



# Elijah Muhammad

HERBERT BERG



ONE WORLD

ELIJAH MUHAMMAD

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## PREFACE

Elijah Muhammad tends to be neglected by scholars of Islam. Their lack of interest often reflects the conviction shared by many Muslims that he and his followers should not be considered Muslims. Alternatively, his Nation of Islam is seen simply as a short-lived American aberration of Islam, a product of the now fading racial tensions in the United States. Thus, only a few American historians of race need to study him and even fewer sociologists need to analyze his movement. Elijah Muhammad also suffers from having been eclipsed in celebrity by his followers: Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan. However, each of them stands on the shoulders of Elijah Muhammad, the man who converted them to Islam. Scholars of Islam should not therefore ignore him, for he and his followers saw themselves first and foremost as Muslims or black Muslims, not Muslim blacks.

The more pertinent issue is whether he can be considered a “Maker of the Muslim World” and thus merit the attention this book gives him. My hope is that by the end of this book, the reader will come away with two conclusions. One, Elijah Muhammad has a unique and most intriguing perspective on Islam, and to understand why he formulated it in the particular (even peculiar) way that he did, one has to understand his context. Two, he almost single-handedly developed an indigenous form of Islam in the United States. This is something that no other person calling himself or herself a Muslim has been able to do. More effectively than the millions of Muslim immigrants to the United States, he made the United States part of the Muslim world, at least in the eyes of millions of African Americans. He is, therefore, a maker of the Muslim world.

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## MAIN PERSONS AND TECHNICAL TERMS

**Ahmadis** An Islamic reform movement from British India that sent missionaries to the United States in the early twentieth century and is the source of Elijah Muhammad's translation of the Qur'an.

**Ali, Muhammad** An Olympic gold medalist and World Heavyweight Champion in boxing who converted to the Nation of Islam. Also known as Cassius Clay, Jr.

**Ali, Maulana Muhammad** The leader of the Lahori Ahmadiyya movement whose English translation of the Qur'an was favored by Elijah Muhammad (d. 1951).

**Batini** An often pejorative description for finding esoteric meanings in the Qur'an underlying the more obvious meanings.

**Circle Seven Koran** The common name of *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple*, the scripture produced by Drew Ali.

**Civil war** The civil war (1861–65) between the United States of America (the Union) and the Confederate States of America (the Confederacy) comprised of the eleven Southern states that seceded. The victory of the Union forces led to the abolition of slavery.

**Drew Ali, Noble** Founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America, Inc. Also known as Timothy Drew and Sharif Abdul Ali (d. 1929).

**Druze** A religion that considers the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim (d. or disappeared in 1021) to be an incarnation of Allah.

**Fard Muhammad, Wali** Founder of the Nation of Islam and thought by Elijah Muhammad to be Allah. The F.B.I. identified him as Wallace D. Ford.

**Farrakhan, Louis** Elijah Muhammad's National Representative and after 1977 the leader of a resurrected Nation of Islam. Also known as Louis E. Walcott and Louis X (b. 1933).

**F.B.I.** Federal Bureau of Investigation whose purview includes domestic intelligence and federal criminal investigations.

**Fruit of Islam** The male self-defense force of the Nation of Islam.

**Garvey, Marcus** Founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association that advocated global pan-Africanism and economic empowerment (d. 1940).

**Ghulat** A term used by heresiographers to describe those Shi'ites whom others view as going to extremes in matters of religion, particularly by deifying particular humans.

**Lynchings** Extrajudicial executions by hanging of African Americans particularly in the post-civil war South.

**Maliki** One of the four prominent schools of Islamic law within Sunni Islam.

**Mirza Ghulam Ahmad** Founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community who claimed to be the Mahdi and the Second Coming of Christ (d. 1908).

**Mohammed, Warith Deen** Son of Elijah Muhammad who led and transformed the Nation of Islam after his father's death in 1975. Originally named Wallace D. Muhammad (d. 2008).

