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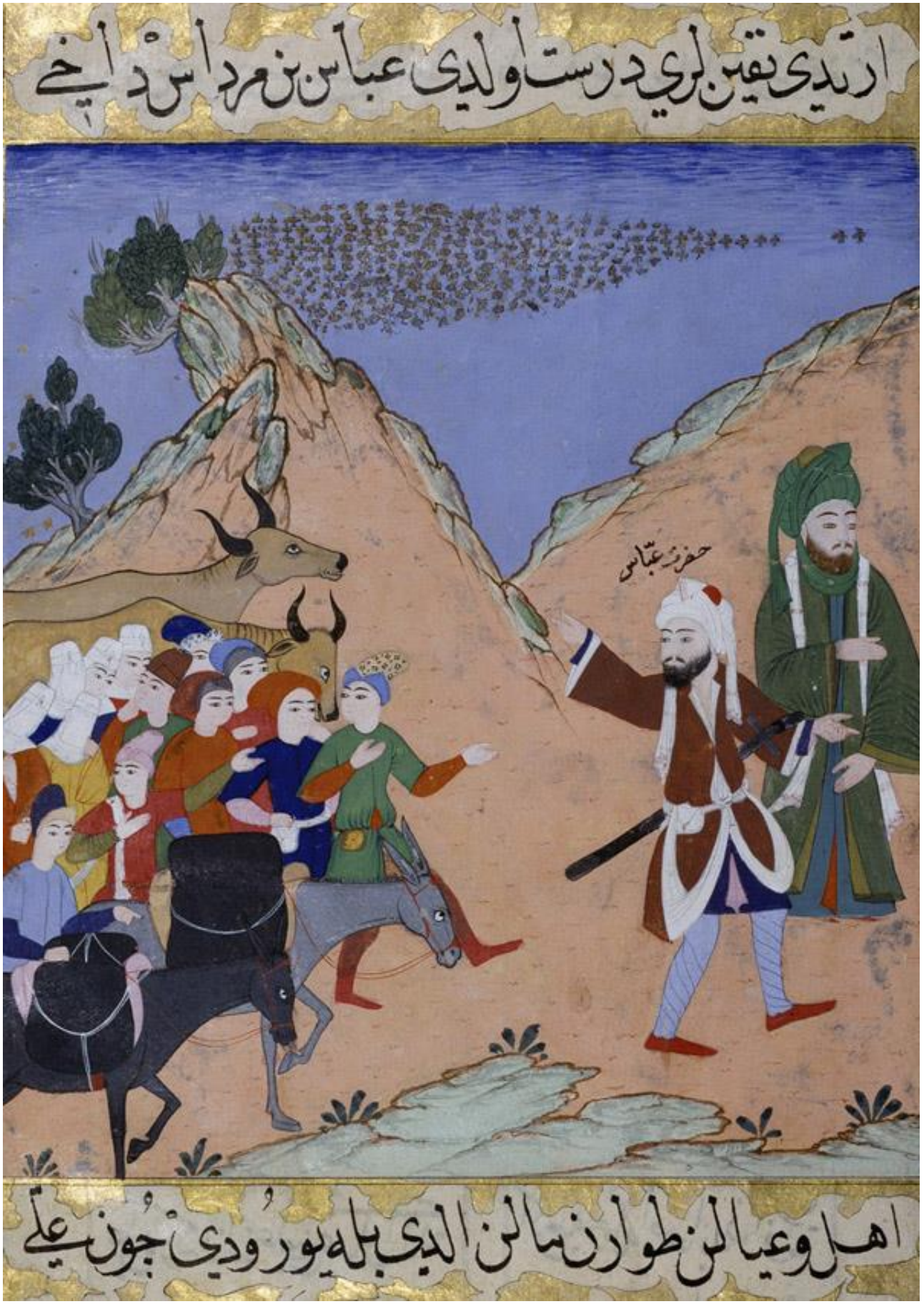
Muhammad in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Prophet of God

By: Coeli Fitzpatrick and Adam Hani Walker, Editors

HONEYBEE

Tauseef A. Khan

Honeybees are bees distinguished by their production and storage of honey and the construction of hives. The most common honeybee around the world is the European honeybee, *Apis mellifera*, which is the major honey-producing bee. Honey is around 95 percent sugar (mainly fructose and glucose) along with trace amounts of vitamins, minerals, and other antioxidant and undetermined compounds. Honey is a natural antiseptic and has been used as a healing remedy since history began. In modern medicine, honey is being used as a powerful antibacterial agent and has use in topical application for burns and bedsores. Honey is a sweetener and can be used as a food, drink, and refreshment.



