consider the introduction of Judaism and Christianity to the peninsula. This discussion again provides the necessary conditions for Mahomet's introduction of Islam, since the doctrines of the Prophet are closely related to those of the Jews and Christians. Irving is making it clear that Mahomet had ample opportunity to explore these faiths. Even his discussion of the ancient religions carefully makes the point that they had degenerated from an essentially monotheistic form

to the "idolatry" of Mahomet's day, and so helps set the stage for the Arabs' acceptance of the Prophet's doctrines. Irving covers the practices of the Meccan Arabs and the traditions surrounding the Caaba, of which Mahomet's family were guardians, in a similar fashion, showing the parallels between them and Islam.

From this point on Irving's organization is essentially chronological, though he does at times interrupt his narrative to explore related issues. For example, at one point he outlines the basic doctrines of Islam, while elsewhere he discusses the various sects of Christianity which Mahomet may have been familiar with. But even though Irving's format is essentially chronological, the biography does not consist of a mere listing of incidents. Irving attempts to link the events of the Prophet's life thematically by focusing on the development of his character and his evolution into a Prophet. So Irving's discussion of Mahomet's early childhood establishes his intelligence and places him in situations where he could learn of the monotheistic faiths, such as his encounter with a Nestorian monk on a journey to Syria. As Mahomet grows older, Irving traces his gradual shift from merchant to mystic. The prophet-to-be is shown questioning and then condemning with the religious

practices of his contemporaries, and withdrawing into the hills for contemplation. This withdrawal from society, combined with the religious ideas he had discovered in his travels, prepare him for the revelation, brought to him by the angel Gabriel, with which he begins his crusade of reformation.

Thus begins the first part of Mahomet's career. Irving is fairly glowing in his treatment of the Prophet during his early days in Mecca. Most of the Prophet's family turn against him when he begins preaching, though his wife, Cadijah, who had first employed and then married him, is an ardent supporter. She is, in fact, the first convert to the new faith. As a result of his preaching, Mahomet falls from his former position in society which, as a member of Mecca's leading family, had been quite high. Though tensions exist in this portrait, Irving is, for the most part, an admirer of Mahomet.

Although Irving does not totally abandon his favorable reading of the Prophet, a definite turning point is reached when Mahomet is forced to flee his native Mecca for Medina, where he finds a virtual army awaiting him. From this point on Irving is clearly disturbed by much of what Mahomet does. Permission is given to the Moslems to fight, and they begin attacking Meccan caravans almost

immediately. But even as his worldly influence grows, Irving's portrait of Mahomet remains generally sympathetic. Religious reform is still the Prophet's primary motive, as is highlighted when he and his followers return to Mecca and show clemency to their one-time tormentors, focusing their anger instead on the idols in the Caaba.

Irving concludes the first volume of Mahomet and His Successors with a summary discussion of Mahomet's character. In "Person and character of Mahomet, and speculations about his prophetic career," Irving tries to pull all the threads of his biography together, covering the Prophet's personality, physical characteristics and, more importantly, the questions of imposture often raised concerning him. Although Irving here defends Mahomet, he does reiterate his discomfort with the Prophet's military career. The tensions which keep Irving from resolving these seemingly contradictory attitudes will be discussed in detail below.

Irving's appendix to this first volume is an extension of his earlier discussion of Islam. Although plagued by misunderstandings and confused facts, the fairly extensive discussion here covers not only the doctrines of the faith, but also elements of its daily practice. This appendix serves as both summation of the first volume, and as a

bridge to the second volume; once Mahomet is dead, it is this faith that drives his followers to the attainment of empire.

#### General Assessment

Mahomet and His Successors has, for good reason, received little positive critical response. The Literary History of the United States pauses only long enough to call it "third-rate" (251). Recently, only three critical works have dealt with the biography at any length, all of them dissertations. Layla Abed al Salam AlFarsy's study of Irving's sources is the only one which explores only the Mahomet. Hassan Mekouar discusses the book as part of Irving's work with Arab sources, and Elsie West explores it along with the other biographies. Even when first published, though popular and received well by some critics, the Mahomet had its unfavorable reviews (Pochman, Feltskog 554-55). Despite the length of time Irving spent writing it, the work is often sloppy, especially when compared to the Life and Voyages of Columbus and the Life of Washington. Both Pochman and Feltskog and Williams complain of Irving's careless use of source material, omission of documentation, and, at times, what approaches outright plagiarism. Irving borrows freely from his

sources: Williams addresses the indebtedness of Irving's telling of Mahomet's domestic squabbles to Gustav Weil's biography (225). Pochman and Feltskog more thoroughly discuss his use of secondary sources and his questionable integration of them into his own work, citing such plagiarisms as the appendix on Islam, which they attribute almost completely to George Sale's notes to his translation of the Koran (541). They also point out passages attributed by Irving to various Arab historians, passages he most likely picked up from Jean Gagnier's biography of the Prophet, but which he neglected to attribute to his source, "thus allowing the assumption that these citations were discoveries or redactions of his own" (536). Similar problems are fatal to the second volume, which disintegrates into a quiltwork of battles and intrigues held together, if at all, by the loosest of organizations. Irving merely patches together information gleaned from his reading, without thoroughly integrating it.