**Muhammad, Akbar** Son of Elijah Muhammad who studied at al-Azhar in Egypt.

**Muhammad, Clara** Wife of Elijah Muhammad (d. 1972).

**Muhammad, Elijah** Leader of the Nation of Islam from 1934 to 1975. Also known as Elijah Poole and Elijah Karriem (d. 1975).

**Muhammad, (Jabir) Herbert** Son of Elijah Muhammad and editor of *Muhammad Speaks* (d. 2008).

***Muhammad Speaks*** Newspaper of the Nation of Islam.

**Saviour's Day** An annual rally or convention of the Nation

of Islam celebrating the birth of Fard Muhammad on 26 February.

**Sharrieff, Raymond** Long-time Supreme Captain of the Fruit of Islam.

**The South** States in the southeastern and south central United States of America that were part of the Confederacy during the civil war.

**The Tribe of Shabazz** An ancient black civilization originally from Mecca and Egypt, but a group of which moved to central Africa and became the ancestors of African Americans.

**University of Islam** The Nation of Islam's schools for children from kindergarten to high school.

**X, Malcolm** National Minister of the Nation of Islam until he left the organization in 1964. Also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and Malcolm Little (d. 1965).

**Yakub** The evil black scientist whose eugenics program created the white race.

# CHRONOLOGY

- 1527** Estavan, the first African American Muslim, comes to North America.
- 1619** First African slaves brought to the English colony of Virginia.
- 1865** End of the American Civil War and slavery in the United States.
- 1877** Birth of Wali Fard Muhammad in Mecca.
- 1886** Birth of Timothy Drew (Noble Drew Ali) in North Carolina.
- 1891** Birth of Wallace D. Ford.
- 1893** American Moslem Brotherhood founded in New York City by Russell Alexander Webb.
- 1897** Birth of Elijah Poole.
- 1913** Wallace D. Ford thought to have immigrated to the United States.
- 1913** Drew Ali founds the Canaanite Temple in Newark, New Jersey.
- 1914** The prophesied end of devils' rule, extended in order to save the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the wilderness of North America.
- 1919** Elijah Poole marries Clara Evans.
- 1920** The Ahmadiyya missionary Mufti Muhammad Sadiq arrives in the United States.
- 1923** Elijah Poole moves to Detroit.
- 1925** Birth of Malcolm Little.
- 1927** Drew Ali publishes his *Circle Seven Koran*.
- 1928** Drew Ali founds the Moorish Science Temple of America, Inc.

- 1929** Drew Ali dies.
- 1930** Wali Fard Muhammad arrives from Arabia to the United States on 4 July to begin his mission.
- 1931** Elijah Poole meets Fard Muhammad.
- 1933** Fard Muhammad is expelled from Detroit and moves to Chicago.
- 1934** Elijah Muhammad sees Fard Muhammad for the last time in Chicago.
- 1935** Elijah Muhammad leaves Detroit for Chicago.
- 1942** Elijah Muhammad arrested and imprisoned for dodging the draft.
- 1946** Elijah Muhammad released from prison.
- 1952** Malcolm Little meets Elijah Muhammad and is renamed Malcolm X.
- 1959** Elijah Muhammad makes his *'umra* and visits countries in the Middle East and Pakistan.
- 1964** Malcolm X leaves the Nation of Islam.
- 1965** Malcolm X is assassinated.
- 1975** Elijah Muhammad dies, and his son Wallace D. Muhammad (later, Warith Deen Mohammed) acclaimed the Supreme Minister of the Nation of Islam.
- 1977** Louis Farrakhan resurrects the Nation of Islam under his leadership.
- 2008** Warith Deen Mohammed dies.



# INTRODUCTION

1. Who made the Holy Koran or Bible? How long ago? Will you tell us why does Islam re-new her history every twenty-five thousand years?

