

debts. Songwriters will be hired to make a musical campaign to stimulate the masses and get them back to work. These media professionals are skeptical, however: "the people pass their time enjoying television programs and videocassettes" (f. 40). But the minister himself perceives a more serious problem. Stirring the people into activity is a dangerous proposition. Nations that are productive are more self-confident; they want a say in how they are governed and make life difficult for their rulers: "God protect me from the vileness of productive peoples" (f. 51).

Not to fear; the musical campaign is a failure. The lazy Egyptians just turn off their radios or their television sets. When the minister hears this, he declares that the problem was that the songs were domestically produced. In their place, the government will import foreign songs. While he is explaining this on the telephone to the secretary, we see the minister in his foreign hotel room, his arm around a floozy. His degree of concern is easy to guess.

This explanation of Egyptian economic policy is neat, even cute. But it departs from the usual leftist attacks on the *infitâh* in a number of ways. The most common charge against the economic open-door policy is that it permits the exploitation of Egyptian national resources by foreigners, who also get rich on the goods they sell to the Egyptian people.<sup>35</sup> The governing elites, according to this view, are simply paid off or controlled by foreign governments or bankers when the two are not the same.

Hijâzî's formulation, while it does not negate these factors, stresses other points. Indeed, his vision of a native population sleeping on the job while eating from foreign loans reads almost like anti-Third World propaganda or an argument against foreign aid. The crux of Hijâzî's system is the idea that a lazy, in effect demoralized and infantilized, Tanâbilized population is easier to govern. The contrast is striking with the Egyptian agricultural workers in *Tanâbilat al-Sibyân* who declared: "Is there anyone in the world who does not want to work?" All the themes of the Tanâbila series are drawn together in a nightmare vision of dependence and powerlessness.

# 6

## Sacred Images: Islamic Comic Strips

Islamic comic strips: the mere phrase seems a contradiction—or a provocation—in a religious tradition known for its hostility to the image, and with a history of avoiding iconographic propaganda. Can this form associated with Western secular mass culture be turned to Islamic purposes? Can Islamic themes be put in visual terms? Islamic sacred texts? Some marriages between the Muslim religion and the comic-strip form have earned the ire of the orthodox, but most have not. Islamic comic strips are not as anomalous as the name suggests; they are far more common than Christian comic strips in the United States, though perhaps not in Europe. The Islamic revival has meant that the availability of Islamic comic strips, both governmental and oppositional, has been steadily increasing.

There is a variety of ways in which Arab strips can be considered Islamic. Virtually all Arab strips and the children's magazines that carry them are Islamic in at least a passive sense, participating in a culture in which Islam is the hegemonic religion, if not always the dominant ideology. Even the secularizing, Westernizing *Mîkî* with its pervasive Pharaonism pays frequent lip service to Islam as a key element in the texture of Egyptian life.<sup>1</sup> Many other, otherwise secular magazines, like the pan-Arab *Mâjid*, include regular religion sections.<sup>2</sup>

Comic-strip materials are often Islamic in two other ways: first, when moral guidance is presented in Islamic terms or with Islamic legitimization, and second, when specifically Islamic topics are treated, whether religious discussions, historical evocations, or even the presentation of material from the sacred texts themselves,

from the *hadīth* (traditions of the Prophet which report his words or actions) to the Qur'ān. Perhaps most clearly Islamic, at least in declared intention, are those strips which form part, often the largest part, of children's magazines which are Islamic in their titles, their self-proclaimed mission to spread Islamic faith and values, and their intended audience. It is no surprise that materials which are Islamic in the above two senses are most highly concentrated in these Islamic children's magazines.

The Islamic magazines featuring comic-strip literature for the longest number of years are the official ones, government sponsored and government supported. Since 1970, *Minbar al-Islām* has been publishing a children's supplement, *al-Firdaws* (Paradise), which almost always includes comic strips. The monthly *Minbar* and its supplement are publications of al-Majlis al-A'lā lil-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyya (the High Council for Islamic Affairs), a department of the Ministry of Pious Foundations (Wizārat al-Awqāf) in Cairo. *Al-Firdaws*, which is aimed at children aged six to twelve, has a circulation of approximately thirty-five thousand.<sup>3</sup> Equally representative of "official" Islam is the slightly younger *Barā'im al-Imān* (Blossoms of Faith), a supplement to *al-Wa'y al-Islāmī* of the Ministry of Pious Foundations and Islamic Affairs (Wizārat al-Awqāf wal-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyya) in Kuwait.

The last decade and especially the last few years have seen an expansion of Islamic children's periodicals published by independent, nongovernmental Islamic associations. *Al-Muslim al-Saghīr* (The Little Muslim) has been, since 1984, the monthly publication of Jam'iyyat al-Usra al-Muslima (Muslim Family Association), a privately supported Egyptian organization. The group's leader and the magazine's editor-in-chief is Marzūq Hilāl (his associates call him al-Hājj, the honorific for those who have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca). The Hājj's weekly children's television program, *Nādī al-Muslim al-Saghīr* (The Little Muslim's Club), testifies to his integration into the Egyptian cultural establishment. *Al-Muslim al-Saghīr* aims a seasonally varied print run of ten to thirty thousand at children aged eight to fourteen.<sup>4</sup> Indicative of the Hājj's resolute modernism is what happened one evening as we were sitting in his office. Everyone had a good laugh when he gently mocked a more conservative female guest, whose gloves were designed to prevent her physical contact with men, by ostentatiously enveloping his hand in a flap of his sport coat before shaking hers.

The clearest political coloration, however, attaches to the Egyptian children's monthly, *Zam Zam*, also created in 1988 and named for the holy well near Mecca where Hagar drew water for Ismā'īl. The well is known as Zamzam (one word), but the magazine cover and logo are written as two words, though the magazine uses the logo *Zam Zam* and the word *Zamzam* interchangeably when referring to itself within its pages. Thus its title is both a specific referent and a reference to the holy place.<sup>5</sup> *Zam Zam* is a supplement to *Majallat al-Mukhtār al-Islāmī*, an Islamist journal, whose connections reach to oppositional, though legal, Islamic circles. Its publishing house, Maktabat al-Mukhtār al-Islāmī, handles figures such as the leading antiestablishment Islamist, Shaykh Kishk. And it is not surprising that al-Zuhayrī, who does so many of the Shaykh's book covers, draws *Zam Zam*'s best comic strips. Of course, al-Mukhtār al-Islāmī also publishes independent but establishment personalities, such as Shaykh

Muhammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī. *Zam Zam* approvingly quoted a newspaper review calling it "the first independent Muslim magazine which treats the problems of the Muslim child in Egypt."<sup>6</sup> If this appreciation seems unfair given the far greater age of *al-Muslim al-Saghīr*, it gains in accuracy if we see independence as a euphemism for opposition to the political and religious establishment in Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Also created in 1988 is the independent Lebanese children's magazine, *Ahmad*, also called *al-Malāk Ahmad* (The Angel Ahmad).

Despite political and geographic variety, there is considerable similarity in the materials these Islamic children's magazines cast into comic-strip form. This convergence is due partly to the conformism so often dominant in Arab children's literature, partly to the choices and limitations that overtly Muslim publications put on themselves.

Basic similarity does not eliminate differences in tendency. The *raison d'être* of Muslim children's magazines is to replace the competing popular secular children's publications, be they native or imported-translated. In the new cultural discourses created by this children's literature, different magazines adopt more or less from their secular rivals and stick more or less closely to traditional Islamic messages and materials. *Zam Zam*, for example, presents a number of animal fables with a cynical but rather traditional political morality, in the absence of any Islamic referent or moral inspiration (1988, no. 2).<sup>8</sup> In another strip, turtles are involved in an adventure with no apparent religious or moral content (1988, no. 4). In a well written story splendidly illustrated by al-Zuhayrī (1988, no. 3), an Islamic referent is echoed by the kerchieflike veil worn by the mother bird (see fig. 6.1). Islamicization is a little more obvious in some other *Zam Zam* adventure strips, in which characters go to the mosque or cite sacred texts (e.g., 1988, nos. 1 and 2). But this most independent of Islamic children's magazines has gone farthest in the inclusion of essentially entertaining stories, which are in their basic nature neither religious nor moral.

Other magazines, and even *Zam Zam* for much of its comic-strip material, exploit a number of subject areas: contemporary political, educational (secular and religious), moral (modern and traditional), and religio-historical.