Of course, the casual reader would not be likely to concern himself or herself with Irving's sources, and it seems clear from the biography's impressive printing history that it was popular among the general public, though Pochman and Feltskog attribute a part of the work's popularity to Irving's own reputation and to its frequent



publication as a part of his complete works (555). Nevertheless, this first volume is fairly enjoyable reading, though it does not rank high when compared to his other works. If this were not Irving, it might be acceptable as it stands. But it is Irving, and as any serious reader of his other work will notice, it is not Irving up-to-par. Not only are his sources more sloppily handled than in his other major biographies, he also seems to have little of the incredible control of tone he evinces elsewhere, especially in his sketches. The lack of a Knickerbocker, Crayon, or Agapida to add flavor to the text is a problem for Pochman and Feltskog, and they rejoice in the few moments where Irving allows a flash of humor to slip into his narrative (553). This is understandable, since Irving is so well known for his humor. But here his subject matter is not humorous, nor is it his intent to write a satire of the Prophet's career. So when he does let his wit slip into his biography, wit which occasionally verges on mockery, it often confuses a work already fraught with contradictions. But this point will be discussed at greater length below.

Still, the Mahomet is worth looking at for several reasons. First of all, it functions as part of a projected series of works on Arab history which, in the Preface to

Mahomet, Irving refers to having considered and then abandoned (3). Although this series may not have taken shape as he had initially planned, Irving did produce a number of works dealing with Arabian themes, including The Alhambra, The Conquest of Granada, and even a play based on a tale from the Arabian Nights, Abu Hassan. With Mahomet and His Successors the reader can see Irving coming to terms with the core of his Arabian material, the Arab Prophet. The work is also one of four full-length biographies Irving wrote, along with the aforementioned Columbus and Washington, as well as Oliver Goldsmith. One cannot deal with Irving as a biographer, or as a historian, for that matter, without a thorough survey of even his less successful works, since with each he is grappling with different problems, and finding, with varying degrees of success, solutions to those problems. The Mahomet, though far from perfect, does illustrate Irving's attempt to deal with one of the "hot topics" of the day: Islam and its Prophet. In the Foreword to his Mohammed, Maxime Rodinson, author of one of the better modern biographies of the Prophet, discusses some of the problems faced by the biographer approaching Mahomet. These problems include the number of contradictory and unreliable traditions, the lack of evidence dating back to the Prophet's lifetime, and

getting beyond one's own ideology (Rodinson is an atheist). These are among the very problems which faced Irving, and though he was less successful than Rodinson in the end, it is interesting to see the attempt, and to try and understand where it falls short of its goal of developing a unified portrait of a very complex historical figure.

## DISCUSSION

## Irving's Mahomet

Irving clearly admires his Mahomet. He begins his closing discussion of "characteristics" with a flattering physical portrait, and describes Mahomet's "deportment" as "calm and equable; [Mahomet] sometimes indulged in pleasantries, but more commonly was grave and dignified; though he is said to have possessed a smile of captivating sweetness." Irving goes on to praise Mahomet's intellect, including qualities such as "quick apprehension, a retentive memory, a vivid imagination, and an inventive genius." As mentioned in the General Overview, Irving's establishment of Mahomet's intelligence is important to his character's evolution into a Prophet. Mahomet's "vivid imagination" and "inventive genius" will allow him to create the Koran. His "quick apprehension" and "retentive memory" will allow him to gather the materials for that work from his encounters with the faiths practiced by his fellow Arabs.

Another attribute which Irving admires is the simplicity of Mahomet's diet and lifestyle, though he is less encouraged by Mahomet's inclination toward women:

"His passion for the sex had an influence over all his affairs." Mahomet is frequently shown being influenced by beautiful women, a trait Irving seems to find quite amusing. He relishes in the stories of the Prophet's acquisition of wives, nor does he seem to be in any way scandalized by them.

An element of Mahomet's character which Irving considers a bit more admirable is his fairness:

He treated friends and strangers, the rich and poor, the powerful and the weak, with equity. . . . He was naturally irritable, but had brought his temper under great control, so that even in the self-indulgent intercourse of domestic life he was kind and tolerant. (331)

Irving's Mahomet is, to this point, a pretty admirable character, and pretty consistently so. But Irving is faced with a serious problem; if Mahomet is, in fact, a respectable, likable, even admirable man, how could he be the power-hungry fraud that many Christian writers (such as George Sale) accuse him of being? And if he is not a great charlatan, does it follow that Irving must accept him as a prophet? Irving is clearly unprepared to do this; his own cultural and religious biases are too strong. In the end, he is faced with the task of finding the middle ground between these extremes.

