

CAESAREAN MOON BIRTHS

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*Calculations, Moon Sighting,
and the Prophetic Way*

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ZAYTUNA INSTITUTE

Published by Zaytuna Institute, 2007

Editor: Safir Ahmed

Managing Editor: Uzma Fatima Husaini

Copy Editor: Valerie Turner

Cover and Text Design: Abdallateef Whiteman

Cover Photograph: Youssef Ismail

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ISBN: 978-0-9702843-2-7

Printed in the United States of America

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

IN THE NAME OF GOD, THE BENEFICENT, THE MERCIFUL

Prayers and blessings be upon the best of creation, our master Muḥammad, and upon his family and companions, and all who follow in their footsteps. Glory to the One who made the stars as guides for humanity and placed the sun and moon in exact courses to provide a means to measure time and learn calculation.

The Qur'an is the last prophetic dispensation revealed by God for humanity. Its guidance will remain until the Last Day, and no other infallible guidance will be given to the world until the return of the blessed prophet of God, Jesus, the Christ, who will affirm the Qur'an and elucidate its meanings conclusively for the community of our beloved Prophet ﷺ.

يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْأَهْلِ قُلْ هِيَ مَوَاقِيتُ لِلنَّاسِ وَالْحَجِّ

They ask you about the crescent moons; say they are a means to measure your specific times and are also for the commencement of the hajj.

QUR'AN 2:189

صُومُوا لِرُؤْيَيْهِ وَأَفْطِرُوا لِرُؤْيَيْهِ ، فَإِنْ غُبِّيَ عَلَيْكُمْ
فَأَكْمَلُوا عِدَّةَ شَعْبَانَ ثَلَاثِينَ

“Fast upon sighting [the new moon], and break the fast upon sighting it, and should it be obscured, then complete thirty days of Sha‘bān.”

A SAYING OF THE PROPHET MUḤAMMAD ﷺ

CONTENTS

Preface	XI
Introduction	1
The Problem	3
The Qur'an and the Moon	6
Calendars in Pre-Islamic Arabia	9
The Jewish Calendar	12
Calendars after the Advent of Islam	16
The Meaning of "Crescent" in Arabic	18
The Islamic Ruling on Calculation	19
Sighting the Crescent Moon	29
Early Muslims and Moon Sighting	34
Scholars Who Permitted Calculation	36
The Five Schools on Moon Sighting	56
Magnified Crescents and Confusion: Signs of the Last Days	59
Conclusion	62
Notes	67

P R E F A C E

ALL RELIGIONS HAVE rites that connect people to sacred time and place. Indeed, devotional observances are the hallmark of religion and maintain its perpetuity. Islam is noted for sacred rites that are largely time-based but also include rites involving places. The central daily rite is prayer; the central weekly rite is congregation; the central monthly rite is monitoring the new moon; the central yearly rite is Ramadan; and the central rite of one's lifetime is pilgrimage to the House of God.

The Abrahamic religions are rooted in the mystery of time; sacred timekeeping is central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The original Abrahamic way was entirely lunar. The Jewish ritual experience was centered around the lunar months. As time passed, the Jewish community moved from a lunar to a solar-lunar calendar. The Christians, who emerged out of Jewish tradition, abandoned the Jewish lunar calendar for a Roman solar one. Islam, uniquely, has maintained this ancient tie solely to the celestial phenomenon of the lunar month.

Prior to the advent of electricity, every night held the possibility of a celestial light show. People in even the most urban environments were exposed to the awe and majesty of the heavens, which clearly “proclaim the glory of God.”

The contemplation of the celestial orbs and their movements provided early man with the most direct connection to his Lord. In the Qur'anic story of Abraham, it is his observance of heavenly phenomena that leads him to his certainty of God's unity and transcendence. Since the time of the Seljuq Turks, the crescent moon has been a sign of Islam. Today, for instance, it serves in place of the cross for the relief work of the Muslim medics of the Red Crescent in Muslim lands.

