

## Chapter 8



# THE LURE OF ISLAMIC PARADISE

**H**owever strange it may seem to Westerners, the much-publicized virgins promised to Islamic martyrs in Paradise is no myth or distortion of Islamic theology. Muhammad painted a picture of a frankly material and lushly sensual Paradise for his followers—containing everything a seventh-century Arabian desert-dweller could possibly dream of: gold and fine material things, fruits, wine, water, women . . . and boys.

Of course, not everyone was buying into this, even during the Prophet's salad days. During one engagement against the Quraysh (the Battle of the Trench), Muhammad asked his followers: "Who is a man who will go up and see for us how the enemy is doing and then come back?" He promised to ask Allah that that spy "may be my companion in paradise." Yet he found no volunteers, requiring him finally to assign the mission to one of his men.<sup>1</sup>

Still, the promise of Paradise was one of the principal means by which Muhammad motivated his followers. It made fighting in jihads a win-win proposition: If a Muslim warrior was victorious, he enjoyed booty on earth; if he was killed, he enjoyed virtually identical rewards in the after-life—on a much grander scale. **During the Battle of Badr, Muhammad urged on the Muslims with promises of Paradise: "By God in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, no man will be slain this day fighting against**

## Guess what?

- The Qur'an describes Paradise in terms that make it clear that it is a place merely to indulge one's physical appetites.
- September 11 hijacker Muhammad Atta packed a "paradise wedding suit" into his luggage on that fateful day.
- Paradise is guaranteed only to those who "slay and are slain" for Allah.

them with steadfast courage advancing not retreating but God will cause him to enter Paradise.”

One of his warriors, ‘Umayr bin al-Humam, who had been sitting near by munching on dates, was excited by this. “Fine, fine!” he exclaimed. “Is there nothing between me and my entering Paradise save to be killed by these men?” He flung away his dates, rushed into battle, and quickly met the death he had been seeking.<sup>2</sup>

### What’s behind Door Number One

In Paradise, ‘Umayr bin al-Humam expected to be adorned “with bracelets of gold and pearls” (Qur’an 22:23) and “dressed in fine silk and in rich brocade” (Qur’an 44:53). Then he would recline “on green cushions and rich carpets of beauty” (Qur’an 55:76), sit on “thrones encrusted with gold and precious stones” (Qur’an 56:15), and share in “dishes and goblets of gold”—on which would be “all that the souls could desire, all that their eyes could delight in,” including an “abundance of fruit” (Qur’an 43:71, 73) including “dates and pomegranates” (Qur’an 55:68). For the carnivorous, there would be “the flesh of fowls, any that they may desire” (Qur’an 56:21).

To those who lived their entire lives in the desert, water was a precious commodity—and the Qur’an promises it in abundance in Paradise. Paradise itself consists of “gardens, with rivers flowing beneath” (Qur’an 3:198; cf. 3:136; 13:35; 15:45; 22:23). In it are “two springs pouring forth water in continuous abundance” (Qur’an 55:66).

And not only water: Paradise would offer a variety of beverages. Besides “rivers of water incorruptible,” there would be “rivers of milk of which the taste never changes; rivers of wine, a joy to those who drink; and rivers of honey pure and clear” (Qur’an 47:15).

Wine? But aren’t alcoholic drinks forbidden to Muslims? Doesn’t the Qur’an say that “strong drink” is “Satan’s handiwork” (5:90)? How,

then, can Satan's handiwork be found in Paradise?

Well, the wine in Paradise is different, you see. It is "free from headiness," so that those who drink it will not "suffer intoxication therefrom" (Qur'an 37:47).

All this would be presented to those blessed of Allah in a perfect climate-controlled environment: "Reclining in the Garden on raised thrones, they will see there neither the sun's excessive heat nor the moon's excessive cold. And the shades of the Garden will come low over them, and the bunches of fruit, there, will hang low in humility" (Qur'an 76:13-14).

The food and comforts would never run out: "its food is everlasting, and its shade" (Qur'an 13:35).

## The joy of sex

But 'Umayr bin al-Humam probably wasn't concerned with all that, as attractive as it may have seemed. For he knew that waiting for him in Paradise were "voluptuous women of equal age" (Qur'an 78:31): "those of modest gaze, with lovely eyes" (Qur'an 37:48), "fair women with beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes" (Qur'an 44:54), "like unto rubies and coral"

(Qur'an 55:58) to whom he would be "joined" (Qur'an 52:20). These women would be "maidens, chaste, restraining their glances, whom no man or Jinn [spirit being] before them has touched" (Qur'an 55:56). Allah "made them virgins" (Qur'an 56:36), and according to Islamic tradition, they would remain virgins forever.