In dealing with the question of imposture, Irving

first argues against the notion that Mahomet created Islam to gain worldly power. This is handled fairly easily by reflecting on Mahomet's already high position as a member of the powerful Koreish family. When he first began propagating his doctrines, which were in direct opposition to the polytheistic faith of his tribe, he drew "on himself the hostility of his kindred, the indignation of his fellow-citizens, and the horror and odium of all his countrymen . . ." (196). This fall from his formerly high position, combined with the persecution the early Moslems encountered, removed for Irving the possibility that Mahomet created Islam to gain material advantages. "Why should he persist for years in a course of imposture which was thus prostrating all his worldly fortunes . . .?" (196).

In fact, Irving here focuses on Mahomet's sincerity--reminding the reader of the Prophet's "enthusiastic and visionary spirit" and of the "temporary delirium" he experienced from time to time, brought on by "solitude, fasting, prayer, and meditation, and irritated by bodily disease" (196). This "delirium" explains for Irving the state in which Mahomet received revelation, and he concludes that "he believed in the reality of the dream or vision" he received in that state (196). In other words, Irving's Mahomet, though not a prophet, sincerely

believed he was receiving revelation. This characterization is especially acceptable to Irving because Mahomet's early teaching is quite close to Christianity in many ways, and so, for Irving, partakes of the sublime. It is in the later revelations, primarily those received after the migration to Medina, that Irving begins discovering "contradictions," such as the move away from pure pacifism (what Irving would call the declaration of the "religion of the sword") and the fact that the divine commands frequently came in response to particular circumstances. In the end, he is led to the conclusion that from the arrival at Medina "worldy schemes too often give the impulse to [Mahomet's] actions, instead of that visionary enthusiasm which . . . threw a glow of piety on his earlier deeds" (197).

Irving suggests two explanations for this shift in the tone of revelation: First, Mahomet himself may have begun consciously inventing doctrines, a conclusion which it is difficult to reconcile with his earlier sincerity. Second, in a brief discussion of the Koran itself, Irving theorized that the current text contains additions and errors. In his discussion of imposture he can therefore suggest that the revelations which seem to him improper for one reason or another may not have been presented by Mahomet as

revelation, but rather may have been mistaken to be such by his followers. The fact that Irving goes to such pains to protect the character of the Prophet is telling; the author clearly respects his subject, and wants his reader to share that respect. Nevertheless, it is clear that Irving is dismayed by the worldly power which Mahomet did acquire after reaching Medina, but he still doesn't portray the prophet as a power seeker. Instead, Irving focuses on the simplicity of Mahomet's lifestyle even after material wealth began to pour in. He points out that when Mahomet died he

did not leave a golden dinar or a silver dirhem, a slave nor a slave girl, nor any thing but his gray mule Daldal, his arms, and the ground which he bestowed upon his wives, his children, and the poor. (199)

Irving concludes the "Person and Character" chapter with yet another defense of the Prophet against claims of fraud:

It is difficult to reconcile such ardent, persevering piety, with an incessant system of blasphemous imposture; nor such pure and elevated and benignant precepts as are contained in the Koran, with a mind haunted by ignoble passions, and devoted to the groveling interests of mere mortality; and we find no other satisfactory mode of solving the enigma of his character and conduct, than by supposing that the ray of mental hallucination which flashed upon his enthusiastic spirit during his religious ecstasies in the midnight cavern of Mount Hara, continued more or less to bewilder him with a species of monomania to the end of his career, and that he died in the delusive belief of his mission as a prophet. (200)



So this is Irving's Mahomet: a sincere reformer who convinces himself that he is receiving revelations from above, who sticks closely to his Christian sources in the early part of his career but who, once worldly influence is achieved, loses sight of those ideals. But even in this latter part of his career, Irving's Mahomet is sincere, maintaining his own simple lifestyle and religious zealotry. What difficulties Irving has with his material he himself recognizes and attempts to reconcile. The way in which later sections of the Koran come in reaction to actual events is attributed to later interpolations, thus reconciling them to Mahomet's clear sincerity. This Mahomet isn't riddled with inconsistencies, nor does the portrait reveal any more confusion in Irving than any other "objective" biographer of the Prophet (note, for example, Maxime Rodinson's biography, which reaches many of the same conclusions Irving does). Despite elements Irving admits he can't reconcile, there is an attempt to hold the characterization together with Mahomet's religious zeal and the sincerity he showed in his actions. But this is not the Mahomet which the reader always sees in the body of the biography itself.

### The Christian Lens

Some of Irving's difficulty may stem largely from his own Christian background; as mentioned above, much of the early progress of Islam can be likened to that of Christianity. But the permission to fight given after the arrival in Medina moves away from Irving's Christian ideal. The intrusion of Christian references is a significant distraction from the development of Irving's Mahomet because it runs the risk of again and again reminding the reader that Mahomet is, to the orthodox Christian, an heretic. This begins in the earliest pages of the biography, as Irving describes the history and the characteristics of the pre-Islamic Arabs. Both Biblical and Qur-anic sources trace the Arabs back to Ishmael, the son of Abraham. So Irving's similar genealogy isn't problematic, at least not until he ends his discussion of his nomadic, war-like Arabs with the following summary:

Such was the Arab of the desert, the dweller in tents, in whom was fulfilled the Prophetic destiny of his ancestor Ishmael. "His hand will be against every man, and every man's against him." (25)

Although the reference here to Genesis is intended to describe the Arabs before the advent of Islam, to Irving's audience it could also foreshadow the coming of Mahomet;

Irving's audience was, after all, a Western one, and in the West Islam had been stereotyped as the "religion of the sword." Irving himself reflects this attitude later in the biography. In this case, the "wild man" foreseen by the Bible could easily be interpreted as referring to Mahomet, whether this was Irving's intention or not.

