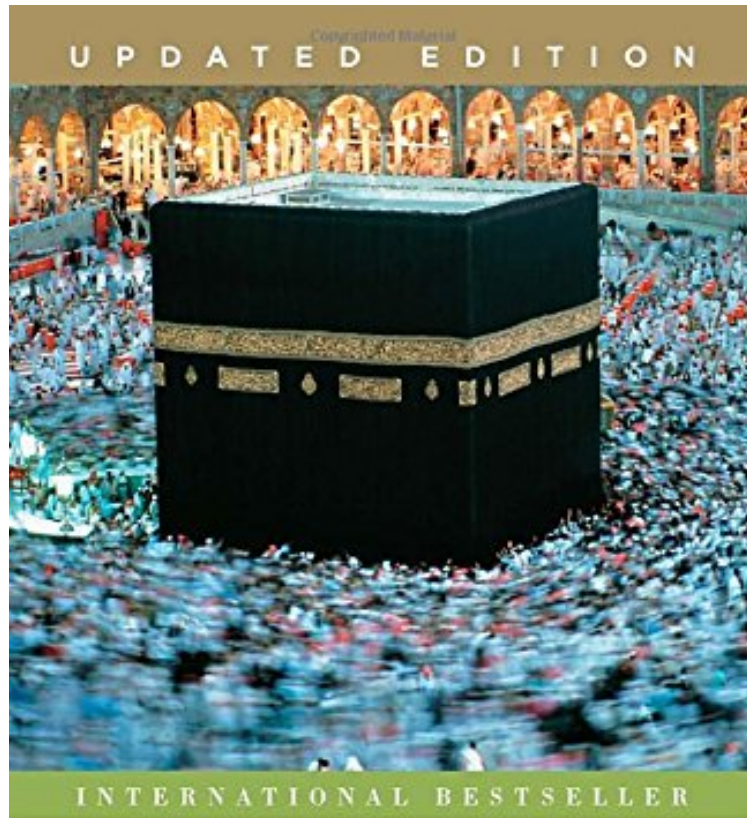


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Reza Aslan

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## No god but God

THE ORIGINS, EVOLUTION, AND FUTURE OF ISLAM

REZA ASLAN

"Grippingly narrated and thoughtfully examined . . . a literate, accessible introduction to Islam." —THE NEW YORK TIMES

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Grippingly narrated and thoughtfully examined . . . a literate, accessible introduction to Islam.  
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Wise and passionate . . . an incisive, scholarly primer in Muslim history and an engaging personal exploration.  
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Acutely perceptive . . . For many troubled Muslims, this book will feel like a revelation, an opening up of knowledge too long buried.  
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About the Author  
Reza Aslan is an acclaimed writer and scholar of religions whose books include *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* and *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. He is also the author of *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror* (published in paperback as *Beyond Fundamentalism*), as well as the editor of *Tablet Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East*. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and three sons.  
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1. The Sanctuary in the Desert  
PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA  
Arabia. The Sixth Century C.E.  
IN THE ARID, desolate basin of Mecca, surrounded on all sides by the bare mountains of the Arabian desert, stands a small, nondescript sanctuary that the ancient Arabs refer to as the Kaaba: the Cube. The Kaaba is a squat, roofless edifice made of unmortared stones and sunk into a valley of sand. Its four walls--so low it is said a young goat can leap over them--are swathed in strips of heavy cloth. At its base, two small doors are chiseled into the gray stone, allowing entry into the inner sanctum. It is here, inside the cramped interior of the sanctuary, that the gods of pre-Islamic Arabia reside: Hubal, the Syrian god of the moon; al-Uzza, the powerful goddess the Egyptians knew as Isis and the Greeks called Aphrodite; al-Kutba, the Nabataean god of writing and divination; Jesus, the incarnate god of the Christians, and his holy mother, Mary. In all, there are said to be three hundred sixty idols housed in and around the Kaaba, representing every god recognized in the Arabian Peninsula. During the holy months, when the desert fairs and the great markets envelop the city of Mecca, pilgrims from all over the Peninsula make their way to this barren land to visit their tribal deities. They sing songs of worship and dance in front of the gods; they make sacrifices and pray for health. Then, in a remarkable ritual--the origins of which are a