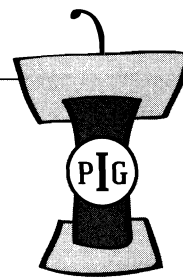
## Muhammad vs. Jesus

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

**John 3:16**

"Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs in return is the garden of Paradise: they fight in His cause, and slay and are slain: a promise binding on Him in truth..."

**Qur'an 9:111**



## Just Like Today: Suicide bombers and Paradise

**T**he promise of Paradise to those who “slay and are slain” for Allah is the principal justification for suicide bombings: The bombers are laying claim to this promise by slaying Allah’s enemies and being slain in the process.

Of course, Muslim spokesmen in America have been quick to point out that the Qur’an forbids suicide: “O ye who believe! Eat not up your property among yourselves in vanities. . . . Nor kill or destroy yourselves” (Qur’an 4:29–30). Muhammad adds in a hadith: “He who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in the Hell-fire forever, and he who commits suicide by stabbing himself shall keep on stabbing himself in the Hell-fire.”<sup>3</sup>

But the influential Islamic scholar Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who has been hailed as a “reformist” by Islamic scholar John Esposito, summed up the more common view. The prohibitions against suicide do not apply to suicide bombers, because their intention is not to kill themselves but the enemies of Allah: “It’s not suicide, it is martyrdom in the name of God, Islamic theologians and jurists have debated this issue. Referring to it as a form of jihad, under the title of jeopardising the life of the mujahideen. It is allowed to jeopardise your soul and cross the path of the enemy and be killed.”<sup>4</sup>

Umm Nidal, the mother of Hamas suicide attacker Muhammad Farhat, saw her son’s murderous death in the same way—as a great victory: “Jihad is a [religious] commandment imposed upon us,” she explained. “We must instill this idea in our sons’ souls, all the time. . . . What we see every day—massacres, destruction, bombing [of] homes—strengthened, in the souls of my sons, especially Muhammad, the love of Jihad and martyrdom. . . . Allah be praised, I am a Muslim and I believe in Jihad. Jihad is one of the elements of the faith and this is what encouraged me to sacrifice Muhammad in Jihad for the sake of Allah. My son was not destroyed, he is not dead; he is living a happier life than I.”

Umm Nidal continued: “Because I love my son, I encouraged him to die a martyr’s death for the sake of Allah. . . . Jihad is a religious obligation incumbent upon us, and we must carry it out.”<sup>5</sup>

But Paradise would not be a bore for Muslims with different proclivities. Allah also promised his blessed that in Paradise, “round about them will serve, devoted to them, young male servants handsome as pearls well-guarded” (Qur’an 52:24), “youths of perpetual freshness” (Qur’an 56:17): “if thou seest them, thou wouldst think them scattered pearls” (Qur’an 76:19).

But surely the Qur’an isn’t condoning homosexuality, is it? After all, it depicts Lot telling the people of Sodom: “For ye practise your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds” (7:81) and “of all the creatures in the world, will ye approach males, and leave those whom Allah has created for you to be your mates? Nay, ye are a people transgressing all limits!” (26:165). A hadith commands that “if a man who is not married is seized committing sodomy, he will be stoned to death.”<sup>6</sup> Another hadith has Muhammad saying: “Kill the one who sodomizes and the one who lets it be done to him.”<sup>7</sup> These strictures have worked their way into Islamic legal codes, such that two Saudis were so anxious to avoid a flogging or prison term that they murdered a Pakistani who witnessed their “shameful acts” by running over him with a car, smashing his head in with a rock, and setting him on fire.<sup>8</sup>

But the pearl-like youths of Paradise have given rise to a strange double-mindedness about homosexuality in Islam. The great poet Abu Nuwas openly glorified homosexuality in his notorious poem the *Perfumed Garden*:



## A Book You’re Not Supposed to Read

*Islamikaze: Manifestations of Islamic Martyrology* by Raphael Israeli; London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003, is an exhaustive and enthralling treatment of what motivates Islamic suicide bombers.

It’s all here: the oppression of women and non-Muslims, the brutal punishments, the double standards, and more—laid out clearly and precisely without a trace of self-consciousness or embarrassment. It’s hair-raising—and enlightening—reading.