The purest political strips appear in Marzūq Hilāl's monthly, where the Hājj writes all the scenarios.<sup>9</sup> The *intifāda* is an ideal topic: it is safely patriotic (support for the Palestinians is a consensus value in Arab society), it shows the Arabs in triumph, and it turns children (the audience of the strips) into heroes. Thus, also, has it been exploited by secular magazines.<sup>10</sup> The twelve frames in the February 1988 *al-Muslim al-Saghīr*, illustrated in color by Qadriyya Abū Shūsha, are not strictly speaking a comic strip, because they lack balloons. Instead, a third-person narrative occupies registers below each frame, coordinated with its subject. The narrator is identified as "an American commentator," and we see him in the last frame looking like a typical Western TV newsman, with his blond good looks, repeating his opening message: "The Palestinian *intifāda* is a time bomb, twenty years old, exploding now in the face of Israel." This personified narrator not only suggests factual veracity but accurately highlights the role of Western media coverage in the *intifāda*'s political successes.





6.1. Mother bird with Islamic kerchief.

Frames show children as well as men and women facing Israeli soldiers. One pictures a trio of uniformed school children with two soldiers behind them, while the text explains that the occupation soldiers follow the children in fear (fig. 6.2).

Stripological gaucheness echoes political embarrassment in a version of the *Achille Lauro* incident illustrated by Khâlid al-Safatî (November–December 1985). Not surprisingly, the story's title focuses on the U.S. interception of an Egyptian civilian aircraft, but more striking is the complete occultation of the Klinghoffer murder, which so incensed Western public opinion. The strip shows Egyptian officials negotiating with the Palestinian hijackers (called *mujâhidûn*, a more religious appellation than the more common *fidâ'iyyûn*). A frame without text shows Palestinians and Egyptians together on an Egyptian boat and the two following frames (both with balloons) show the interception of the Egyptian aircraft and the seizure of the Palestinians on the ground of a Sicilian airbase. Were negotiations with the Palestinians successful? Was the Egyptian government going to free them? Punish them? None of these questions is addressed in the narrative. The last frame of the story is at once the most ambiguous and the most telling. Coming after the image at the airbase, it shows only an Egyptian flag held aloft by an arm, emerging from the frame's border: a protest affirmation of Egyptian nationalism to balance the humiliation associated with the content of the previous two frames. The contrast with the triumphalism of the *intifâda* strip is marked.

Such purely political strips are rare in Muslim children's magazines. The October 1973 War sparked a rash of patriotic strips in the usually less political *al-Firdaws*. But

6.2. The *intifâda*: Israeli soldiers and Arab schoolchildren.

even in this time of war fever, the Egyptian periodical mixed the patriotic with other, more common Muslim comic-strip genres. Even before the Egyptian surprise crossing of the Suez Canal, a change appeared in the *al-Firdaws* strips, foreshadowing the war to come. A September 1973 story, written by 'Aliyya Tawfîq Mahmûd and drawn by Nabîl al-Ramlî, seems on the surface a typical moral tale, in which a girl is rewarded for returning a box she has found. The end of the story introduces the new element when we learn that the box contained letters from a son at the front to his mother, adding a patriotic element to an otherwise structurally typical tale of moral exchange.<sup>11</sup> The two November issues of 1973 each produced war stories.<sup>12</sup> In the first, a group of boys collecting dynamite to use against Israeli soldiers are saved when the enemy soldiers accidentally blow themselves up in a cave. Qur'anic quotes in the middle (Sûrat al-Hajj, verse 38) and end (Sûrat al-Baqara, verse 190) of the story indicate that God protects believers and not unbelievers. Divine providence, not bravery or patriotic valor, saves our young heroes. In the second story, a child's paralysis is miraculously healed so that he can help a victim from the rubble caused by an Israeli raid. Again, patriotic fare is bent to religious purposes.

These magazines take their educational functions seriously, and the provision of general knowledge, especially scientific, is a frequent feature. In a regular series in *Ahmad*, a knowledgeable young man, 'Arif (a name meaning "one who knows") explains to a group of adolescents topics from moles to firefighting. This technique, conventional in Arab strips, is enlivened by the inclusion of photographs inserted into the strips themselves (e.g., 1988, nos. 14 and 21). Third World political economy is broached when 'Arif argues that his compatriots should eat their own fresh food rather than exporting it to be canned and repurchasing it at a higher cost, and that they should buy local products in order not to be dependent on others (1988, nos. 15 and 17).

*Zam Zam*, by contrast, usually inserts or attaches its general knowledge in narratives (e.g., 1988, no. 3). The greatest emphasis on education in all its forms characterizes *al-Muslim al-Saghîr*, the overwhelming majority of whose strips are devoted to such material. A number of strips feature father figures teaching younger individuals (e.g., 1985, nos. 28, 29, and 30). The most important teaching strip, and one of the most important series in *al-Muslim al-Saghîr*, is entitled "al-Faylasûf al-Zâ'ir wal-Shâtir 'Atir" (The Visiting Philosopher and the Clever 'Atir). The philosopher, with flowing white beard and traditional robes, explains a variety of subjects to his pupil: religious knowledge, historical data, the natural sciences (e.g., October 1985, February 1986, May 1986). The result of this pedagogical mixture is to define all these subjects into a larger category: that of general knowledge. Further, the choice of a philosopher (instead of a *shaykh*, for example) fuses the philosophical and Islamic traditions, while placing the entire curriculum under the sign of rational knowledge.

But a more subtle dialectic of tradition is being played out. Transmission of knowledge is patriarchal (from father figure to eternal son) but equivocal. The philosopher is not of our time; rather, he is outside time, hence his knowledge of all periods: he is a visitor, his clothes are timeless, he, apparently ageless. He functions, in fact, like the Islamic figure of al-Khidr.<sup>13</sup> But our philosopher, though clothed in the attributes of a venerable religious figure, belongs, through his title if nothing else, to a more secular tradition. Thus does the assimilation of religious to profane knowledge risk the replacement of the religious tradition with the scientific one.

### Moral Tales

Our Muslim magazines give little space to unadorned practical religious instruction and prefer, when they do, to deliver these messages in narrative form. This does not mean that the daily practices of a Muslim do not find their way into frames and balloons. Nothing perhaps testifies better to the ubiquity of the comic-strip medium as a Muslim educational tool than the posters available in bookstores around the region explaining proper religious conduct. Among the best is a polychrome production by Ahmad 'Abd al-'Azîz printed in Cairo. Sixteen of these twenty-one frames also appeared in a publication series by the Children's Culture Branch of the Safîr Company. This booklet version has reduced the frames to virtual illustrations placed within prose fields. The poster traces "A Day in the Life of the Muslim Child."<sup>14</sup> But our black-haired lad becomes more than a Muslim everyman. Iconographically, he is a comic-strip hero: his head in an Islamicized medallion in the form of an eight-pointed star, accompanying the title (fig. 6.3). The frames themselves take us through the boy's day from awakening and greetings to his parents through prayers, meals, school work, "sports," visiting the sick, etc. Only the boy speaks. Narrativizing text is reserved for words at the bottoms of the frames, which, when combined with the pictures, identify the daily-life scenes. These present-tense comments blend prescription with narrative: "He gets up to perform the dawn prayer," "he goes to the mosque," "he helps his mother at home," etc. From the mouth of the boy come only pious for-



6.3. A day in the life of the Muslim child.

mulae, appropriate to each situation: Qur'anic recitation, Muslim greetings, blessings, etc. Daily life becomes textualized, its narrative a sequence of pious texts. The message is clear: the sacred word gives meaning to life as it gives continuity to the narrative. Even the booklet version supports this, since its inserted texts consist mostly of *hadîths* relevant to the situation.

