

The Ḥadīth of Gabriel

‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (the second Rightly Guided Caliph) reported: One day when we were with God’s messenger, a man with very white clothing and very black hair came to us. No mark of travel was visible on him, and none of us recognized him. Sitting down before the Prophet, leaning his knees against his, and placing his hands on his thighs, the stranger said, “Tell me, Muhammad, about *islām*.”

The Prophet replied, “*Islām* means that you should bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God’s messenger, that you should perform the ritual prayer, pay the alms tax, fast during Ramadan, and make the pilgrimage to the *Ka’aba* if you are able to go there.”

The man said, “You have spoken the truth.” (We were amazed at this man’s questioning the Prophet and then declaring that he had spoken the truth).

The stranger spoke a second time, saying, “Now tell me about *īmān*.”

The Prophet replied, “*Īmān* means that you have faith in God, His angels, His books, His messengers and the Last Day, and that you have faith in the measuring out, both its good and its evil.”

Remarking that the Prophet again had spoken the truth, the stranger then said, “Now tell me about *iḥsān*.”

The Prophet replied, “*Iḥsān* means that you should worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.”

Yet again the man said, “Tell me about the Hour (that is, the coming of the Day of Judgment).”

The Prophet replied, “About *that* he who is questioned knows no more than the questioner.”

The stranger said, “Then tell me about its marks.”

The Prophet replied, “The slave girl will give birth to her mistress, and you will see the barefoot, the naked, the destitute, and the shepherds vying with each other in building.”

At that, the stranger went away.

After I had waited for a long time, the Prophet spoke to me: “Do you know who the questioner was, ‘Umar?’” I replied, “God and His messenger know best.” The Prophet said, “He was Gabriel. He came to teach you your religion.”



For Muslims, a *ḥadīth* (a report or a tradition) is an authenticated account of something the Prophet said or did. What we have in the *Ḥadīth of Gabriel* is an ingenious teaching device, spelling out the basics of Islam in memorable story form. This story (which, arguably, most Muslims would know) teaches that:

- Islam has three essential aspects: *islām*, *īmān*, and *iḥsān* (submission, faith, and the doing of the beautiful);
- Islam rests on Five Pillars of practice: witness, daily ritual prayer, charity, the annual month-long fast, and the pilgrimage.
- Islam demands belief in six key doctrines: belief in God, the angels, the revealed Books, the Prophets, the Day of Judgment, and God’s Decrees regarding the ultimate destiny of each individual.
- Islam understands history as culminating in a cataclysmic restructuring of the natural order.

If we understand even this much, we know quite a bit about Islam. We have learned that, essentially, Islam is a religion of submission to God’s will, thus of obedience to God’s commands. Islam is a religion of faith in God as absolutely One and as absolutely the Real (in a way nothing else can be). It is a religion of faith in God’s emissaries (the angels), in the prophethood of Muhammad and the many prophets who preceded him (including Jesus, who is highly revered), in God’s Word (which Muslims believe is available now most authentically in the Qur’ān). It is a religion of faith in ultimate divine judgment. It is a religion in which the doing of the beautiful/striving for excellence is to be the governing principle in all behavior.