Prologue.
There were nine explosions in all, 30 minutes of car bombs, suicide bombs, grenades, and mortar fire. It was midmorning on March 4, 2004—the day known as Ashura. The city of Karbala was packed with Shia pilgrims. The mass program which had been banned for years; this was the first time since the fall of the Saddam regime that they had been able to celebrate openly. The Ashura Massacre of March 4, 2004 was the first sign of civil war between Sunni and Shia to come. The Sunni extremist group Al Qaeda in Iraq had calculated the attack with particularly cruel precision.

What happened at this date, in this place, in the year 680 CE, was a prelude to what was to come. Mohammed had not been dead 50 years when his closest male descendants were massacred here in Karbala, and the women of his family taken captive and chained. What happened at Karbala in the 7th century is the foundation story of the Sunni-Shia split.

Chapter 1.
The most serious of the attempts to assassinate Mohammed occurred some 10 years before his death. His preaching had significantly threatened the aristocrats of his native Mecca. The urban elite of Mecca was a clan called the Quraysh. Mecca had become very successful not because of any geographical advantage, but because it was the home of the Kaaba. The Quraysh had skillfully blended faith and finance—indeed, they charge fees for access to the Kaaba. To charge money to visit the Kaaba contradicted the basic Muslim teaching according to Mohammed that the poor, the orphan, the enslaved—all were equal in the eyes of God.

Why did Mohammed not appoint a successor well before he died?
Appoint your successor, and that appointee, no matter how trusted, might always be tempted to speed up events, to preempt the natural lifecycle by artificial means. A carefully crafted poison in a honey drink or a dish of succulent lamb? Such things were not unknown. In fact, they were soon to become all too familiar.

The most likely explanation, however, is that Mohammed knew that the moment he formally appointed a successor, he would be introducing divisive this into the newly united community of Islam—or, rather, feeding into the divisiveness that already existed. He would set in motion the web of resentments and jealousies that had accumulated as people jockeyed for influence in position, as they will around any man of charisma, let alone a profit. However hard he may have tried to smooth the mover, disagreements that had merely simmered beneath the surface would become all too visible. Factions would form, arguments developed, his whole life's work would teeter on the edge of collapse.

Excerpts from Chapter 5
[The Death of Muhammed and the Ascent of the Caliphs]

[1] No words were needed to carry the news. The wailing did that. First Aisha [Muhammed's favored wife], then all the other wives broke into a terrible, piercing howl that sounded like a wounded animal hiding in the bush to die. It spoke of ultimate agony, of pain and sorrow beyond all comprehension, and it spread through the oasis at the speed of sound. Men and women, old and young, everyone took up the wail and surrendered themselves to it. They slapped their faces with both hands; beat their chests with clenched fists so that the sound echoed as though the whole torso were a hollow tree; raked their foreheads with their fingernails until blood streaked down over their eyes and their tears were stained red; scooped up handfuls of dust from the ground and poured it over their heads, abasing themselves in despair. These were the time-honored rituals of grief, the same public rituals still carried out every year at Ashura, when the Shia mourn the tragic death of Ali's son Hussein. They were the outward expression of abandonment, of being abandoned and of abandoning oneself to mourning—not only for the one who had died but for themselves, leaderless, without him . . .

[2] It could not be so, Omar insisted. It was heresy even to entertain such an idea. Muhammad was gone only for the moment. There would be a resurrection, as there had been with the last great prophet, Jesus. The Messenger would return
from the dead and lead his people to the Day of Judgment. And in a panic of blind grief, before anyone could stop him, this most severe of men stood up in the forecourt of the mosque and berated the fearful crowd. "By God, he is not dead," he declared, even as the tears ran down his face and over his beard . . .