But iconography is its own language, as is color. In the poster, the frame that reads "he likes sport" shows our young Muslim dressed in a karate outfit yet wearing boxing gloves and working out with a punching bag. With two forms of combat instead of one, its aggressiveness is overcoded. Why not a communal and far more popular sport like soccer? The iconographic contradiction (what Riffaterre would call an ungrammaticality) highlights a semiotic ambiguity.<sup>15</sup> Part of a *hadîth* (not presented as such, but merely in quotes) gives some of the answer: "The strong believer is better and more beloved to God than the weak believer." Juxtaposed with the picture, this would seem to indicate physical strength. The Arabic word *qawî*, however, suggests both mental and physical properties; and al-Nawawî, in his discussion of this *hadîth* in his famous commentary on the *Sahîh* of Muslim, interprets it as psychological and spiritual strength of will, whose manifestations include virtues such as patience, the doing of good deeds, and courage against the enemy in the *jihâd*. Physical fitness is not mentioned. Further, the poster-strip eliminated that part of the *hadîth* which more unequivocally addressed psychological concerns.<sup>16</sup> The frame, therefore, brings together two fields of signification, one purely iconic, the other religio-textual. Their point of contact is the idea of combat. Together, in the syntagm which is the frame, the signification is military struggle on behalf of the community—holy war. And this



activity is the closest to play of any in the life of our young Muslim. Is it a coincidence that this frame was one of those omitted in the booklet version, thus depriving it of the potential for fuller *hadîth* citation and commentary? The fuller *hadîth* citation would have rendered more difficult the semiotic shifts which give this poster frame its ideological distinctiveness.

In the boxing frame, the community was present while absent. Something similar transpires in the mosque and prayer frames. Though the poster recounts the daily life of an individual, many frames show his interaction with others; and in most of those, again, the other figures are fully colored in like the hero: his parents, a sick friend. In two frames, however, our young Muslim is shown praying in a mosque with a congregation, once kneeling and once standing. In the kneeling frame, the hero is fully colored in, while the rest of the frame, including the congregation, is done exclusively in a purple-white monochrome. The standing frame displays the same phenomenon, but with the entire background in shades of green. In both cases, also, the boy is drawn with a solid outline, colored in with solid color. The other figures, including those next to him in the row, are shaded in with more indefinite lines. In the frame, they look like ghosts, there and yet not there. Two other frames, one of prayer at school and another a classroom scene, have secondary figures with flesh-tone faces, ghostly white bodies, but polychrome background.

If the presence of others in the hero's background seems occasionally problematic, the mosque scenes are the most provocative. The congregation, in effect the Muslim community, or *umma*, is a ghostly apparition. Perhaps, this poster's iconography suggests, the supportive Muslim community is more an ideal or an echo from the past than a social reality. The family is real, as is the sick friend. But outside this narrow social circle, relationships fade in spirit and in color. Indeed, the sense of collectivity is weak. In thirteen of twenty-one frames, the hero appears alone.

By contrast to such direct prescriptions, most Muslim magazines prefer to wrap their moral messages in narrative, making contemporary moral tales the most ubiquitous Islamic comic-strip form. Such tales follow variations on two basic patterns: either good deeds are rewarded (usually directly, though in unexpected ways) or bad or foolish deeds are punished, generally by their practical consequences. The *al-Firdaws* strip discussed above in which a young girl was rewarded is a good example. Many of these stories include *hadîths* as justifications (e.g., *Barâ'im*, 1988, no. 156) but others do not (e.g., *Barâ'im*, 1988 no. 158).

The subtleties of *hadîth* citation come out in a strip in *Ahmad* (1988, no. 14). A boy, Muhtadî, comes home angry with his sister, whom he blames for having shamed him in front of a group of other boys, and justifies his criticism with the *hadîth*: "Help your brother, be he a tyrant or a victim of tyranny." Their mother replies that had he finished the *hadîth*, he would have understood that helping your brother when he is a tyrant means helping him to cease his tyranny. The boy now understands and promises never to bully again.

In this case, mother does know best, as the rest of the *hadîth*, never cited in the strip, clearly supports her interpretation.<sup>17</sup> But there are more significant issues here. Muhtadî has understood the *hadîth* as privileging family solidarity over wider social

bonds, evoking clan, tribal, and local loyalty networks. These bonds, which the Arabs call *'asabiyya*, have traditionally played a strong role in the region (as in the strip on Saddâm Husayn)<sup>18</sup> and have been the most important competitor to the *umma* and Islamic values as foci of loyalty. Though the father blesses the whole business at the end, it is the women of the family who uphold correct Islamic values against male bullying; and it is piquant to notice that the girl's name, Salmâ, is also that of the strip's author, Salmâ Badawî (the illustrator is 'Alî Shams al-Dîn).

Such a gender division of labor forms part of a larger pattern. Girls are more often exemplars of virtuous behavior, boys of improper or simply foolish activity. (Male figures are purveyors of knowledge, but that is another problem.)<sup>19</sup>

"Muhtadî" is one of two *Ahmad* series which use negative role models. The other is "Fashkûl." If Muhtadî's errors are both moral and practical (as when his overeating is repaid with a stomach ache; 1988, no. 15), those of Fashkûl are almost always practical (as when he fails to prepare his bicycle properly for a race; 1988, no. 14).

### Picturing Islam

But what if a *hadîth*, rather than proving a point, becomes a narrative, the essence of the strip itself? This brings us into the realm of the historico-religious material, strips which tell stories of early Islamic history. Several Firdawsian strips are narrativizations of *hadîths*. Sometimes the entire formal *hadîth* follows the strip, duplicating and certifying the story (e.g., *Qâdî*, pp. 3-5).<sup>20</sup> At other times the strip actually replaces the *hadîth*, though the young reader is told before and after the story that this was a *hadîth* from the Prophet (e.g., *Sâlim*, pp. 6-8).<sup>21</sup>

Putting early Islamic history in strips poses the problem of representation in its acutest form. Like *al-Firdaws*, *al-Muslim al-Saghîr* does not shy away from picturing important Islamic personalities or events, though the Prophet himself never appears, being kept carefully out of the frames (e.g., 1983, nos. 13, 16, 17, and 24). Marzûq Hilâl put it to us this way: there are two types of Islam, one backward looking, one forward looking; and images are tools—used for a good purpose they are good, for a bad purpose, bad.<sup>22</sup>

The most conservative stripology is that of *Barâ'im al-Imân*, whose strips on the early caliphs omit all historical pictorialization (1986, no. 131; 1988, nos. 156 and 157). All we see is a young man narrating the history to male and female colleagues in exclusively verbal balloons. The series' only interest lies in its politics: divisions in the community are blamed on its enemies, "chief among them the Jews," echoing a position of Sayyid Qutb.<sup>23</sup> But even *Barâ'im* drops this exceedingly dull procedure when it moves to the slightly later, and less sacred, Umayyad period (1988, no. 158).

It is the "official" *al-Firdaws* which goes farthest in putting Islamic sacred materials in strip form. Two episodes recount events from the lives of pre-Islamic Arabian prophets, Sâlih of the people of Thamûd and Hûd of the people of 'Ad. No sacred reference or source is given in the strips. Both prophetic accounts go back to the Qur'ân (e.g., Sûrat al-A'râf, Sûrat Hûd, Sûrat al-Shu'arâ'), yet the strips contain im-



6.4. Halima with the infant Muhammad.

portant narrative elements missing from the Qur'anic versions (though not inconsistent with them). Virtually all the significant material, however, can be found in Qur'anic commentaries, such as al-Baydāwī's, and the *Anbiyā'* collections (histories of the prophets).<sup>24</sup> If the Qur'anic text is understood as including its commentary, then these Firdawsian stories can be seen as narrativized Qur'ān in comic-strip form. This would be particularly provocative, since, as we shall see, a later similar narrativization of the Muslim holy book proved controversial.

The taboo on Prophetic representation was at least partly violated, however, in an earlier *al-Firdaws* (April 1974). Written by 'Aliyya Tawfīq (whom we shall meet again) and drawn by Nabil al-Ramlī, this strip recounts an episode from the *Sīra*, or biography of the Prophet, by Ibn Hishām, though no source or reference is given.<sup>25</sup> In no sense a canonical text, the *Sīra* has been for many centuries an extraordinarily popular work, the main source on the life of the Prophet and much venerated by Muslims. In this story, a wet nurse, Halima, takes on the infant, and orphaned, Muhammad, after which she and her family are blessed with a series of fortunate happenings. Iconographically, the strip takes us into territory heavily exploited in Christian pictorial traditions: a mother figure and holy infant. Not surprisingly, the images have a familiar feeling. Muhammad appears in the woman's arms. We see him only from the back, but his head is surrounded with a brilliant halo (fig. 6.4). Halima resembles Western representations of the Virgin, in that her head covering exposes the face and even some long tresses,<sup>26</sup> though some of the women in the strip bear more conservative, Islamic-looking veils. Further, while Halima's companions ride



6.5. Al-Firdaws's traditional Arabs.

camels and horses, she and the blessed infant ride a donkey, as in Christian representations of the Flight into Egypt, though this narrative detail was present in the *Sīra* and not added by the comic strip's authors.<sup>27</sup>

### Morality and History: *al-Firdaws*

*Al-Firdaws* regularly devotes three pages to comic strips, for the last several years in brilliant colors. The scenarios are by 'Aliyya Tawfīq and drawings by Kamāl Darwish. Some of the strips are reused in later issues, and the majority, including virtually all the later ones, have also been collected in two booklets available separately.<sup>28</sup>

The strips themselves recount stories set in the past, the majority in the time of the Prophet or of the Jāhiliyya. The most modern evoke the Umayyads, the 'Abbasids, or, in one case, the time of the Crusades. Similarly, the loci of the stories are either clearly Arabia or an ill-defined Middle East. None of the strips take place in Egypt. For Egyptian readers, the narratives exist in a time and space not their own.