The intrusion of Irving's own Christianity has other, though less ominous, ramifications. Early in the biography, as in the "Person and Character" chapter, Irving draws parallels between Islam and Christianity, and bends over backward to show that Mahomet would have been both exposed to the latter, and capable of absorbing it and transforming those creeds into his own faith. Most of the time this is not distracting; Irving's Mahomet does, after all, begin his career as a reformer who attacked the idolatrous practices of his society because of the insights gained from his experiences with monotheistic faiths, including Christianity. But at other times the comparisons seem meaningless; they don't help Irving trace doctrine, rather they simply remind the reader of the author's own Christian (or, more precisely, his Judeo-Christian) background. For example, he compares the Haschem family, who were responsible for maintenance of the Caaba, to the Levites, who cared for the temple at Jerusalem (15). He

also compares Mount Hara, where Mahomet received revelation, to Sinai (37). Mahomet also chooses, according to Irving, twelve apostles, "in imitation, it is supposed, of our Saviour" (73).

More misleading than these, because it actually confuses Moslem doctrine with the inaccurate intrusion of the Christian, is his recounting of a story of Mahomet's childhood. When the Prophet was living with the tribe of his wet-nurse, he was visited by an angel, who removed his heart and "cleansed it from all impurity, wringing from it the black and bitter drops of original sin . . ." (17). This is a claim Irving's Arab sources, or the Arab sources of his sources, would not have made, since Muslim theology does not include the concept of original sin. None of these references to Christianity contribute to Irving's study of Mahomet. Not only are they not necessary, they actually run the risk of reminding the reader of Mahomet-as-heretic, a position which Irving himself does not take.

This is not to say that all references to Christianity are inappropriate. Irving finds a lot to respect in Mahomet largely because of his use of Christian doctrines. This is most evident in the early part of the Prophet's career, when his teachings most closely paralleled those of

Christ. Yet, even though Irving seems to look favorably on Mahomet's early creed, the author still seems to feel a need to taint the early stages of the Prophet's career by disparaging those who converted to the new faith.

#### Mahomet's Followers

The first person to accept Mahomet's mission was his wife, Cadijah. According to Irving's Arab sources, she was aware of the Prophet's unique qualities even before their marriage. Typically enough, these sources use a miracle to make their point, and Irving can't resist letting his wit slip into his handling of the event in a way that is potentially damaging to the reader's view of Mahomet. The miracle occurs when Cadijah is just beginning to feel a romantic inclination toward her younger employee. "According to Arabian legends," Irving writes, "a miracle occurred most opportunely to confirm and sanctify the bias of her inclinations." As Mahomet returns with one of Cadijah's caravans, she sees two angels shading him from the sun. She turns to her handmaids, saying "'Behold . . . the beloved of Allah, who sends two angels to watch over him!'" So far so good; Irving has already pointed out the source of this legend, and so has already informed the reader that this is not a piece of information he accepts

wholeheartedly. But he can't resist a bit of irony:  
"Whether or not the handmaidens looked forth with the same eyes of devotion as their mistress, and likewise discerned the angels, the legend does not mention" (27). This last goes beyond its function of pointing out the unreliability of the source and having a little fun with the story; it transfers some of its humor onto Cadijah herself. She is, after all, seeing through the eyes of her devotion something which her companions may not see. Not only does this unnecessarily disparage Cadijah, but there is also an essential breakdown in Irving's logic. Irving is trying to do two things at once: make light of a legend from an Arab source and question Cadijah's objectivity. But can he have it both ways? If the story is considered unreliable, then undercutting Cadijah through it does not seem practical. Although Irving does need to explain the savvy woman's acceptance of her husband's mission, that hardly seems to be his intent here. It seems more likely that he was simply unable to resist a satiric comment, without considering its ramifications on his work.

When Mahomet tells his wife of his first revelation, Irving finds another opportunity to question Cadijah's objectivity, this time much more directly. Though Mahomet himself doubts the reality of his first encounter with

Gabriel, Cadijah immediately confirms his call to prophethood. But, as Irving is careful to point out, this is done with the "eye of faith, and the credulity of an affectionate woman" (32). Although Irving's discussion of the events leading up to this first revelation focused on the intensity of Mahomet's spiritual quest (including his study of Christianity) and on the Prophet's sincerity, Irving feels the need to rather harshly disparage this first convert to the new faith. In an equally sexist way, he also takes a poke at others among Mahomet's early followers: "[His teachings] found favor among the people at large, especially among the women, who are ever prone to befriend a persecuted cause" (37).