Of late, certain Muslims, responding to the yearly anarchy in determining the beginning of Ramadan, have called for a move to calculations and an abandonment of the traditional practice of physical observation to determine the new moon. Some highly qualified mathematicians and astronomers believe that Muslims in North America should follow lunar months determined by calculation. They argue that the science of astronomy is highly developed and visibility charts can be generated to high degrees of precision; that calculation will help the Muslim community gain recognition from the government for Muslim holidays, which would obviously need to be known in the previous year when calendars are prepared; that it is not against the Sunnah, as some scholars of the earliest period have accepted calculations as have others of the later period; and that many modern scholars are inclining toward this position in larger numbers.

As the argument has been presented, the call is buttressed by early Muslim opinions, isolated but authoritative nonetheless, which allowed calculation. I have written this essay to reveal what I believe to be the fallacies in that claim. As I substantiate in this paper, the few scholars who did permit calculation did so for only the 29th night, and

then only if clouds or other atmospheric conditions obscured the twilight sky. I do not believe there is any evidence to support an argument for calculation unless it is based upon the early Fatimid position that the new moon begins with the separation of the sun and moon's monthly conjunction—an opinion rejected by consensus among Sunni scholars and almost all of the Shia scholars. A few late Muslim scholars of the nineteenth century, not mentioned in any of the papers I read, did acknowledge the advancement of astronomy and the reliability of calculation. Their colleagues, however, ignored their opinions.

Hence we find that before this modern period, authoritative Imams did not advocate the abandonment of a prophetic practice that has been continually applied throughout Muslim history and remains viable today. Oddly, the one argument that might have merit is not put forward by the current proponents of calculation: that is a *maqāṣadī* argument, i.e., one that looks at the aims and purposes of the sacred law. While I recognize that such an argument would seem reasonable given the relative hardships people in North America face in adjusting fixed secular schedules with fluid sacred ones each year, the presence of a clear and unambiguous text from the sound hadith makes *ijtihād* untenable. Indeed, it could even be argued that connecting people with the natural phenomenon in our selves and on the horizon—which is where we must look every month for the new moon—is a central aim and purpose of the religion itself.

Having said that, I do see a compromise possible between the two positions if the proponents of calculation would alter their sighting calculation criterion to a 12-degree angular separation instead of their current 9-degree

separation, which allows for probable sighting only under perfect conditions. For several years now, in monthly crescent observations, we have found that the moon sighting visibility charts based upon a 12-degree separation in North America consistently concur with our physical sightings on the West Coast of the United States.

The current crisis is largely the result of the lack of a unified religious authority and the split in the scholarly community over local sightings as opposed to one global sighting for all Muslims. And while both positions are sound and have their proofs from the early Muslim community and are recognized by all of our juristic schools, the latter position is hard to adhere to, given what we know about the earth and its vastness and the fact that while the moon is born in one region it has yet to be in others. Despite that, we should not make the local/global issue a point of dissention or division in our communities. It would foster unity if we adhered to one moon sighting that is seen by sound witnesses anywhere in North America. Devotional practices based upon moon calculations will always split the community. Those who question why we cannot calculate our moon dates when we calculate our prayer times will find unequivocal answers in this paper.

My hope is that this book will alleviate confusion and provide clarity—and guidance for those who are fed up with the inability of our community to agree on matters of the utmost importance and who simply want to fast, and break the fast, without worrying that they are doing it at the wrong time. We can be unified on this issue if we develop trained moon-sighting committees throughout North America who are committed to going out every month and maintaining a religious duty. My intention is not to

Preface

be divisive. My personal friendship and love for many of the people promoting calculation is not negotiable. They are scholars in their own right in their respective areas of expertise and I respect their scholarship and honor their friendship and fraternity. On this matter, however, I believe an egregious mistake has been made and my hope is that it can be redressed. May God grant us clarity in matters obscure and guidance in matters momentous.