[3] But if this was intended to calm the wailing crowd, it had the opposite effect. The sight of Omar in hysterical denial only gave rise to greater panic. It took the small, elderly figure Abu Bakr to pull Omar back. "Gently, gently," he said, "be quiet"—and one can almost hear it, the soothing tone, urging calmness as he took the towering warrior by the arm and slowly led him aside, then took his place before the terrified throng. His voice was startlingly strong, not at all what one would expect from such a frail body, and though the message he delivered was a terrible one, it was also oddly reassuring. "For those who worshiped Muhammad, Muhammad is dead," he announced. "For those who worship God, God is alive, immortal." The Messenger is dead, long live Islam . . .

[4] And with this confirmation of mortality, as the tears flowed and the agonized wailing continued through the day and far into the night so that even the pack animals were restless in their pens and the jackals and hyenas in the mountains all around Medina could be heard raising their voices in unison, reality began to set in. For some, however, it was to set in faster than for others. Ali and three of his kinsmen had shut themselves in Aisha's chamber and begun the work of the closest male relatives, preparing Muhammad for the grave. Theirs was the long, slow ritual task of washing him and rubbing herbs over him and wrapping him in his shroud. But even in grief, others were thinking of the future. The "lost sheep" were faced with the daunting task of selecting one of their own as their shepherd.

[5] Within the hour, the lingering distrust between the native Medinans [residents of Medina who had accepted Muhammad's teaching, and were called "Helpers" in distinction from the Meccan "Emigrants"] and the former Meccans had surfaced. Ibn Obada, put out the call for a shura, a traditional intertribal forum where agreements were ratified and disputes settled. It was a kind of seventh-century version of the smoke-filled back room, and like that back room, it was strictly by invitation only. The call went out quickly, but only among the native Medinans, the ones known as the Helpers. The Meccans, those known as the Emigrants, were not invited.

[6] The Medinan Helpers had trusted Muhammad because they considered him a kinsman. Since his father's mother had been born in Medina, they had seen him as one of their own. But the seventy-two companions who had followed him from Mecca, along with their families, were another matter. They had been welcomed, of course, but not with the most open of arms. True, all were equal in Islam. All were brothers, all family. But even between brothers—or perhaps especially between brothers—resentment and ill will flourished. The Emigrants remained Meccans in the eyes of the Helpers, tolerated in Medina rather than accepted. They were still members of that rival city's ruling Quraysh tribe, and now, in the sudden absence of Muhammad as the unifying force, the politics of tribe and clan would reassert themselves.

[7] The shura took time, for its success depended on consensus. That was a high ideal, but in practice it meant that the session would go on until those opposed to the general feeling of the meeting had been persuaded or worn down or simply browbeaten into going along with the majority. Such things could not be hurried. Each leader, each elder, each representative had to have his say, and at length. Few there could read or write, but their powers of oratory were phenomenal, as was often the way in preliterate societies.

[8] A meeting of this importance could not be kept secret for long. Word got out, and just a few hours after the shura had begun, those not invited—the Meccan Emigrants—decided to invite themselves. By early evening of that fateful Monday, Abu Bakr had roused Omar from his grief. There would be time enough to mourn once the succession to Muhammad had been settled, he said. The Medinans could not be allowed to break away; that would work against everything Muhammad had achieved. The new leader of Islam had to be someone who would unite, not divide, the Muslim community.

[9] Like Abu Bakr, Omar had taken it for granted that this leader would be one of the Emigrants. They were the Prophet's earliest companions, the men who had been with him the longest, and the most influential of them were three senior
counselors besides Ali: Omar himself, Abu Bakr, and a third man—Othman, the handsome aristocrat from the Umayyads, the wealthiest clan of Mecca's Quraysh tribe.

[10] While most of the Umayyads had opposed Muhammad until just two years before, Othman had accepted Islam early on. He had emigrated to Medina with the Prophet, given most of his wealth to the cause, and steadfastly supported it even when it meant battle against his own kin. In gratitude, Muhammad had honored him with the hand of his second daughter in marriage and then, when she died, with that of his third. Othman thus had the unique distinction of being the double son-in-law of the Prophet. His voice would be essential if Omar and Abu Bakr were to prevail.