Space and time are those of the heritage of Islam and of the Arabs, hence the titles of the collections: Arab and Islamic Stories. Pastoral scenes dominate, camels and sheep play an important role, and urban life is never clearly evoked. More striking is the physiognomy of the characters. The men (good guys as well as bad guys) are generally robust if not stout, and majestic, with large almost caricatural noses. This last trait is reinforced by the tendency of the artist to make the noses of his characters a bit redder than the rest of their faces (fig. 6.5). These faces neither look Egyptian nor resemble the customary ways in which Egyptians, or even other Arabs, are drawn in their own strips. Apparently, a "Semitic" physiognomy is intended. Nevertheless, no ethnic differentiation is coded visually. The Jewish characters (among whom are both heroes and villains) are perhaps a bit thinner on the average, but Bilāl, who has traditionally always been considered a black, is not drawn as one (e.g., *Sālim*, p. 54; *Qādī*,



pp. 21, 31).<sup>29</sup> Thus the drawings, like the stories, combine a temporal and physical alterity with an Islamic exemplarity. The number of characters represented visually remains small; usually two and rarely more than three per frame, the authors avoiding visual representations of crowds.

This concentration on a small number of individuals in each episode is linked to the way history is understood and exploited in these strips. Unlike *al-Muslim al-Saghîr*, *al-Firdaws* does not treat history as a sequence of events, a diachronic series, the past of the reader and the explanation of his or her present. In the supplement to the *Minbar al-Islâm*, history is sundered from temporal continuities and considered in an essentially synchronic manner. This distant past is a field peopled with exemplary characters whose actions are considered almost uniquely from an ethical perspective. Morality flattens out history into a collection of good and bad actions, a very old form of historical conceptualization.

The system of values expressed revolves around two linked concepts: generosity and exchange, the latter figuring a kind of imminent justice. The first of these is a positive value, the second figures a relationship crucial to a number of the most common morphologies in the comic strips of *al-Firdaws*. In effect, religion centers on practical morality expressed through social relations, themselves conceived in essentially binary terms as the dealings of one individual with another. Generosity is the virtue most prized in the strips of *al-Firdaws*. In a corpus of forty-two comic-strip narratives, fifteen, or more than a third, are almost exclusive celebrations of this value, so traditionally at once Arab and Islamic. Four others relate to the limits and conditions of generosity.

The prominence of generosity and its association with exchange can be seen most clearly in a strip which functions virtually as a perfect generosity anecdote. Two men are lost in the desert and arrive at the camp of a bedouin. The latter decides to kill his last sheep, a ewe, in their honor. His wife protests: what will become of their daughter thus deprived of milk? But her husband goes ahead and kills the animal. After their meal, one of the travelers wants to offer his last five hundred dinars to the generous bedouin. His companion protests: the sheep was worth only five dirhams. The first traveler replies that the bedouin had given all that he had, preferring his guests to his family. After receiving his gift, the bedouin explains to his wife that he can now buy an entire flock of sheep for their daughter (*Sâlim*, pp. 42-44).

All the elements of the systems of generosity and exchange are present in this strip. Much in the scene is classic and evokes the Jâhiliyya. The virtue itself is presented as a social duty, and it is, of course, the hospitality upon which the Arabs have prided themselves from earliest times (and which even the fugitive Saddâm Husayn evoked).<sup>30</sup> Equally manifest is the structure of exchange. The second generous act replies to the first, the gift provoking more than its recompense. This idea of multiplied recompense is quite common in our corpus. Typical also are the two characters who serve as foils, advising against generosity.

It might be tempting to see in the reaction of the bedouin's wife a lesser concern with honor or a greater preoccupation with the material condition of the family, associated with her female role (we seem almost in the presence of a female conspiracy:

the milk of the ewe demanded by the mother for her daughter). Though other women act similarly, in the story in question the same lack of generosity is expressed by the traveler's male companion; in another strip, it is the wife who insists on returning a lost bag of money (*Qâdî*, pp. 45-47). Less equivocal is the relatively mundane treatment of the virtue. Generosity is never justified in religious terms, and though God is invoked in the beginning of the story by the traveler and at the end by the wife, the faith that sustains the generous is present only by implication. When, in her final comments, the bedouin's wife thanks the deity who does not fail to repay those who do good deeds, the young reader would conclude that the repayment is both earthly and material.

The same desert scene, the same exchange of generosity, and the same multiplied recompense characterize another strip appropriately entitled "Sustenance in the Desert." The only missing figure is the nongenerous foil. An element of providence appears with the fact that the guests only find their lost camels (which permits them to repay their host) after having received his hospitality (February 1988).

In *al-Firdaws*, generosity is so important that it can replace, even substitute for, other virtues, always within the structure of exchange. During the Crusades, a young man is charged by his mother with watching over a goat, the only possession left to the family after the depredations of the warriors from Europe. Our young hero himself wishes he were old enough to fight alongside Salâh al-Dîn. Appropriately, a Muslim soldier arrives asking for water for a wounded comrade. Short of water, the young man offers the milk of his goat. The soldiers leave and the boy returns home, only to have his mother blame him for having given away the sole resource of the household. Her son answers that they will have to wait for the nanny to produce more milk, since he could not let a wounded Muslim die of thirst. Several months pass and the Muslims are victorious. One of them brings to the young man an entire flock of goats, explaining to him that it was a gift from the leader whose life he had saved. When our young hero protests that he has done nothing, the soldier answers that, on the contrary, he has without knowing it participated in the victory of the Muslims (*Sâlim*, pp. 33-35). The generosity exchange is as clear as the role of the mother as foil. But generosity here becomes a kind of generic virtue. It permits the young man who dreams of battle to play his part in the war, a stand-in for courage. At the same time, the principle of exchange, equally present in the strip, obviates the need for a hierarchization of values. Evidently, the young man would prefer the glory of battle. But would he be justified in sacrificing the well-being of his family for what could be seen as the greater well-being of the community? The second part of the exchange, clearly defined as a gift and not as booty, occults this political question by reducing the issue to reciprocal generosity.

The connection between generosity and the military virtues appears in other strips as well. In one, a young Muslim wants to fight in the army of the Prophet. His father is rich, but an unbeliever. The solution: the young man's sister gives him money to outfit himself while another Muslim takes him on his horse to the Prophet's army (*Sâlim*, pp. 45-47). In another tale, the caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattâb finds work for a man so that he can buy arms, enabling him to go on the *jihâd* (*Qâdî*, pp. 54-56).

Generosity is further glorified by its association with a large number of figures, including the Prophet (*Qâdî*, pp. 24–26 and 33–35), and its presence in a large variety of situations. But exchange, which so often accompanies this Firdawsian virtue, is not limited to the things of this world. In a popular story, apparently often presented to Muslim children<sup>31</sup> and based on a *hadîth*,<sup>32</sup> a man in the desert slakes his thirst at a well. Shortly afterward, he meets a dog who is suffering from thirst but cannot reach the deep well. With great difficulty, our pious hero climbs into the well, fills his babouche with water, and brings it to the dog. Climbing out of the well, he carries the babouche in his mouth. This role reversal between man and animal reinforces the identification of need that motivated the good deed. This equivalence is not complete: it is not the dog who repays the man his kindness but God who pardons him his sins (*Sâlim*, pp. 6–8).