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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INTRODUCTION

ALL OF THE acts of ritualized worship incumbent upon Muslims are related to time, and thus the measurement and the detailing of time's passage is a religious duty. According to ʿAbd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī, maintaining time is a religious position to which the Prophet ﷺ himself appointed certain people in Medina. Islamic law considers sacred timekeeping (*tawqīt*) a communal obligation, so once someone in a community fulfills this duty, the rest of the community is relieved of it.¹ Not only is it a religious duty to monitor the sun and the moon's courses for prayer times and for the other acts of worship contingent upon certain months, but, according to the Prophet ﷺ, it is one of the most pleasing and beloved acts to God. The Prophet ﷺ said, "The most beloved of God's servants to God are those who monitor the sun and moon, engendering love of God in God's servants and love of God's servants in God." And in a sound narration

* The title "Caesarean Moon Births" was chosen for two reasons. Like a caesarean birth, the early announcements of the lunar months that have historically accompanied a calculated new moon are primarily the result of conforming to the scheduling requirements of modern bureaucratic societies. Also, it was the edict of Caesar that was instrumental in forcing the Jews to abandon their lunar calendar based on actual sighting and resorting to one based on calculations.

related by al-Hākīm, the Prophet ﷺ said, “The best of God’s servants are those who watch the sun, moon, stars, and shadows in order to remember God.”²

In another hadith, the Prophet ﷺ said to Mu‘ādh before sending him to Yemen to act as a judge, “What will you base your judgments on?”

Mu‘ādh replied, “The Book of God.”

The Prophet ﷺ then asked, “And should it not be in the Book of God?”

“Then the Sunnah of the Prophet,” replied Mu‘ādh.

“And should you not find it in the Sunnah?” asked the Prophet ﷺ.

“Then I will exert my efforts completely and not falter.”

To this, the Prophet ﷺ responded, “Praise is due to God, who has given the messenger of the Messenger of God success.”

This hadith elucidates the methodology to be followed by any scholar attempting to understand an issue involving a legal ruling in the sacred law of Islam. There are four agreed upon sources of legislation:

1) The Qur’an, first and foremost, 2) the Sunnah, which comprises the words, deeds, and acknowledgments of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, as transmitted through reliable sources, 3) the consensus of the Muslim scholars (*ijma‘*), and, finally, 4) analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) that is used as a last resort in the absence of definitive proofs. However, of these four, the two sources agreed upon for use as single sources are the Book of God and the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. The Prophet ﷺ stated, “I have left you two things; as long as you hold to them, you will never stray: the Book of God and my Sunnah.”

So the scholars first look to the Qur’an, then to the

Sunnah, and then to the consensus of the previous scholars, and then, finally, resort to independent reasoning (*ijtihād*). However, *ijtihād* is permissible only when there is no decisive and unequivocal text (*naṣṣ*) found in the Qur'an or the Sunnah; this is based upon the juristic principle, "There can be no *ijtihād* in light of an explicit text."

Another important axiom is that both the Qur'an and the Sunnah were revealed in Arabic, and any interpretation must be in accordance with the accepted linguistic meaning of those texts during the period of revelation, between 610 and 632 CE. It is proscribed to interpret the Qur'an in the Arabic of any other period. One may refer to authentic pre-Islamic poetry to determine the meanings of words because linguistic usages of that period were accepted at the time of the Qur'anic revelation. Immense human effort has been exerted in order to preserve the meanings of the Arabic language of the Prophet's time. No other religious community on earth has the level of certainty about their sacred scriptures' historical authenticity and lexical signification as Muslims do. This is due first to God's promise of scriptural preservation, and then to efforts of those scholars who codified the Qur'an and preserved the Arabic language in the voluminous lexicons of the first centuries of Islam.

THE PROBLEM

The lunar Islamic calendar follows the phases of the moon, beginning with the crescent moon and ending with the conjunction of the moon and the sun in their respective perceived movements around the earth. The time of one lunation or complete cycle of the moon is approximately 29.5 days. This must be averaged because the moon does