[11] Led by Omar and Abu Bakr, they turned up in force and muscled their way in. Essentially, they gate-crashed the meeting, outnumbering those already there. Only one person with a direct interest in the proceedings would remain absent, but for many, that absence would deprive the shura of all legitimacy. Ali was the one Emigrant whom the native Medinans would have freely acknowledged as their leader. They saw him more as one of theirs than as a Meccan. Since Muhammad was their kin because of his grandmother, so too was Ali, Muhammad's closest male relative. Yet it was precisely because he was the closest male relative that Ali would remain absent.

[12] He must certainly have heard about the shura. His uncle Abbas surely urged him to leave his vigil over the Prophet's body, and offered to keep watch in his place. With so much at stake, it was vital that Ali assert his right to leadership. If Abbas made the argument, though, he made it in vain. One can see Ali shaking his head at the idea of the shura being held with such unseemly haste. Before the Prophet had even been buried? To leave the man who had been father and mentor to him before consigning him back to the earth from which he had come? However dire the circumstances, that was out of the question. Ali was above all a man of faith; he would stay with the body, in the faith that the Medinans would support him. It would not be the last time he would suffer from misplaced faith in others.

[13] To Sunnis, the shura would be the perfect example of the wisdom of consensus, of a community newly empowered to resolve its disputes and to find the right solution. The Prophet trusted them to find the right leader, they maintained. In fact that was precisely what he had intended all along. They would quote a later tradition in which Muhammad said, "My community will never agree in error." The Islamic community was sacred, that is, and thus by definition free of error. But in centuries to come, this statement came to serve as a self-fulfilling argument against the Shia. It would be taken to mean that any Muslims who disagreed with the Sunni majority could only be in error; the Shia, by force of their disagreement, were not part of the true community of Islam as defined by Sunnis.

[14] For the Shia, it was not the community but the leadership that was sacred. The Sunnis had abrogated divinely ordained power by determining it among themselves, they would argue, and this usurpation of the divine had begun right there, in the first Islamic shura. The Prophet's will had been clear: Ali was the only true, legitimate successor to the Prophet. To acclaim anyone else as Caliph was a betrayal not only of Muhammad but of Islam itself. It seems clear that the shura began with the best intentions, but even as unity was the one thing people most wanted, it was also the one thing that seemed impossible to achieve.

[15] The moment the crowd of Meccan Emigrants burst in, the Medinan Helpers knew that their bid to claim leadership for one of their own was doomed. In an attempt at compromise, they proposed separate leaders. "Let us Helpers have one rule and you Emigrants another," they said. But Abu Bakr and Omar insisted on one leader for the whole of Islam, and that leader, they argued, had to be an Emigrant. They had been the earliest to accept Islam. They were from Muhammad's own tribe, the Quraysh, who had transformed Mecca into a great trading and pilgrimage center. Islam was about unity, they said, and only someone from the Quraysh could keep Mecca and Medina together as one people, the center of the community of Islam.

[16] Inevitably, the shura dragged on, through the night and into the next day. Speech followed speech—long, ornate, impassioned orations. All had the welfare of the people in mind, as such speeches always do. There is no doubt
public concern of all those involved, nor the self-interest. Public concern and self-interest do sometimes coincide, even—especially—when the self-interest is your own.

[17] The Emigrants began to impose their will on the Helpers. It became clear that the successor would be Quraysh, from Mecca. That much was now certain, but which one? All else being equal, the established principle of nasb, noble lineage, might have held sway. This held that nobility was in the bloodline, and in a society so entranced by lineage that later, when outright civil war had begun, warriors would stand tall and proclaim their lineage aloud before actually attacking each other, bloodlines mattered. By the principle of nasb, Ali should have been the successor. But all else was not equal. Despite Muhammad's personal authority, his clan—and Ali's—was relatively powerless within the large Quraysh tribe. They were Hashimis, and the Quraysh were dominated by the Umayyads, who had led the opposition to Muhammad for so many years, their wealth and power threatened by his preaching of equality.