Mahomet's later converts don't fare much better. Although many are shown accepting Mahomet's mission after an act of mercy or generosity on his part, the rapid spread of the faith after the arrival in Medina is, even when it cannot be attributed to the use of the sword, likewise explained in unflattering terms:

The idolatrous tribes of Arabia were easily converted to a faith which flattered their predatory inclinations with the hope of spoil, and which, after all, professed but to bring them back to the primitive religion of their ancestors . . . . (102)

Irving does allow a positive aspect of Mahomet's doctrines

some position in this explanation; the Arabs are said to be drawn back to their original faith, identified above as that of Abraham. And the statement which prefaces this again takes direct aim at the nature of those who chose to follow the Prophet. They are "idolatrours" and are said to be drawn more by the chance at war and spoils than by the faith itself. The accumulated effect of statements like this, and those mentioned above, is not as simple as mere explanation of why Mahomet found support. They come close to implying that he and his ideas were not, in themselves, sufficient to draw the Arabs to him. Even his own wife, after all, is not allowed to support him without being called credulous. Although Irving may not intentionally be detracting from the Prophet's character, that is ultimately the effect he has. If Mahomet, despite the strength of personality and the sincere desire for religious reform which the author has attributed to him, cannot find support by means of those qualities, then they begin to come into question. But this doesn't seem to be Irving's intent, especially when Mahomet is viewed from the perspective of the "Person and Character" chapter. The seeds of Irving's respect for the Prophet are sown in the early part of Mahomet's career. If Irving's reader is to share that respect, then undermining those early days by making light of the Prophet's followers is hardly productive.



## Miracles and Wonders

From the time of Mahomet's birth, and even before, Irving's Arab sources surround the Prophet with miracle after miracle. The skepticism Irving feels toward these wonders is made very clear by his so persistently undercutting them that the reader is left with a sense of amused condescension, a feeling which runs the risk of tainting the character of Mahomet himself.

Examples of this occur early in the book, when Irving describes the events with which his Arab writers surround the birth and infancy of Mahomet. In the beginning of this section, Irving undermines these miracles, first with the tone of his writing: "Heaven and earth, we are assured, were agitated at his advent" (emphasis here and below added). Again, shortly after: "The relatives of the new-born child, say the like authorities, were filled with awe and wonder" (16). Here, and elsewhere, the "authorities" are disparaged, and therefore the miracles attributed to their reports, by the careful pointing out of their unreliability--in the first example, by the sarcasm of the interjection, and in the second by the reference to the earlier disparaging tone. Identifying the unreliability of his sources is also done more directly. "Such are the marvelous accounts given by Moslem writers of

"Such are the marvelous accounts given by Moslem writers of the infancy of Mahomet," Irving writes, "and we have little else than similar fables about his early years" (16). Here Irving is explicit; he identifies his source and its unreliability. Tone still plays a role; note such word choices as "marvelous" and "fable." In the space of three pages eight of these disparaging references intrude on Irving's narrative, frequently with this same, almost mocking, tone. The accumulated effect of these references hardly increases the reader's respect for Mahomet. But these examples hurt the Prophet only indirectly; not accepting everything his sources say is not, after all, the same as attacking the Prophet directly. But there are places where Irving comes dangerously close to crossing the line between laughing at his sources and laughing at his subject. For example, when he relates the angelic visitation during which "original sin" was washed from Mahomet's heart (mentioned above), he includes the following anecdote:

At his supernatural visitation, it is added, was impressed between the shoulders of the child the seal of prophecy, which continued throughout life the symbol and credential of his divine mission; though unbelievers saw nothing in it but a large mole, the size of a pigeon's egg. (18)

This is very nearly outright mockery, and comes particularly close to going beyond making light of the legend to disparaging Mahomet himself. It is places like this where Irving's approach to miracles hurts the cohesiveness of his portrait the most. When discussing Mahomet's escape from an assassination attempt, he again begins with the miraculous version given by his sources, then goes on to say that the "most probable account is, that he clambered over the wall in the rear of the house, by the help of a servant, who bent his back for him to step upon it" (76). Not only does the humor of this passage undermine the dignified demeanor Irving elsewhere gives the Prophet, but the idea of Mahomet stepping on the back of a servant in order to escape is hardly one designed to gain sympathy or respect from an egalitarian audience, who might not approve of having servants at all, let alone stepping on them.

Irving does occasionally try to deflect from Mahomet the effect of his attack on these miracles. After one listing of miraculous events, he goes on to say that "the miracles here recorded are not to be found in the pages of the accurate Abulfeda, nor are they maintained by any of the graver Moslem writers. . . . It will be remembered that [Mahomet] himself claimed but one miracle, 'the

Koran'" (56). There are even instances when Mahomet refuses to claim miracles. On one occasion, after an eclipse at the time of his son's death, Mahomet's followers immediately call the event a miracle; Mahomet, however, insists that it was not. "'The sun and moon,' said he, 'are among the wonders of God, through which at times he signifies his will to his servants; but their eclipse has nothing to do either with the birth or death of any mortal'" (177). The fact that Irving's Mahomet never claimed any miracles himself becomes, in these instances, a saving grace. But at another point, Mahomet's refusal to work wonders is unfavorably colored, again by Irving's intrusive sense of humor. When the Meccans, joined by some of Mahomet's own followers, began demanding that he prove his mission by turning the hill of Safa to gold, the Prophet "produced" a verse of the Koran, which warned that if God turned Safa to gold

all who disbelieved it would be exterminated. In pity to the multitude, therefore, who appeared to be a stiff-necked generation, he would not expose them to destruction: so the hill of Safa was permitted to remain in its pristine state. (47)