The subtleties of spiritual recompense are developed in another episode. The hero finds a sick man who asks him for a pomegranate. The generous man goes to the village to buy one. Afterward, feeling relieved and spiritually uplifted, he decides to make the pilgrimage. On the way he encounters a lion who miraculously does not attack him. At Mecca he meets up with the sick man, now cured, who explains that his protection from the beast was a divine reward (*al-Firdaws*, December 1987). In effect, there were two rewards: the first psychological and spiritual, the second material.

Trials can come before or after the reward. The latter is the case with the story of the three handicapped individuals: a blind man, a leper, and a bald man (this last infirmity is part of the Arabo-Islamic system of physical marginality).<sup>33</sup> The three men pray to God to cure them, which is done. Only now is their faith tried. An angel, disguised as a beggar, asks alms successively of each of the three in the name of God who gave to each man either his hair, his sight, or his normal skin. Only the blind man proves generous, and the others are repaid with the return of their infirmities (*Qâdî*, pp. 18–20). Here the exchange runs in reverse, though the terms are made clear in the angel's request. In the same terms, generosity can buy off a fault, real or imagined. Hârûn al-Rashîd suddenly gives a large sum of money to the poor when he thinks that he has spent too much on himself (*Qâdî*, pp. 42–44).

### Complications and Limits of Exchange

The exchange system easily figured a kind of justice when generosity could be directly repaid, more often by men, sometimes by direct divine agency. But even in the relatively simple society of the Firdawsian strips, the search for the appropriate level of exchange, that is, the harmonization of generosity with reciprocal justice, is not always easy. A man sells his house for the agreed price: a normal commercial exchange. The son of the new owner finds a pot of gold in the new house and exclaims: "Look, my father, here is a treasure that God has sent to us!" But the father will not accept it and insists that the money belongs to the previous owner of the house. The latter refuses it in turn, since he had not known of its existence. The wise judge finds

a solution: the son of the one man will marry the daughter of the other and the couple will accept the gold as dowry (*Sâlim*, pp. 3–5). The generosity of the two men provokes the search for a principle of exchange, effectively found by the *qâdî*. By offering the money to the young couple, each man gives and receives at the same time.

But why such a complicated solution based on the narrative pretext of marriageable children of the opposite sex? A simple division of the money would have eliminated generosity, crucial in the transformation of mere exchange into justice. Equally striking is the fact that the *qâdî*, faced with a legal problem, never answers the question and at no time invokes Islamic law. The generosity-as-imminent-justice system effectively precludes positive law, even Islamic law.<sup>34</sup>

The story of the money in the house also implicitly criticizes the idea of treating found objects as gifts of God. The same problematic combines with questions of exchange in the story of a man who goes to the Ka'ba and prays God to provide for his sustenance and the support of his family. After all, as he explains to his wife, all goodness comes from the Lord. During his circuit of the Ka'ba, his foot strikes a sack containing a hundred dinars. Delighted, the man brings the money back to his wife as divine bounty. This time it is the wife who objects, arguing that the money was certainly lost by someone. Her husband accepts her position as a religious duty; returning to the sacred site, he hears a man asking if someone has found a bag of money. The hero identifies himself, but the other insists that he keep the sack and gives him a further thousand dinars. The explanation of the mystery: a believer from Iraq wanted to donate some money but was concerned that the beneficiary be worthy of it (*Qâdî*, pp. 45–47).

The moral is expressed directly in the text: a good Muslim keeps the property of others in trust and returns it to them. But the morality of exchange has been refined. In the beginning, the hero thinks that he is making a deal with the good Lord. He goes to the Ka'ba, he prays, and in return he will receive money. But the terms of the exchange are more complicated than he suspected, and he is obliged to merit the money through his actions. Our hero then turns in his small bag of money for a far larger sum, as in the classical exchange between host and guest already discussed. At the end of the story, we are brought back to the conditions of the first exchange, since the man finds the sustenance he sought at the Ka'ba.

A tension exists within the idea of confidence and divine providence. To receive money directly is to expect too much, but in the end one receives it anyway. Simply, the motivation must be the correct one. The same distinction operates in the strip already cited of the man who was carried on the horse of another to the *jihâd*. In return for the transportation, the zealous young warrior had offered his share of the spoils to his benefactor. The battle over, the other refuses the proffered booty, explaining that this was not his motivation in aiding his Muslim brother. If the exchange becomes too mercantile, it can be refused.

For the authors of *al-Firdaws*, not all exchanges embody an imminent justice. Some are morally superior to others, as in the story, alluded to above, in which a young man asks the believers to help him buy arms so that he can go on a *jihâd*. He is led before the caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattâb, who finds him work (*Qâdî*, pp. 44–46).



This moral is drawn even more clearly in a narrative entitled "Inciting to Work." A man, wishing to trust in divine providence, is informed by means of a *hadith* that for a good Muslim the best money is earned through work (*Sâlim*, pp. 21-23). It is better to exchange work for money than to rely on providence.

But there are exchanges, even exchanges of generosity, which are illicit. Knowing that her husband, again the famous caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattâb, is going to send a message to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, Umm Kulthûm seizes the occasion to send a gift to the emperor's wife. The latter answers quite generously with a letter of thanks and gifts of higher value than those sent by Umm Kulthûm. The empress's gifts are intercepted by 'Umar, who explains to his wife and to the other Muslims that the gifts, as they are brought by the messenger of the community, belong to the community (*Qâdî*, pp. 39-41). Between two men, the exchange might seem perfectly licit. But it is improper because the caliph's wife has meddled in an area in which she has no business, politics. There is, of course, a long tradition in Islam on the impropriety of "first ladies," be they wives of the Prophet, interfering in politics.<sup>35</sup> Noteworthy in this case is the exclusion of women from a male system of reciprocal generosity. Umm Kulthûm's marriage with 'Umar is not based on reciprocity either. Twice the strip explains that she was an obedient wife who accepted the authority of her husband.

Even between men there are forbidden generousities and improper exchanges. The pious Umayyad caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azîz refuses a gift of apples. To accept them would have been corruption and the fruit a bribe (*Sâlim*, pp. 48-50). The problem of corruption and of an insufficiently disinterested generosity is evoked as well in the strip entitled "Beware of Corruption" (*Sâlim*, pp. 18-20).

But justice can also be seen as the restitution of an original equal exchange in place of an unequal one. A merchant secretly watered down the milk he was selling by 50 percent. He left the city with his ill-gotten gains, but on the boat a monkey he had just purchased opened his moneybag. The animal threw half the coins in the water and the other half in the boat. The text explains that this is only justice, because the monkey threw overboard the proceeds of the sale of the water and only kept the value of the milk actually sold (*Qâdî*, pp. 3-5). Noteworthy here is the punishment of the cheat, or lack thereof. Instead of making him lose all his money, the monkey restores the legal exchange, but only half of it, since the customers do not get half their money back. The morality of the story consists in the restitution of a parody of exchange, not in a true punishment of the businessman. The same restitution of proper exchange following criminal activity appears in another *al-Firdaws* narrative (*Qâdî*, pp. 48-50).

### Binary Justice

The notion of justice as appropriate exchange is reflected in the binary structures dominating this Islamic children's magazine. Even when there are more than two characters, two or rarely three individuals often function narratologically as one. Nor are these conceptions foreign to the visual arrangement of the pages. The most distinctive characteristic of the *Firdawsian* strips is the horizontal nature of the frames.

The majority of pages are divided uniquely into horizontal registers, each consisting of a single frame. And in almost all the rest of the cases, all but one of the registers are so composed. The result is a visual field far wider than it is high and in which it becomes easiest to arrange figures in profile and from the right to the left of the frame. These profiles, which face each other visually, figure the equivalence of exchange, even when the story does not. They also show the connection of the justice-as-exchange motif to essentially binary social relations.

It is not simply that justice tends to be individualized, linked to the personal virtue of generosity. By being directed to reciprocal relations, justice is severed from overall social organization. And this is hardly an Islamic conception. From the inception of the community, Muslims have always insisted upon the necessity of a just social order, not merely of individually correct behavior.

But, one might object, *al-Firdaws* is for children, and social justice is a complicated notion. Yet this choice has political implications. The authors have set their stories in earlier, apparently simpler times, certainly in periods for which the dominance of Islamic values is generally assumed. The primary virtue, generosity, though certainly not un-Islamic, is just as clearly pre-Islamic. Thus does this Islamic magazine draw on some of the same *Jâhiliyya* mystique exploited by the secular Baathist propagandists of Saddâm Husayn.