[18] The Hashimis had been honored by having the Prophet come from their clan, the argument now went. But now that he was gone, the honor of leadership had to be extended to other clans of the Quraysh. Muhammad's intention had always been to spread power wide, not to raise up one clan above all others. To choose Ali, another Hashimi, would be to risk turning the leadership of Islam into a form of hereditary monarchy, and that was the opposite of everything Muhammad had stood for. Leadership was not something to be inherited, like property. It had to be decided by merit, not by blood.

[19] It was this attitude that distinguished the Quraysh as a whole, and, among them, the Umayyads in particular. So if there was one possible candidate at the shura who seemed to have been born to power, it was Othman, the Umayyad. But not in this city. Until Mecca had submitted to Islam two years before, Meccan armies led by Umayyads had fought two major battles against Muhammad and Medina, not to mention countless skirmishes. With the memory of those battles still fresh in their minds and the scars still livid on their flesh, none of the Medinan Helpers would agree to an Umayyad as their leader, even one as respected as Othman.

[20] As the light faded on the Tuesday evening, the shura seemed to have reached deadlock. Most of those present were near the point of exhaustion. They had sat through more than twenty-four hours of speeches, proposals, and counterproposals, yet consensus seemed further away than ever. Then, with what might be seen as the finesse of an endgame in a champion chess match, Abu Bakr and Omar made their closing move.

[21] Had they worked it out beforehand? Nobody would ever know, but it went so smoothly, with such an air of inevitability, that Ali's followers would always suspect that it had been planned all along. First, Abu Bakr proposed Omar as the new leader of Islam, though he must have known that after Omar's panic-stricken speech denying Muhammad's death, the tall warrior was not exactly the man of the moment. Then Omar responded by proposing that Othman be the leader, though he in turn must have known that since Othman was Umayyad, this was a nonstarter. Sure enough, both proposals provoked heated opposition, and tempers finally frayed beyond the breaking point.

[22] Speeches gave way to shouting, outward calm to heated finger-pointing. Ibn Obada, the Medinan Helper who had originally convened the shura, stood up and openly accused the Emigrants of working in collusion to take over the leadership. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than several of the Emigrants leaped on him, fists flying. In the ensuing free-for-all, he was beaten unconscious. The sudden outburst of violence seemed to sap the resistance of the Medinans. They were dismayed at seeing Ibn Obada carried out with his head bloodied, and in shock that a shura should come to this.

[23] All desire for any further debate seeped out of them, so that when the final proposal came, they simply gave in. In a move that the Shia have ever since claimed was rigged beforehand, and that Sunnis acclaim as the perfect example of the wisdom of consensus, Omar suddenly came up with what he presented as the ideal compromise. His account of it has all the terse brevity of a military man: "Altercation waxed hotter and voices were raised until, when a complete breach was to be feared, I said 'Stretch out your hand, Abu Bakr.' "He did so and I pledged him allegiance. The Emigrants followed, and
then the Helpers." And so it was done. The successor to Muhammad— the khalifs, the Caliph— was not Ali. It was the father of Muhammad's most prominent widow, the ever-controversial Aisha.

[24] The burial would be strangely hugger-mugger. It was done in haste— indeed, in secrecy— and with a matter-of-factness that seems startling in the light of all the pilgrimages and sacred precincts to come. By the time Ali and his kinsmen heard the news of Abu Bakr's election, Muhammad had been dead a full day and a half, and for reasons all too obvious in the intense June heat, the matter of burial was becoming urgent. Now that the shura had agreed on a leader, Abu Bakr was likely to make Muhammad's funeral a major occasion, a stage for confirmation of his election, and this was exactly what Ali would deny him. There would be no funeral, just burial in the dead of night.

[25] In the small hours of that Wednesday morning, Aisha was woken by scraping sounds echoing around the mosque courtyard. While Muhammad's body lay in her chamber, she had moved in with her co-wife Hafsa, Omar's daughter, a few doors down. In the exhaustion of grief, however, she could not rouse herself to investigate the noise. If she had, she would have discovered that what had woken her was the sound of steel digging into rocky soil. With pickaxes and shovels, Ali and his kinsmen were digging Muhammad's grave, and they were digging it in Aisha's chamber.