mystery--the pilgrims gather as a group and rotate around the Kaaba seven times, some pausing to kiss each corner of the sanctuary before being captured and swept away again by the current of bodies. The pagan Arabs gathered around the Kaaba believe their sanctuary to have been founded by Adam, the first man. They believe that Adam's original edifice was destroyed by the Great Flood, then rebuilt by Noah. They believe that after Noah, the Kaaba was forgotten for centuries until Abraham rediscovered it while visiting his firstborn son, Ismail, and his concubine, Hagar, both of whom had been banished to this wilderness at the behest of Abraham's wife, Sarah. And they believe it was at this very spot that Abraham nearly sacrificed Ismail before being stopped by the promise that, like his younger brother, Isaac, Ismail would also sire a great nation, the descendants of whom now spin over the sandy Meccan valley like a desert whirlwind. Of course, these are just stories intended to convey what the Kaaba means, not where it came from. The truth is that no one knows who built the Kaaba, or how long it has been here. It is likely that the sanctuary was not even the original reason for the sanctity of this place. Near the Kaaba is a well called Zamzam, fed by a bountiful underground spring, which tradition claims had been placed there to nourish Hagar and Ismail. It requires no stretch of the imagination to recognize how a spring situated in the middle of the desert could become a sacred place for the wandering Bedouin tribes of Arabia. The Kaaba itself may have been erected many years later, not as some sort of Arab pantheon, but as a secure place to store the consecrated objects used in the rituals that had evolved around Zamzam. Indeed, the earliest traditions concerning the Kaaba claim that inside its walls was a pit, dug into the sand, which contained "treasures" magically guarded by a snake. It is also possible that the original sanctuary held some cosmological significance for the ancient Arabs. Not only were many of the idols in the Kaaba associated with the planets and stars, but the legend that they totaled three hundred sixty in number suggests astral connotations. The seven circumambulations of the Kaaba--called tawaf in Arabic and still the primary ritual of the annual Hajj pilgrimage--may have been intended to mimic the motion of the heavenly bodies. It was, after all, a common belief among ancient peoples that their temples and sanctuaries were terrestrial replicas of the cosmic mountain from which creation sprang. The Kaaba, like the Pyramids in Egypt or the Temple in Jerusalem, may have been constructed as an axis mundi, sometimes called a "navel spot": a sacred space around which the universe revolves, the link between the earth and the solid dome of heaven. That would explain why there was once a nail driven into the floor of the Kaaba that the ancient Arabs referred to as "the navel of the world." As G. R. Hawting has shown, the ancient pilgrims would sometimes enter the sanctuary, tear off their clothes, and place their own navels over the nail, thereby merging with the cosmos. Alas, as with so many things about the Kaaba, its origins are mere speculation. The only thing scholars can say with any certainty is that by the sixth century C.E., this small sanctuary made of mud and stone had become the center of religious life in pre-Islamic Arabia: that intriguing yet ill-defined era of paganism that Muslims refer to as the Jahiliyyah--"the Time of Ignorance." TRADITIONALLY, THE JAHILIYYAH has been defined by Muslims as an era of moral depravity and religious discord: a time when the sons of Ismail had obscured belief in the one true God and plunged the Arabian Peninsula into the darkness of idolatry. But then, like the rising of the dawn, the Prophet Muhammad emerged in Mecca at the beginning of the seventh century, preaching a message of absolute monotheism and uncompromising morality. Through the miraculous revelations he received from God, Muhammad put an end to the paganism of the Arabs and replaced the "Time of Ignorance" with the universal religion of Islam. In actuality, the religious experience of the pre-Islamic Arabs was far more complex than this tradition suggests. It is true that before the rise of Islam the Arabian Peninsula was dominated by paganism. But, like "Hinduism," "paganism" is a meaningless and somewhat derogatory catchall term created by those outside the tradition to categorize what is in reality an almost unlimited variety of beliefs and practices. The word paganus means "a rustic villager" or "a boor," and was originally used by Christians as a term of abuse to describe those who followed any religion but theirs. In some ways, this is an appropriate designation. Unlike Christianity, paganism is not so much a unified system of beliefs and practices as it is a religious perspective, one that is receptive to a multitude of influences and interpretations. Often, though not always, polytheistic, paganism strives for neither universalism nor moral absolutism. There is no such thing as a pagan creed or a pagan canon. Nothing exists that could properly be termed "pagan orthodoxy" or "pagan heterodoxy." What is more, when referring to the paganism of the pre-Islamic Arabs, it is important to make a distinction between the nomadic Bedouin religious experience and the experience of those sedentary tribes that had settled in major population centers like Mecca. Bedouin paganism in sixth-century Arabia may have encompassed a range of beliefs and practices--from fetishism to totemism to manism (ancestor cults)--but it was not as concerned with the more metaphysical questions that were cultivated in the larger sedentary societies of Arabia, particularly with regard to issues like the afterlife. This is not to say that the Bedouin practiced nothing more than a primitive idolatry. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that the Bedouin of pre-Islamic Arabia enjoyed a rich and diverse religious tradition. However, the nomadic lifestyle is one that requires a religion to address immediate concerns: Which god can lead us to water? Which god can heal our illnesses? In contrast, paganism among the sedentary societies of Arabia had developed from its earlier and simpler manifestations into a complex form of neo-animism, providing a host of divine and semi-divine intermediaries who stood between the creator god and his creation. This creator god was called Allah, which is not a proper name but a contraction of the word al-ilah, meaning simply "the god." Like his Greek counterpart, Zeus, Allah was originally an ancient rain/sky deity who had been elevated into the