The Arabism of the *Firdawsian* faces and settings, already familiar to us, is reinforced by the covers of the booklets in which most of the strips have been reprinted. As Jean-Bruno Renard has shown for French strips, such covers frequently figure iconographic combinations which are not present in the strips themselves and which, as a result, release hidden levels of meaning.<sup>36</sup> The two *al-Firdaws* covers contain slight variations on a single basic design. In the one shown in fig. 6.6, the four images on the bottom of the diamond are taken from the strips themselves. The two new images are also the two nonvariant ones. Dominating the diamond, a boy reaches out to a sphere, surrounded by an Islamic motto. Normal enough for the circumstances: our young reader reaches out to Islam. More interesting is the other invariant. A bedecked camel with a traditionally dressed Arab rider emerges from outside the visual field, on the right. The level of detail is far greater than that used in the strips themselves. What is this intruder doing? He brings in the Arab heritage, both *Jâhiliyya* and Islamic, a heritage which the strips use to personify Islamic values. If this Arabism, unlike that of the Iraqi leader, links to religion, they nonetheless share an archaizing backward-looking tendency. It is an Arabism of the past, not a Nasserite pan-Arabism of the present and future.

The exemplary nature of this past is not unproblematic, however. The classical virtue of generosity, the idea of giving all one has to a stranger without leaving resources for the morrow, with its implications of confidence in divine providence, is not exactly modern. Thus is it corrected by another, the superiority of work over passive expectation. One finds an even greater contemporary relevance in the concern with problems of corruption. Does this mean that the old values are no longer valid? After having refused the gift of apples, the pious Umayyad caliph defends his decision before a group of men who object to him that the Prophet always accepted gifts,

and, could one not add, that the acceptance of gifts is a condition of generosity? But the caliph's response is clear: the Prophet's time is not ours. "At the present time," that is to say, that of the story and that of the reader, accepting gifts becomes corruption. The exemplarity of the distant past has its limits, those of the Firdawsian project itself: the portrayal of Islamic values through a simplified, mythologized social system.

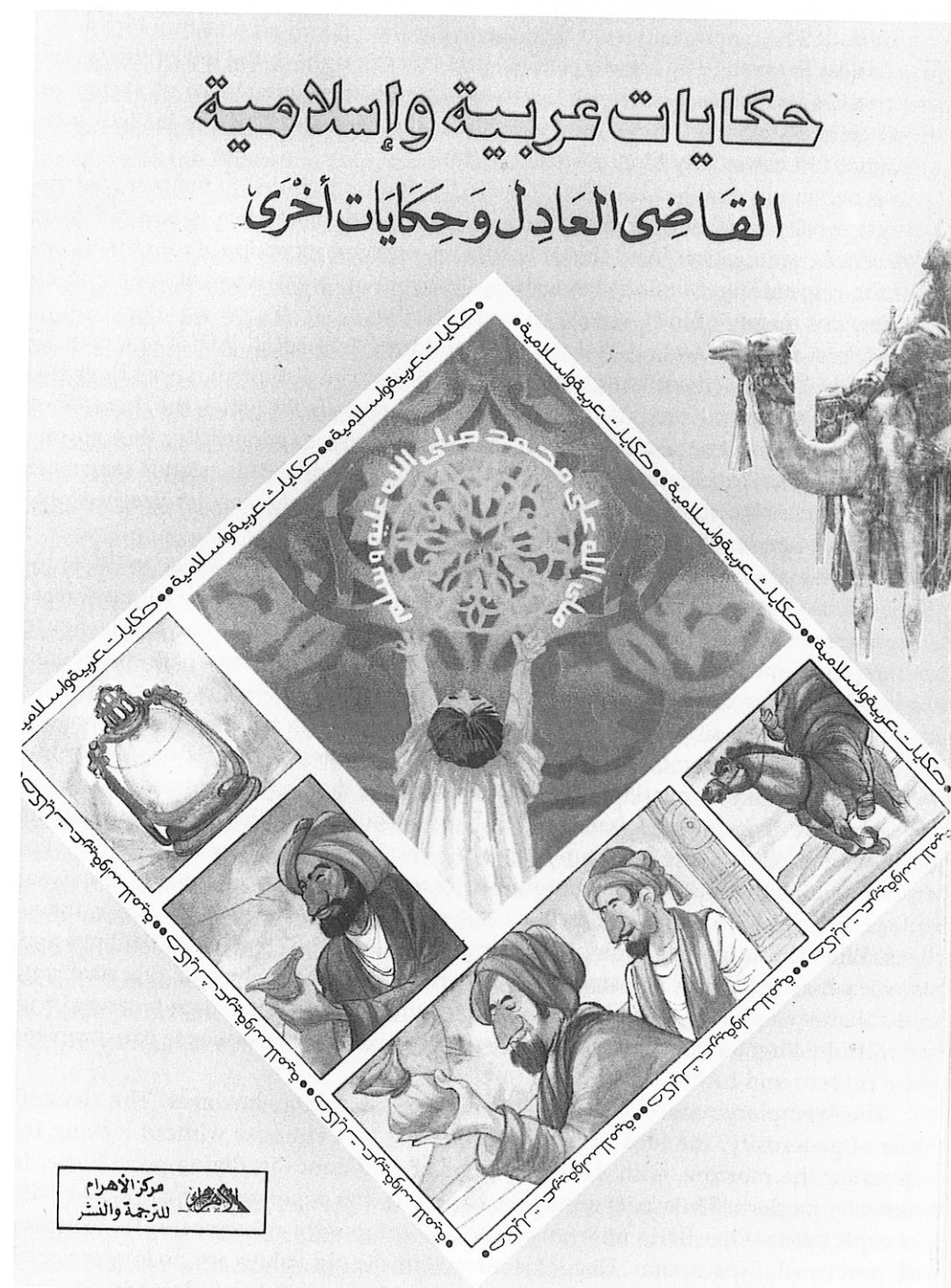
### Sacred Biography

If the representation of the Arabo-Islamic past poses the greatest challenges to Islamic comic-strip artists, how much more is this so when in the form of a complete album, rather than selected narratives. *Zuhûr al-Islâm* (The Advent of Islam) is such a historical album, published first in Arabic and then in French translation (*L'Avènement de l'Islam*).<sup>37</sup> The production is actually Euro-Arab, since the drawings are by Clave Florencio, but the whole is under the official caution of Abdel Satar Abou Ghouda and with the religious visa of the Ministry of Pious Foundations and Islamic Affairs of Kuwait. The work is presented as the first in a series, "The History of Islam in Comic Strips," but in reality it is something else—a comic-strip version of the first part of the *Sîra*, or biography of the Prophet.

Though the album itself begins with a double evocation of the community (through pictures of Muslims praying and circling the Ka'ba) and the Qur'ân (through the *fâtiha*, or opening *sûra*), we soon meet Ibn Ishâq, who, replying to requests from those around him, undertakes to explain the appearance and spread of Islam. Ibn Ishâq was the author of a *sîra*, or biography, of the prophet which has come down to us in the recension of Ibn Hishâm.<sup>38</sup> Though many of the historical appreciations have been effectively modernized, the topics and stories treated in "The Advent of Islam" are essentially those of the medieval Arab scholars.

Thus Ibn Ishâq takes on the familiar role of the *homme-récit*.<sup>39</sup> But he swiftly becomes less *homme* and more *récit*. Even in the frame where his fellows ask him to explain the revelation to Muhammad (p. 4), he alone is entirely in black and white. Every other face bears the flesh tones of living beings. Ibn Ishâq continues to appear as a narrator of sorts—but without speech balloons. Most often his head is in profile, a line drawing in a monochrome frame, with the masculine dignity of an Ottoman sultan painted by Bellini. Though text appears next to his profile, he never "speaks" (his mouth is never open). On only one occasion do we see a finger in a gesture that reminds one of conversation (p. 35). This Ibn Ishâq is not a living narrator, but an icon of a text—of Ibn Ishâq's *sîra*. And this textualization dominates the album. Not only are balloons virtually absent, but the speech of other characters which could easily have gone into speech balloons instead is often subsumed as quotes into the narrative of Ibn Ishâq (e.g., p. 20).