Ans. – The Holy Koran or Bible is made by the original people, who is Allah, the supreme being, or (black man) of Asia; the Koran will expire in the year twenty-five thousand. Nine thousand and eight years from the date of this writing the Nation of Islam is all wise and does everything right and exact. The planet Earth, which is the home of Islam and is approximately twenty-five thousand miles in circumference, so the wise man of the East (black man) makes history or Koran, to equal his home circumference, a year to every mile and thus evertime his history lasts twenty-five thousand years, he re-news it for another twenty-five thousand years.

(F.B.I. file 105-63642)

On 20 February 1934, Wali Fard Muhammad, then simply referred to as “our Prophet, W. D. Fard,” asked one of his ministers, Elijah Muhammad, forty questions. “Lesson #2,” the pamphlet that contained these questions and answers, would serve as the Nation of Islam’s main literature until Elijah Muhammad began writing his columns and booklets in the late 1950s. Although the answer to the first question quoted above mentions the Qur’an, Islam, and Allah, little else in it is recognizably “Islamic.”

Questions two through eight ask about the world’s size, physical features, and weather. Then the subject turns to God and the devil: “Why does the devil teach the eight[y]-five per cent,

that a mystery God brings all this [that is, the world]?” and “Who is that mystery God?” Elijah Muhammad answers that the belief in an invisible God permits the devils to enslave the eighty-five percent. In subsequent answers Elijah Muhammad explains that his people have been lost for 379 years, during which time they were enslaved, beaten, and killed by those who taught them to worship this mystery God. But now the Son of man, the Prophet W. D. Fard, has come to remedy that situation and along with his five percent who are righteous teachers to teach “who the living God is and teach that the living God is the Son of man, the supreme being, the black man of Asia; and teach Freedom, Justice, and Equality to all the human family of the planet Earth, otherwise known as civilized people. Also [a]s Moslem and Moslem Sons.” The devil was created some six thousand years ago by a great black scientist, a Mr. Yakub, born some twenty miles from Mecca. He “grafted” this devil from his own black people through selective breeding over a six-hundred-year period. The result was a weak, wicked, and *white* race who cannot be reformed, but whose prophesied destruction is imminent, thus demonstrating the power and reality of this human and black Allah.

The questions themselves are odd, but it is the answers that most Muslims find to be heretical. Yet Elijah Muhammad and his followers in the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the wilderness of North America, or just “Nation of Islam,” prayed to Allah, fasted, identified themselves as Muslims, and read the Qur’an. Over two decades later, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.) asked Elijah Muhammad what credentials Fard Muhammad, then referred to as Allah, had given his messenger, he simply replied: the Holy Qur’an.

Elijah Muhammad is a fascinating Muslim figure not only because he (re)introduced Islam into the United States and was by far Islam’s most successful missionary there, but also because

his formulation of Islam forces Muslims and scholars to reevaluate their often normative definitions of this religious tradition. To dismiss the Nation of Islam as un-Islamic, or worse, to ridicule the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, is to discount his tremendous impact on Islam in the United States in general and on African Americans in particular.

In the mid-1930s, Elijah Muhammad was just one of several competing leaders of the embryonic movement begun by the mysterious Wali Fard Muhammad, who claimed to be a prophet of Islam and who had recently disappeared. By the time of his death in 1975, Elijah Muhammad led a movement that may have numbered a few hundred thousand, making him the most powerful Muslim in the United States of America. Even before his death he was overshadowed by the growing legend of Malcolm X, and after his death by the activities of Louis Farrakhan and his own son Warith Deen Mohammed (formerly known as Wallace D. Muhammad). Each of these men, however, was brought to Islam by Elijah Muhammad. And although Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad's son came to reject his idiosyncratic and racial formulation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad was responsible for introducing hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of African Americans to Islam. Almost four decades after his death, he remains by far the most influential American Muslim.

Many other Muslims, however, object to that description; they are unwilling to believe he was a real Muslim. Elijah Muhammad's personal commitment to Allah and his emphasis on the Qur'an are not in dispute. He certainly called himself a Muslim and his religion he consistently referred to as Islam. The problem lies primarily with his claim that Wali Fard Muhammad was "Allah in person," that he himself was his messenger, that heaven and hell were here on Earth, and that the white man was the devil. These teachings contradict some of the basic teachings of Islam as traditionally formulated, and so many Muslims

outside the Nation of Islam vehemently object to the description of Elijah Muhammad as a “Muslim” and his movement as “Islam.”