role of the supreme god of the pre-Islamic Arabs. Though a powerful deity to swear by, Allah's eminent status in the Arab pantheon rendered him, like most High Gods, beyond the supplications of ordinary people. Only in times of great peril would anyone bother consulting him. Otherwise, it was far more expedient to turn to the lesser, more accessible gods who acted as Allah's intercessors, the most powerful of whom were his three daughters, Allat ("the goddess"), al-Uzza ("the mighty"), and Manat (the goddess of fate, whose name is probably derived from the Hebrew word mana, meaning "portion" or "share"). These divine mediators were not only represented in the Kaaba, they had their own individual shrines throughout the Arabian Peninsula: Allat in the city of Ta'if; al-Uzza in Nakhlah; and Manat in Qudayd. It was to them that the Arabs prayed when they needed rain, when their children were ill, when they entered into battle or embarked on a journey deep into the treacherous desert abodes of the Jinn--those intelligent, imperceptible, and salvable beings made of smokeless flame who are called "genies" in the West and who function as the nymphs and fairies of Arabian mythology. There were no priests and no pagan scriptures in pre-Islamic Arabia, but that does not mean the gods remained silent. They regularly revealed themselves through the ecstatic utterances of a group of cultic officials known as the Kahins. The Kahins were poets who functioned primarily as soothsayers and who, for a fee, would fall into a trance in which they would reveal divine messages through rhyming couplets. Poets already had an important role in pre-Islamic society as bards, tribal historians, social commentators, dispensers of moral philosophy, and, on occasion, administrators of justice. But the Kahins represented a more spiritual function of the poet. Emerging from every social and economic stratum, and including a number of women, the Kahins interpreted dreams, cleared up crimes, found lost animals, settled disputes, and expounded upon ethics. As with their Pythian counterparts at Delphi, however, the Kahins' oracles were vague and deliberately imprecise; it was the supplicant's responsibility to figure out what the gods actually meant. Although considered the link between humanity and the divine, the Kahins did not communicate directly with the gods but rather accessed them through the Jinn and other spirits who were such an integral part of the Jahiliyyah religious experience. Even so, neither the Kahins, nor anyone else for that matter, had access to Allah. In fact, the god who had created the heavens and the earth, who had fashioned human beings in his own image, was the only god in the whole of the Hijaz not represented by an idol in the Kaaba. Although called "the King of the Gods" and "the Lord of the House," Allah was not the central deity in the Kaaba. That honor belonged to Hubal, the Syrian god who had been brought to Mecca centuries before the rise of Islam. Despite Allah's minimal role in the religious cult of pre-Islamic Arabia, his eminent position in the Arab pantheon is a clear indication of just how far paganism in the Arabian Peninsula had evolved from its simple animistic roots. Perhaps the most striking example of this development can be seen in the processional chant that tradition claims the pilgrims sang as they approached the Kaaba: Here I am, O Allah, here I am. You have no partner, Except such a partner