This relentless textualization, which almost turns the album into a text with accompanying illustrations, simplifies the problem of prophetic representation. Neither Muhammad nor any of the pre-Islamic prophets are visualized in any way, not even



6.6. Islam and Arab tradition on an al-Firdaws reprint cover.



in profile, in shadow, or as out-of-frame voice. The techniques used in *al-Firdaws*, such as having characters repeat the words of a prophet, are absent. One master narrator has so effectively textualized all the other characters that no further distancing is necessary.

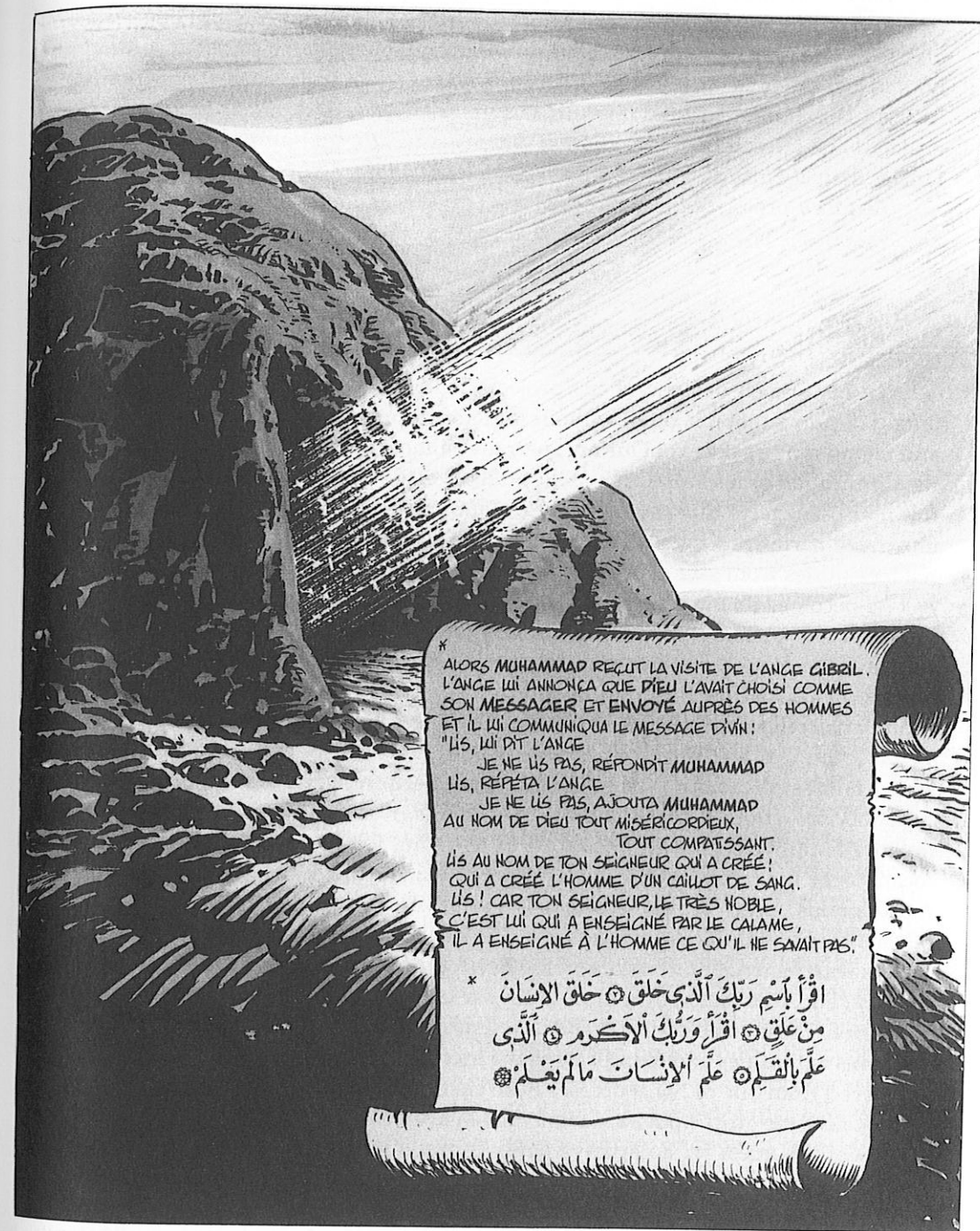
An out-of-frame voice could suggest the numinous, as in the familiar voice from the clouds in a religious film. Since much of "The Advent of Islam" is concerned with the history of the Arab tribes, it is not surprising that like most Islamic strips it avoids the numinous<sup>40</sup>—that is, until the dramatic closing of the album. The last page is a single frame (fig. 6.7). A shaft of light whose point of origin would seem to be the sky outside the frame penetrates the womblike structure of Mount Hira through a natural opening. A scroll records the event of revelation and the first-revealed verses (*Sûrat al-ʿAlaq*) in French and in Arabic. The Angel Gabriel, who carries the revelation, and the Prophet Muhammad, who receives it, are equally absent.

The recent Moroccan *History of Islam Series* (*Silsilat Ta'rîkh al-Islâm*), drawn by Muhammad Binmas'ûd with scenario by 'Abd al-ʿAzîz Ishbâbû, has concentrated largely (at least so far) on the life of the Prophet. Though obviously also relying largely on the *Sîra*, the *Series* does not present itself as a stripification of that work, nor does it employ a personalized, textualizing narrator. The words of the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad are shown as huge Kufic characters slicing, balloon-free, through the night sky (e.g. 4/10–11). The words of the Prophet and some of his most important companions are generally transmitted through off-screen voices, rather than reported discourse. The result is to turn some of the frames into confusing collections of speech balloons pointing to no characters (e.g. 4/11, 15).

### The Qur'ân in Strips

Problems of representation are only sharper when the text is not a revered biography of the Prophet but the Qur'ân. The sacred text has a centrality in Islam equivalent only to the miracle of the Incarnation in Christianity. Even more, its text is armored with the doctrine of *I'jâz al-Qur'ân*. This doctrine, a dogma for virtually all Muslims, states that the Qur'ânic text as the word (and, as Mohammed Arkoun puts it, the wording<sup>41</sup>) of God is perfect in every respect, from the doctrinal to the linguistic and the aesthetic. Hence, whereas *hadîth* and biography are the work of man (and Muslim scholars have long recognized that they are not free from error), the Qur'ân is perfect. When this dogma is added to the highly elusive and figurative nature of much Qur'ânic rhetoric, it is easy to see how many might consider such a project not merely sacrilegious but well-nigh impossible from a practical point of view.

And yet the Tunisian Youssef Seddik has published several volumes of what he considers a comic-strip version of the Qur'ân. As befitting the linguistic situation in Tunisia<sup>42</sup> and in a clear attempt to reach the widest possible audience, Seddik has brought out his sacred strips simultaneously in French and Arabic editions.<sup>43</sup> The scenarios have all been prepared by Youssef Seddik, but the illustration is the work of a number of French artists. While the texts and images of the strips are the same, the



6.7. Revelation pictured.

editorial comments introducing and defending the project have been adapted in each case to the differing cultural backgrounds of Francophone and Arabophone readers.

Seddik's strip scripture received prompt condemnation from Islamic authorities both in and out of his own country.<sup>44</sup> The Tunisian writer replied by anticipation, criticizing that school of Muslim thinking which condemns any recourse to images. Nevertheless, he offered the concession of picturing no prophets.<sup>45</sup> He has thus gone no farther than *al-Firdaws*.

Seddik's project attracts controversy because of the breadth of its claim. The French series is labeled *Si le Coran m'était conté* (If the Qur'ân Were Told to Me). The Arabic is more ambiguous: an unattributed quote easily recognized by educated Muslims, verse 3 from Sûrat Yûsuf, the *sûra* of Joseph, "We will tell you the most beautiful of stories, through our revealing to you this Qur'ân, though you were before it one of the heedless."<sup>46</sup>

In his French defense of his project, Seddik criticizes the way the Qur'ân is taught, arguing that it is often without understanding. His insistence on the elliptical and metaphoric qualities of Qur'ânic narrative almost make it seem as if the text needs the clarification of his strips. While the Arabic version is more restrained and respectful, it also suggests that the meaning of Qur'ânic passages will be rendered by the illustrated narrative.<sup>47</sup> Hence, if the artists and scenarists of *al-Firdaws* present to their readers stories from sacred history, Seddik claims to be delivering the Qur'ân. In effect he becomes its interpreter. By the seeming reality of its visualizations, the strip implies a univocal interpretation of the text. This difference in aim between the Tunisian and Egyptian strips may not be unrelated to the fact that while the Egyptians used local artists, the Tunisian (like Abdel Satar Abou Ghouda of "The Advent of Islam") has relied on Western illustrators.