The Miracle of the Bees, page of the *Siyer-i-Nebi* by Murad III, 1595. ʻAli, wearing a green turban, brings the bees from ʻAbbas to Medina. (Louvre, Paris, France/Christian Larrieu/The Bridgeman Art Library)

Chapter 16 of the Holy Qur'an has been named after the bee, Al-Nahl, meaning "the bee" or "the bees." The honeybee is mentioned specifically in verses 68 and 69: "And thy Lord inspired the bee, saying: Choose thou habitations in the hills and in the trees and in that which they thatch; Then eat of all fruits, and follow the ways of thy Lord, made smooth (for

thee). There cometh forth from their bellies a drink divers of hues, wherein is healing for mankind. Lo! herein is indeed a portent for people who reflect."

The Qur'an describes both the text itself and honey as a means of healing for mankind. The Qur'an is said to remedy the spiritual diseases of man, while honey treats physical ailments. The Prophet also reminded this by saying that "You should take the two that bring healing: Honey and the Qur'an" (al-Qazwini 2007, hadith no. 3452). However, it should be noted that the Qur'an has also been described as useful in physical illness, such as the story of the one who was bitten by a snake and cured when Surah Al-Fatiha was recited on him (al-Bukhari 1996, 476).

The Prophet Muhammad loved sweet edible things and honey (al-Bukhari 1996, 7:586). He also used to drink it. Anas ibn Malik reported that he served honey, *nabidh* (fermented dates), water, and milk as drink to Allah's messenger (Muslim 2000, hadith no. 4982). The Prophet also believed in the healing powers of honey. A famous hadith, narrated by Sa'id al-Khudri, states that "a man came to the Prophet and said, 'My brother has some abdominal trouble.' The Prophet said to him 'Let him drink honey.' The man came for the second time and the Prophet said to him, 'Let him drink honey.' He came for the third time and the Prophet said, 'Let him drink honey.' He returned again and said, 'I have done that.' The Prophet then said, 'Allah has said the truth, but your brother's abdomen has told a lie. Let him drink honey.' So he made him drink honey and he was cured" (al-Bukhari 1996, 7:5684). It is likely that in this case honey would have indeed acted as an effective form of oral rehydration when mixed with water, as it contains antimicrobial properties and is around 40 percent glucose.

In another hadith, this time narrated by Ibn 'Abbas, the Prophet is reported as stating that "healing is in three things: A gulp of honey, cupping, and branding with fire (cauterizing), but I forbid my followers to use branding (cauterization) with fire" (al-Bukhari 1996, 7:584). The Prophet also advised the use of honey as a prevention against diseases: "Whoever eats honey three mornings each month, will not suffer any serious calamity" (al-Qazwini 2007, hadith no. 3450).

In a novel incident concerning honey, the Prophet forbade it for himself, albeit only temporarily. It is related that one day one of the wives of the Prophet made him a drink made from honey, which he appeared to like. Some of his other wives, out of pique, pointed out to him that his breath smelt of *maghafir*, a shrub whose taste resembles honey but gives out a bad smell. The Prophet, because of his delicate nature, refrained from taking honey thereafter (al-Bukhari 1996, 7:434). As honey is beneficial, described in the Qur'an as "a cure for mankind," God then directed the Prophet to not forbid the consumption of honey, as it is something made lawful for humankind by God (Q 66:2). This incident certainly highlights the importance of honey in Islam.

The Prophet also shared honey with other people. It was narrated that Jabir ibn 'Abd Allah said that "some honey was given as a gift to the Prophet, and he shared among us spoonful by spoonful. I took my spoonful then I said: 'O Messenger of Allah, can I have another?' He said: 'Yes'" (al-Qazwini 2007, hadith no. 3451).

Despite the obvious importance of honey, the Prophet was quick to forbid intoxicants made of honey (e.g., mead). It is narrated that the Prophet was asked about *al-bit*, a liquor prepared from honey that the Yemenites used to drink. The Prophet replied, "All drinks that intoxicate are unlawful (to drink)" (al-Bukhari 1996, 7:492). Muhammad was also mindful of the creatures that produce honey, having forbidden the killing of honeybees. In this regard, 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abbas reported that the "Prophet prohibited the killing of four creatures: ants, bees, hoopoes, and sparrow-hawks" (Abu Dawood, 5247).

See also: Animals; Ecology and Islam; Food; Hadith

Further Reading

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