The sarcasm is blatant. Here Irving's Mahomet comes dangerously close to being the charlatan which Irving elsewhere insists he is not--he is backed into a corner,

and invents a verse to cover himself. There are two major problems with this story. First of all, although Irving has elsewhere praised Mahomet for refusing to perform miracles, the tone of this passage is far from flattering. Secondly, Irving has had Mahomet invent a verse from the Koran, despite the fact that Irving has elsewhere focused on Mahomet's sincerity. But here and elsewhere Irving contradicts this position by showing Mahomet consciously inventing verses throughout his career.

#### The Invention of the Koran

The opportunistic invention of verses is a recurring theme in the Mahomet. Even though the discussion of the development of the Prophet's personality focuses on the intensity of his spiritual quest and the resulting "paroxysms" which supposedly convinced him of his mission, Irving effectively erases this portrait by again and again showing Mahomet inventing parts of the Koran to suit his own whims. The effect of this is magnified by the intrusive humor which has caused Irving trouble elsewhere.

This is least problematic where Irving simply describes the Prophet producing verses as a reply to circumstances. When his detractors demand miracles, "The reply of Mahomet may be gathered from his own words in the

Koran . . ." (46). When the Moslems are taunted with the defeat of the monotheistic Greeks by the polytheistic Persians, Mahomet "replied to their taunts and exultations, by producing the thirtieth chapter of the Koran . . ." (57). Though they contradict the portrait later developed, they are not consciously mocking or accusative. They simply assume that Mahomet was writing the Koran.

Similarly, when Irving quotes from an early verse which links Islam to the ancient patriarchal faith of Abraham, he omits the word "say" from the verse. In Irving's work, it therefore reads:

We follow . . . the religion of Abraham the orthodox, who was no idolater. We believe in God and that which hath been sent down to us . . . and that which was delivered unto the Prophets from the Lord: we make no distinction between any of them, and to God we are resigned. (39)

In the A. Yusuf Ali translation of the Qur'an, as well as in the translation by George Sale which Irving used, each "we" in the passage is prefaced with the command "say," so that the verse reads as a series of proclamations which God asks the Muslims to make. Removing the "say" shifts the passage into first person plural, so that its statements are being made, not by God, but by Mahomet and his followers. Although Irving's motives for the omission may not be sinister, he does later make the point that the Koran was presented as "the very words of God" (39). But

by removing the imperative, Irving presents the quoted verse not as a divine command, but rather as a statement of belief from Mahomet himself. The contradiction seems obvious, and even such casual alterations, when taken with the problems discussed just above, begin to create tension within Irving's characterization: Mahomet is in places deluded; elsewhere he is consciously deluding others. This tension increases when Irving's tendency towards wit intrudes, attributing even baser motives than self-defense to the Prophet. An example is Mahomet's supposed use of the Koran to justify his own romantic inclinations.

The interest Irving's Mahomet takes in women has been mentioned above, and is consistent with the "Person and Character" chapter. Although he dwells on the Prophet's loyalty to his first wife, Cadijah, Irving delights in descriptions of Mahomet's susceptibility to desire after her death. For the most part this is done good-naturedly, and Irving makes it clear on many occasions that Mahomet was, despite his wandering eye, devoted to his family. When the Prophet is shown displaying his passion for women, the tone usually remains light; this is no tragic flaw. But when Irving's Mahomet uses the Koran to facilitate his love life, no lightness of tone can mediate the damage to his character. For example, when Mahomet's eye fell on the

wife of his follower Zeid, the devout Moslem divorced her, despite the protestations of the Prophet. Mahomet eventually married the woman, Zeinab. But the community at large almost immediately decried the marriage as incestuous because Zeid was Mahomet's son by adoption. "At this critical juncture," writes Irving, "was revealed that part of the thirty-third chapter of the Koran, distinguishing relatives by adoption from relatives by blood . . . . This timely revelation pacified the faithful . . ." (112). Since Zeid was an adopted son, the marriage was not incestuous and was allowed to stand. The Mahomet who would invent a message from God to allow himself marriage in such circumstances seems hardly compatible with the zealous religious reformer of "Person and Character" who, if he deluded anyone, deluded himself.