"If the Qur'ân Were Told to Me" is both more and less than the holy book in strips. It is less because it is only directed to the narrative parts of the Qur'ân, ignoring hortatory, descriptive, legal, and other materials. It is more because Seddik has frequently narrativized the Qur'ânic text by bringing together passages from different locations of the work. (While the Qur'ân contains stories, that of Joseph being the most famous, which appear as seamless narratives, many other events are referred to allusively and in different contexts.) Seddik has further fleshed out the Qur'ânic narratives with material from works on the lives of the prophets, Qur'ânic commentaries, the *Sîra*, etc. This much, of course, is similar to *al-Firdaws*, whose narrative detail also drew from these same sources. The difference is that Seddik goes to great pains both to list his authorities and to indicate in the text when a detail or point of interpretation is derived from one of his sources. These citations, combined with those of Qur'ânic verses, give the strip a para-academic, defensive quality.

Seddik's quest for a narrative easily represented in strip form sometimes leads him to introduce elements (in effect fictions) not found in the tradition. These can be narratologically minor, as in the conversations around the priest in the story of Hûd (*Peuples/Hûd*, p. 11). On occasion they can be narratologically and theologically significant. Based on a remark by al-Qurtubî that Iblîs (Satan in the Islamic tradition) built a siege engine for the tyrant Nimrod in order to hurl Abraham into the fire, Seddik creates a "Satanic personage." This fully drawn character inspires in the tyrant a variety



6.8. Divine punishment: rapid aging.

of challenges to the God of Abraham. One of them involves a complicated story in which this "devil" raises and trains vultures, eventually accompanying Nimrod on a mad voyage into space to challenge the deity (*Abraham/Ibrâhîm*, pp. 21, 27–37). By contrast, Seddik chooses not to illustrate the Angel of Shadow who, his text tells us, protects Abraham in the fire. Seddik had explained that he would pictorialize neither prophets nor angels (and the angelic nature of Iblîs is a disputed issue in the Islamic tradition).<sup>48</sup>

Hence, while the force for divine mercy is not represented, that of evil takes human form. This personification of temptation depsychologizes the Qur'ânic text. Perhaps more noteworthy, it runs counter to the trend found in some recent comic-strip versions of the New Testament in which the temptations of Christ (traditionally rendered with a personified Satan) are turned into internal psychological phenomena.<sup>49</sup>

Sometimes Seddik's interpretations effectively substitute new sets of events for the traditional ones. The people of Thamûd are punished by God. The Qur'ân in Sûrat al-A'râf (verse 78) says they were destroyed by an earthquake. The passage in question occupies a frame at the end of the story in the Arabic version, while the French text quotes from Sûrat Hûd, which does not mention the quake. The visual frames are ambiguous on the matter at best (*Peuples/Hûd*, p. 33). Seddik cites al-Qurtubî to the effect that before this, the faces of the people of Thamûd became yellow on the first day, red on the second, black on the third, and on the fourth they were destroyed (pp. 30–32).<sup>50</sup> In the strip itself, however, something else entirely occurs. The people of Thamûd age suddenly, and their faces fill with wrinkles (fig. 6.8). Seddik has introduced a visually compelling set of events that is common in contemporary science fiction and horror literature but seems without foundation in the traditional sources.<sup>51</sup>

The nonrepresentation of prophets is a familiar enough challenge in Islamic strips. Some of Seddik's solutions are equally familiar, such as reported discourse. Unlike his predecessors, however, he also often puts prophets into the frame, representing them with a kind of burst bubble, from which can even emanate speech bal-





6.9. The Prophet Abraham as a burst bubble.

loons (fig. 6.9). This absence then becomes a semiotic presence signifying the numinous, not unlike bursts of light replacing the faces of sacred characters in some traditional Islamic iconography. Prophetic humanity is invisible, its divine connection visually manifest.

Prophetic nonrepresentation can open a path to the visualization of other religious themes. Eight frames illustrate verses 75–79 of *Sûrat al-An‘âm* in which Abraham, rejecting the false deities of the sky for their impermanence, deduces monotheism. The descriptive parts of the verses are in explanatory bands, while Abraham’s words are in balloons emanating from a series of landscapes, almost as if their speaker were hidden behind a rock or a bush (fig. 6.10). The “speaking” landscape becomes



6.10. Abrahamic monotheism as a landscape.

an argument from design, at once illustrating and commenting the Qur’anic argument. Similarly, the impact of the Qur’anic verse “We said, ‘O fire, be coolness and safety for Abraham!’” is magnified by the fiery full-page frame which surrounds it.<sup>52</sup>

Such pages are the exception, however. The albums devote most of their space to more dramatic storytelling. Paradoxically, the avoidance of the prophetic figures when combined with the incidents chosen for narrative elaboration has the effect of emphasizing God’s wrath over his bounty. The Abraham album concentrates less on that prophet than on his struggle with Nimrod and the latter’s mad battle with the God of Abraham. As it has been argued that Satan is the hero of *Paradise Lost*, so in a way is the Mesopotamian tyrant the anti-hero of the Abraham album. Similarly, the punishments of the peoples of ‘Ad and Thamûd take visual precedence over the prophets Hûd and Sâlih, just as Nimrod’s vulture-led flight received maximum elaboration. Divine punishments, whether personal (against Nimrod) or collective (against the peoples of ‘Ad and Thamûd, or the Ethiopian army attacking the Ka‘ba), are narratively elaborated and richly illustrated (fig. 6.11).



6.11. Divine wrath narrativized: the destruction of the men of the elephant.

Each of the European illustrators brings his own Western-inspired visual style. Gioux, who did “The Men of the Elephant,” draws in the style of “the Belgian school” of Hergé and Jacobs; Teulat’s illustrations of Hûd and Sâlih are clearly inspired by U.S. adventure and horror strips. *Newsweek* printed the charge that Seddik’s strips visually stereotype Arabs (negatively is implied).<sup>53</sup> With the series’ multiple artists, this would be difficult. Nothing resembling a racial stereotype (even a mild or positive one) exists in *Peuples/Hûd* or *Ashâb al-Fîl*. The forms of faces are instead taken from the average physical types of the comic-strip school to which the artist belongs, with the concession to realism that these Near Easterners are not blond, except when the story makes them so. Many of the figures in *Abraham/Ibrâhîm* have what, in a Western context, are ethnically marked Near Eastern faces. But probably the clearest in this regard, Abra-

ham's father, is drawn with the dignity that belies caricature. In either case, no one in this album is an Arab. The image held up by *Newsweek* of a supposed Arab king imposing religious uniformity on his people (fig. 6.12) is just a "Belgian school" render-



6.12. An Arabian tyrant persecutes the Christians.

ing of a hysterical individual who in the strip is (a) a Jew and (b) an evil figure in the story. In either case, compared to the treatment of *al-Firdaws's* Arabs, Seddik's heroes and villains are virtually North European in physiognomy.

Not surprisingly, Occidental images wink at us from the pages of Seddik's strips. The city of Iram with its Qur'anic tall pillars becomes in some frames, and quite inappropriately, Stonehenge (fig. 6.13). The devil in the Nimrod sequence has the waxed mustache of a Gounod Mephistopheles (fig. 6.14) and the face and red head-gear of a modern Satan.

In effect, the decision to largely ignore the existing (though marginal) Islamic iconographic tradition and turn to Western illustrators has given Seddik's Qur'anic albums some of the shape of the Western comic-strip container into which he has poured his Islamic contents. Avoiding the prophets while concentrating on more easily represented dramatic episodes has only increased this tendency. The challenge is not the same for comic-strip versions of the Bible because the West has a long iconographic tradition, which grew up in symbiosis with its own religious interpretations. The artists and scenarists of *al-Firdaws* avoided this problem through their fragmentary approach. "The Advent of Islam" ducked the difficulties through the familiar technique of the *homme-récit* responsible for narrative continuity. By accepting the full





# Arab Comic Strips



Politics of an  
Emerging  
Mass  
Culture

Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas

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To D. P.-T., A. P.-T. and the memory of S. P.-T.