O the joy of sodomy! So now be sodomites, you Arabs. Turn not away from it—therein is wondrous pleasure. Take some coy lad with kiss-curls twisting on his temple and ride him as he stands like some gazelle standing to her mate—A lad whom all can see girt with sword and belt not like your whore who has to go veiled. Make for smooth-faced boys and do your very best to mount them, for women are the mounts of the devils!<sup>9</sup>

This paradoxical attitude toward homosexuality runs through Islamic history. Even the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II, the conqueror of Constantinople, was open about this proclivity. While the conquered city was still smoldering, Mehmed turned his mind away from wars and battles and demanded that the famously handsome teenage son of a Byzantine official, Lukas Notaras, be brought to him. Notaras went to the sultan and

### Just Like Today: Paradise still lures young men

“**T**he Americans love Pepsi-Cola, we love death,” crowed Maulana Inyadullah of al Qaeda.<sup>10</sup> Muslims love death because Allah commands them to value the joys of Paradise over those of this world: “Those who love the life of this world more than the hereafter, who hinder men from the path of Allah and seek therein something crooked: they are astray by a long distance” (Qur’an 14:3).

As lurid as they are, the joys of Islamic Paradise have a definite and continuing appeal—an appeal felt most sharply, perhaps, by teenage boys. In 2004, a fourteen-year-old would-be Palestinian suicide bomber told the Israeli troops who disarmed him: “Blowing myself up is the only chance I’ve got to have sex with seventy-two virgins in the Garden of Eden.”<sup>11</sup> Another fourteen-year-old explained how a jihadist recruiter enticed him to join the jihad in Iraq: “He told me about paradise, about virgins, about Islam.”<sup>12</sup>

told him he would rather see his sons killed before his eyes than turned over to Mehmed's pleasures. Mehmed obliged him, and then had Notaras himself beheaded.<sup>13</sup>

## How to gain entry into Paradise

As we have seen, the Qur'an's surest guarantee of Paradise is given to those who "slay and are slain" for Allah: "for theirs in return is the garden of Paradise . . . a promise binding on Him in truth" (Qur'an 9:111). Muhammad also proclaimed: "Know that Paradise is under the shades of swords (*Jihad* in Allah's cause)."<sup>14</sup> It assures those on earth that those who die for Allah are not dead, but more alive than ever: "And say not of those who are slain in the way of Allah: 'They are dead.' Nay, they are living, though ye perceive it not" (Qur'an 2:154).

## The Assassins and the lure of Paradise

Around the time of the Crusades there flourished a notorious sect of Ismaili Shi'ite Muslims known as the Assassins. Although they did not invent political assassination, by murdering numerous key figures that opposed their movement, they introduced it on a large scale into the politics of the Islamic world and the Crusades themselves. After carrying out these murders, the Assassins almost always placidly allowed themselves to be caught, although at that time this meant certain death.<sup>15</sup>

What enticed young men to join this sect and sacrifice their lives in this way? For one thing, the Ismailis presented themselves as the exponents of "pure Islam," which they were giving their lives to restore. But it is also possible that the lure of Islamic paradise was among these motivations. When Marco Polo traversed Asia in the late thirteenth century, he reported what he had heard "told by many people" about the shadowy leader of the Assassins, the Old Man (or Sheikh) of the Mountain:

He had had made in a valley between two mountains the biggest and most beautiful garden that was ever seen, planted with all the finest fruits in the world and containing the most splendid mansions and palaces that were ever seen, ornamented with gold and with likenesses of all that is beautiful on earth, and also four conduits, one flowing with wine, one with milk, and one with honey, and one with water. There were fair ladies there and damsels, the loveliest in the world, unrivalled at playing every sort of instrument and at singing and dancing. And he gave his men to understand that this garden was Paradise. That is why he had made it after this pattern, because Mahomet assured the Saracens that those who go to Paradise will have beautiful women to their hearts' content to do their bidding, and will find there rivers of wine and milk and honey and water. . . . No one ever entered the garden except those whom he wished to make Assassins.<sup>16</sup>

It is likely that this description is more legend than fact. But Muslim warriors throughout history have been motivated by Islamic Paradise. Even September 11 hijacker Muhammad Atta packed a “paradise wedding suit” into his luggage on that fateful day, although he was unable to change into it because the airline required him to check all but one carry-on item. A letter found in Atta’s bags spoke of “marriage” with the “women of paradise . . . dressed in their most beautiful clothing.”<sup>17</sup>