From at least the time of the death of Muhammad (b. ‘Abd Allah in 632 C.E.) Muslims have been divided on the doctrines, practices, and polity of the religion he espoused. Certainly subsequent history has shown that it is far better to speak of Islams or formulations of Islam. It would be fruitless for a scholar to search for a continuous essence that extends from Muhammad to all people who identify themselves as Muslims and that somehow links all of these formulations of Islam. Nor is it the function of the scholar to construct a normative Islam by which these formulations can be judged. Thus, though Elijah Muhammad’s often tense relationship with other Muslims will be explored, the point is not to determine if he was a “real Muslim.” More interesting questions to be explored include: why did Elijah Muhammad’s Islam take the form that it did? Why was his message so powerful and attractive to so many African Americans? How did Elijah Muhammad understand the major practices and beliefs of Islam, and how did he justify them using the Qur’an? What was the relationship between himself and non-Nation of Islam Muslims? And what was his legacy? That is to say, why does he qualify as a maker of the Muslim world?

By answering these questions, it will become obvious that Elijah Muhammad came from a context that few if any Muslims before him had experienced, which then led him to formulate an Islam that contemporary Muslims could not have foreseen. As unique or deviant as his Islam may appear, through it he was able to do what no other Muslim missionary has succeeded in doing: to convert a large number of Americans to a religion that at the time was almost completely foreign to American soil. And he did so in the face of strong and sustained opposition. By the end of his life there were mosques in almost every major city,

and Islam was no longer a religion merely of immigrants and their descendants. He had established a foothold for Islam in the United States.

Yet another way of framing Elijah Muhammad within a larger Islamic context is to compare his teaching with those of the *ghulat*, a term used by heresiographers to accuse Muslims of exaggeration or hyperbole (*ghuluw*) in religious matters. It was employed (often by Shi'is against rival Shi'is) to disapprove of exalting the imams above ordinary humans, for example by suggesting that Ali did not die or that he was an incarnation of Allah. Elijah Muhammad was very much outside of this sectarian milieu, but three characteristics of *ghuluw* have parallels in his teachings. First, some of the *ghulat* are accused of teaching that Allah incarnates in the bodies of the imams. For Elijah Muhammad, Fard Muhammad is Allah. Second, some of the *ghulat* reject that the Shari'a, Islamic law, is obligatory. Elijah Muhammad rarely even referred to the Shari'a. Third, some of the *ghulat* saw hidden, symbolic meanings in the Qur'an. Elijah Muhammad rarely read the Qur'an or the Bible in any other way. Such a comparison must, of course, be used with caution. Applied too narrowly and without qualifications, it could lead one to suggest that Elijah Muhammad considered Fard Muhammad an incarnation of Allah. Druze and Alawites certainly may consider Ali and others as human beings embodying Allah, but for Elijah Muhammad, Fard Muhammad *was* Allah – not an embodiment or incarnation of Allah; “incarnation,” particularly one similar to Christian teachings about Jesus, suggested a spiritualized conception of Allah – as a “mystery God” – that Elijah Muhammad adamantly rejected. The periodic presence of God among humans he accepted, but not the periodic incarnation of some spiritual deity. Being initially unaware of the Shari'a and, if he became aware later, being uninterested in it, is not the same as rejecting it. For Elijah Muhammad the defining characteristic of

scripture was its hidden prophecies. He did not accept reincarnation, another common doctrine among the ghulat. Such claims in relation to Fard Muhammad appear only in outside sources, never within the Nation of Islam. Nevertheless, a comparison with the ghulat does highlight that Elijah Muhammad's teachings are not as unprecedented in Islam or as distant from other formulations of Islam as they are so frequently portrayed.