[26] Muhammad had once said that a prophet should be buried where he had died, they explained later. Since he had died on the sleeping platform in Aisha's chamber, that was where he had to be buried, so they dug the grave at the foot of the platform, and when it was deep enough, they tipped up the pallet holding the Prophet's shrouded body, slid it down into the earth, quickly covered it, and placed the stone slab of the platform on top. None of the wives was present, nor any of the other Emigrants, nor any of the Helpers. It was a fait accompli, as final in its way as the decision of the shura.

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From The Two Faces of Islam (2002)

Stephen Schwartz

from Ch.2 — The Mongol Conquest and Ibn Taymiyyah

[1] In 1258, the Mongols fell upon and obliterated Baghdad. The siege of the city was perceived by its inhabitants as a sign of the "end time." It ended Baghdad's power in the Islamic world for centuries. These events had consequences for the Mongols themselves and for the whole ummah, creating controversies that have complicated the later history of Islam.

[2] The Mongol rulers of Baghdad became Muslims. This produced a reaction by a Hanbali legal scholar named Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328). Born in the generation after Baghdad's fall to a family from the devastated city, Ibn Taymiyyah rebelled against the Islamized Mongol rulers. He insisted on a purist attitude toward Islam that directly anticipated and honored above all others by the Islamic fundamentalists of the 21st century. This extremism was most fully expressed in his theories of governance.

[3] Muslim legal authorities traditionally held that local Muslim rulers should be obeyed by their subjects if they were recognized by the caliphate. Ibn Taymiyyah denied that a caliphate existed after the first four caliphs succeeding Muhammad. He argued that the rulers of differing Islamic states should command the loyalty of the Muslims whether a caliphate was recognized or not. But he offered the Islamic rulers a means of religious legitimation: They were to be obeyed if they instituted a rigid interpretation of Shariah.

[4] For Ibn Taymiyyah, the political state and the religious scholars were to function as a single entity. This view was later echoed in the rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, which sought the same result, and in the governance of Ayatollah Khomeini. But in reality, political and religious authority, though formally combined, could not avoid a division of responsibilities in which religion would inevitably become a tool of political necessity.

[5] Ibn Taymiyyah argued that Muslims who did not live under Shariah represented the worst of all evils. He alleged, incorrectly, that the Mongols had not accepted Shariah; he claimed that although they had made the profession of Islamic
faith in One God and the Prophecy of Muhammad, they were unbelievers. Shocking the ummah of his time, he went on to argue that the Mongols who had accepted Islam were suitable targets for attack and despoliation.

[6] The Mongol ruler of Baghdad, Ghazan Khan, was denounced by Ibn Taymiyyah and later extremists. But Ghazan Khan was a fervent Muslim even though he was presented as a disbeliever with the intention of justifying Ibn Taymiyyah's pretensions as a reformer and a great soldier in jihad. Ghazan Khan was the grandson of Hulagu Khan, the invader who had devastated Baghdad. Brought into Islam by a Sufi Shaykh al-Juwayni, he built a distinguished mosque in Tabriz among many other Islamic religious works.

[7] Ibn Taymiyyah also declared total war on Sufism, Shi'ism, and the study of Greek philosophy. He even attacked those who visited the grave of Muhammad, or commemorated his birth, insinuating that such celebration of the Prophet was an imitation of the Christian worship of Jesus as God. He denounced Ibn Arabi as an unbeliever. Finally, he introduced an anthropomorphic view of God into Islam, declaring that the Creator had a physical body. As in Judaism, this position is firmly rejected by Muslims, who hold that the divine form is limitless and unknowable—a view more consonant with modern physics than with religious obscurantism. Ibn Taymiyyah was also markedly ignorant, anticipating the flat-earth fundamentalists and terrorists who, centuries later, idolized him. He seems to have believed, for example, that Greek and Armenian Christians kept the same dietary laws as Jews and Muslims, an astonishing gap in his knowledge. Above all, he renewed the threat of extremism, which was repudiated, but which was revived and reinforced by the Wahhabis.