Irving goes on to have Mahomet use the Koran for even more unseemly purposes: first, to punish a man who accused Mahomet's wife Ayesha of adultery, and then to allow himself a concubine. Irving does try to color these incidents in such a way that Mahomet is not vilified. Irving shows the loneliness of the Prophet when he is separated from Ayesha, and he has elsewhere emphasized Mahomet's love for this woman, so when revelation comes to bring them together again, the reader can sympathize. This



revelation also comes in a "paroxysm of grief" (116). The reader could believe that Mahomet is not consciously inventing this verse, since these paroxysms are elsewhere described as a symptom of Mahomet's self-delusion. When Mahomet is kept from taking a concubine by "his own law in the seventeenth chapter of the Koran," and is "relieved from his dilemma, by another revelation revoking the law in regard to himself alone" (133), one would expect Irving to be scandalized. But if he is, he does not show it; the incident is dealt with briefly, with little comment. In neither of these incidents does Irving pause to condemn the Prophet, as he later does when the "religion of the sword" is declared. But these stories are fairly shocking, and the mere inclusion of them, despite the fact that they are not likely a part of the "accurate Abulfeda," inevitably undermines Mahomet's sincerity.

Irving also takes great pleasure in narrating one of the Prophet's domestic squabbles and the way in which it was resolved by revelation. Here Irving the humorist again takes over, as he describes Mahomet being caught by one of his wives while with his concubine, Mariyah. Despite Mahomet's promise to stay away from Mariyah, word of the scandal is leaked to the other wives, who "united in a storm of reproaches," leading him to "renounce all

intercourse" with them (172). So far, so good. But the humor used to describe this situation does not have the same effect when it carries over into discussion of revelation: "Allah, at length, in consideration of his lonely state, sent down the first and sixth chapters of the Koran, absolving him from the oath respecting Mariyah, who forthwith became the companion of his solitary chamber" (172). Again Mahomet is using the Koran to enable his physical appetites, and the tone of this statement, the humor of which holds over from the rest of the tale, makes Mahomet an almost farcical character.

The discussion to this point has focused primarily on the early days of Mahomet's mission. Irving's respect for the Mahomet of this period is relatively unqualified, yet there are still contradictions and problems with tone which undercut that respect. After the Hegira, or flight to Medina, and the subsequent declaration of the "religion of the sword," Irving does temper his portrait somewhat; he cannot feel comfortable with the Prophet's shift from pure pacifism. Irving still attempts to reconcile what he sees as disparate sides of Mahomet, but he does so unsuccessfully.

### The Religion of the Sword

Much of Irving's difficulty in reconciling the two halves of Mahomet's career may be the result of his own Christian lens. The parallels between the Meccan revelation and the precepts of Irving's Christianity are obvious, but the permission to fight given in Medina just as obviously obviously contradicts the pacifism of the Gospels. Irving acknowledges the difficulty of his task, but still tries to reconcile this shift in creed with the earlier form of Islam. The following passage is virtually an apology for the Prophet's new views on fighting, and as such attempts to salvage Mahomet's character from this shift:

His human nature was not capable of maintaining the sublime forbearance he had hitherto inculcated. Thirteen years of meek endurance had been rewarded by nothing but aggravated injury and insult. His greatest persecutors had been those of his own tribe . . . . By their virulent hostility his fortunes had been blasted; his family degraded, impoverished, and dispersed, and he himself driven into exile. All this he might have continued to bear with involuntary meekness, had not the means of retaliation unexpectedly sprung up within his reach. (87)

The focus of this passage is on the incredible hardship faced by Mahomet in Mecca and the way in which his entire life had been changed by his mission. But while the

passage seems to be aimed at helping the reader to sympathize with the Prophet, Irving is working at cross purposes. In order to make Mahomet understandable, he must focus on justifying his desire for revenge. Yet, however well he does that, the fact remains that the motive he is attributing to the Prophet is revenge. Although Irving chooses such words as "prosecutors" and "virulent hostility" to cast the Koreishites into a bad light, "retaliation" is named as one of Mahomet's motives in this latter part of his career. Even more damaging to the pious sincerity of Mahomet is the implication that the "sublime forbearance" of his behavior in Mecca stemmed not from his faith, but rather from his lack of power; it was an "involuntary meekness." But does the beginning of this passage contain in it the seed for this conclusion? The "sublime forbearance" and the "involuntary meekness" seem to imply very different motives for Mahomet, and hence very different Mahomets.

Shortly after the passage just discussed, Irving again seems to have forgotten what he has just said. After attributing Mahomet's forbearance in Mecca to weakness, he again reverses himself by re-emphasizing the Prophet's religious zeal: "Human passions and mortal resentments were awakened by this sudden accession of power. They mingled

with that zeal for religious reform, which was still his predominant motive" (87). Although the first part of this is consistent with what has just been said, Irving is again pointing to religion as the motivating force in Mahomet's life. The "still" implies that it was such in Mecca, when he was supposedly refraining from violence only because he hadn't the power to do otherwise. In the space of less than a paragraph, Irving has twice reversed himself.

Irving also allows his humor to intrude on this part of his discussion. The contrast in tone as Mahomet arrives in Medina is confusing. As the Prophet enters the city, Irving relates that most of the crowd awaiting him "had never seen Mahomet, and paid reverence to Abu Beker through mistake; but the latter put aside the screen of palm-leaves, and pointed out the real object of homage, who was greeted with loud acclamations." There immediately follows: "In this way did Mahomet, so recently a fugitive from his native city . . . enter Medina, more as a conqueror in triumph than an exile seeking asylum" (78-79). The entrance in which Mahomet is likened in summation to "a conqueror in triumph" is not described in those terms; the picture Irving paints initially is that of a man most of his followers did not even recognize. The words "object of homage" become laughable; the crowd seems willing to heap

praise on anyone. Mahomet is again split in two; he is both a "conquerer in triumph" and an object of gentle mockery.