as you have. You possess him and all that is his. This remarkable proclamation, with its obvious resemblance to the Muslim profession of faith--"There is no god but God"--may reveal the earliest traces in pre-Islamic Arabia of what the German philologist Max Muller termed henotheism: the belief in a single High God, without necessarily rejecting the existence of other, subordinate gods. The earliest evidence of henotheism in Arabia can be traced back to a tribe called the Amir, who lived near modern-day Yemen in the second century B.C.E., and who worshipped a High God they called dhu-Samawi, "The Lord of the Heavens." While the details of the Amirs' religion have been lost to history, most scholars are convinced that by the sixth century C.E., henotheism had become the standard belief of the vast majority of sedentary Arabs, who not only accepted Allah as their High God, but insisted that he was the same god as Yahweh, the god of the Jews. The Jewish presence in the Arabian Peninsula can, in theory, be traced to the Babylonian Exile a thousand years earlier, though subsequent migrations may have taken place in 70 C.E., after Rome's sacking of the Temple in Jerusalem, and again in 132 C.E., after the messianic uprising of Simon Bar Kochba. For the most part, the Jews were a thriving and highly influential diaspora whose culture and traditions had been thoroughly integrated into the social and religious milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia. Whether Arab converts or immigrants from Palestine, the Jews participated in every level of Arab society. According to Gordon Newby, throughout the Peninsula there were Jewish merchants, Jewish Bedouin, Jewish farmers, Jewish poets, and Jewish warriors. Jewish men took Arab names and Jewish women wore Arab headdresses. And while some of these Jews may have spoken Aramaic (or at least a corrupted version of it), their primary language was Arabic. Although in contact with major Jewish centers throughout the Near East, Judaism in Arabia had developed its own variations on traditional Jewish beliefs and practices. The Jews shared many of the same religious ideals as their pagan Arab counterparts, especially with regard to what is sometimes referred to as "popular religion": belief in magic, the use of talismans and divination, and the like. For example, while there is evidence of a small yet formal rabbinical presence in some regions of the Arabian Peninsula, there also existed a group of Jewish soothsayers called the Kohens who, while maintaining a far more priestly function in their communities, nevertheless resembled the pagan Kahins in that they too dealt in divinely inspired oracles. The relationship between the Jews and pagan Arabs was symbiotic in that not only were the Jews heavily Arabized, but the Arabs were also significantly influenced by Jewish beliefs and practices. One need look no further for evidence of this influence than to the Kaaba itself, whose origin myths indicate that it was a Semitic sanctuary (haram in Arabic) with its roots dug deeply in Jewish tradition. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Aaron were all in one way or another associated with the Kaaba long before the rise of Islam, and the

mysterious Black Stone that to this day is fixed to the southeast corner of the sanctuary seems to have been originally associated with the same stone upon which Jacob rested his head during his famous dream of the ladder.