This becomes the pattern of Irving's treatment of Mahomet for the remainder of the biography. He is shown as a leader of bandits and as a merciful conqueror, as a man motivated by vengeance and as a Prophet motivated by religious zeal. Irving continues to use his intrusive humor when quoting Arab sources, humor which inevitably casts a shadow on Mahomet. Irving also continues to casually attribute passages of the Koran to the Prophet. While Mahomet is quoted above as wanting to retaliate against the Korieshites for their persecution of him, Irving's treatment of the conquest of Mecca makes it clear that his motivations are religious. As the Prophet approaches death, Irving's sympathies for him surface more regularly, and the sincere man of faith again dominates the portrait. But this final move toward consistency is not enough to override the difficulties Irving has had earlier. In the end, his characterization is incoherent and frequently confusing. Although the reader may leave the biography sensing that Irving respects Mahomet, he or she may wonder why.

## CONCLUSION

In the chapter entitled "Person and character of Mahomet, and speculations on his Prophetic career," Washington Irving sums up his characterization of the Prophet of Islam. Although there are aspects of Mahomet's character which Irving admits are difficult to reconcile, the portrait here is fairly consistent. Mahomet is a sincere and brilliant religious reformer who comes to believe he is a prophet. He creates a faith from the forms of Christianity and Judaism practiced in his native Arabia, and faces great persecution to spread that faith. But when Irving's Mahomet suddenly finds the means to worldly power at his hands, the sublimity of his teachings is tarnished, and he declares the "religion of the sword." But even this later Mahomet is primarily moved by sincere religious zeal. That zeal, and the sincerity of Mahomet himself, is the glue that holds Irving's portrait together.

But Irving's biography often contradicts or undermines that characterization. For one thing, Irving's own Christian background often intrudes on his work in a way that is potentially confusing. Although Irving himself never takes the Medieval view of Mahomet as an heretic, by constantly referring to Christianity when such references

are not necessary he runs the risk of recalling that image for his readers. Similarly, his attack on Mahomet's followers indirectly disparages the character of the Prophet by tainting the early period of his career, that period which Irving elsewhere expresses respect for. Irving's attack on the more fanciful legends found in his sources is no more helpful; the miracles attributed to the Prophet are undermined so frequently that the shadow of these attacks inevitably falls on Mahomet. Perhaps most problematic are the occasions when Irving shows Mahomet inventing verses of the Koran. In Irving's closing portrait, in which he summarizes his conclusions about the Prophet, Mahomet is not accused of consciously deluding his followers; in fact, he himself is deluded in his belief in his own prophethood. But Irving elsewhere shows him intentionally misleading the Moslems by producing verses of the Koran and attributing them to God. This is especially disparaging when he does so to allow himself an otherwise illegal marriage or a concubine. This Mahomet seems a far cry from the sincere reformer of the "Person and Character" chapter. These problems are aggravated when Irving tries to come to terms with Mahomet's call to arms after the migration to Medina. Although Irving tries at times to reconcile this shift in policy with the earlier form of



Islam, the pacifism of his own Christianity forces him to also condemn the change. This tension again results in what seem to be unintentional contradictions in Irving's portrait.

Despite the faults of Mahomet and His Successors, the work is interesting, if only for its place in Irving's canon. Although Irving never completed his projected series on the Arabs, which apparently was to begin with his biography of the Prophet and was to then explore Arab dominion in Spain, the author did publish a number of works which drew from Arabian material. In this book he is dealing with the core of that material: the Prophet and the faith which gave the Arabs the impetus to build an empire. A thorough study of these works must therefore include some examination of Mahomet. This is also one of four biographies published by Irving. Although the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus and the Life of George Washington are more successful than Mahomet (the biography of Oliver Goldsmith is even weaker than that of Mahomet), they don't encompass the totality of Irving-as-biographer; again, if one wants to come to terms with Irving's career as a biographer, Mahomet cannot be ignored. Each biography shows Irving working with different problems; a work on a national hero such as Columbus or Washington is not likely

to confront the author with the difficulties which writing on the subject of an Eastern prophet, especially one as controversial as Mahomet, involves.

Finally, a thorough assessment of any author is not possible without an understanding of their weaknesses as well as their strengths. Irving's career is especially fraught with flashes of brilliance alternating with bouts of mediocrity. Although it might be nice for admirers of Irving to pretend that The Sketch Book was not followed by Bracebridge Hall and Tales of a Traveler, or that the Columbus was not followed by Mahomet, overlooking those weaker books would leave readers with an incomplete picture of Irving's career as a writer. Mahomet, though it may not belong in the front rank of Irving's works, does therefore deserve some consideration. But, despite its usefulness in the study of Irving, Mahomet and His Successors is hardly brilliant, perhaps not even competent, biography.

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