

## THE MESSENGER OF GOD

The Prophet Muhammad has been chosen by a leading Western historian to head his listing of the world's most influential persons. Not only the founder of one of the world's great religions, he was the only person in history who was extremely successful on both religious and secular levels. Muhammad was a philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, general, and statesman. He is a role model that all sincere Muslims seek to emulate.

God revealed to Muhammad the same message that had been revealed to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Muhammad was an inspiring religious teacher, a visionary social reformer, a brilliant civic and national leader, a gifted general, and a skilled politician. He was a man of great gentleness, generosity, compassion, and piety. The life of Muhammad has been well documented. We know how he lived at home, how he prayed, how he taught, and how he ruled. Muslims do not regard Muhammad as God, or as a divine figure. However, he is considered *insan al-kamil*, a perfect human being.

## EARLY LIFE

Muhammad was born in the year 570 C. E. His father died before he was born and his mother died when he was still a child. Shortly after he was born, Muhammad was given to Bedouin foster parents. This was a common practice among city Arabs, who believed the desert was healthier than the city and the nomadic life of the Bedouin developed character and fortitude.

When he was six, Muhammad's mother died, and he went to live with his grandfather. Two years later his grandfather died, and Muhammad joined the household of his uncle, **Abu Talib**. His uncle was chief of the **Hashim** clan, one of the clans of the powerful **Quraish**, the tribe that dominated Makkah. Abu Talib was poor but well respected in Makkah. Makkah was a wealthy and powerful city. It was an oasis in the desert, a major stop for desert caravans, and the chief trading center in Arabia. Travelers from all over Arabia and beyond came to Makkah.

As a young man, Muhammad was known for his honor and integrity. He was nicknamed *al-amin*, the reliable, by those who knew him. Muhammad grew up to be an able, honorable young man. He was of average height, and his hair and beard were thick and wavy. He had a striking, luminous expression and a noble character.

Muhammad became a merchant and trader and led caravans to **Syria** and **Mesopotamia**. This was a demanding and sometimes dangerous job, requiring intelligence, patience, courage, and leadership. He was hired for a trading journey by **Khadijah**, a well-to-do widow and a successful merchant. Khadijah came to know Muhammad and to admire his character, and she proposed marriage to him. They married and raised a family. They had **two sons**, who died in infancy, and **four daughters**. Throughout their marriage Khadijah was one of Muhammad's strongest supporters, and they were deeply in love with each other.

Muhammad was always heavily interested in religious and spiritual matters. Although he and Khadijah were relatively wealthy, they gave most of their income to the poor and led a simple, frugal life. Muhammad often spent time in long vigils and prayers in secluded caves in the mountains surrounding Makkah.

In 610, when he was 40, Muhammad went into seclusion in a cave on nearby **Mount Hira**. While sitting in contemplation, the archangel **Gabriel** appeared to him. This awesome angelic presence commanded, "*Iqrad*" ("Read" or "recite"). Muhammad was unlettered and he replied, "I cannot read." The angel seized him and embraced him so hard all the strength went out of him. Gabriel repeated, "Recite!" and again Muhammad replied, "I cannot." Gabriel crushed Muhammad to himself a second time and repeated once more, "Recite!" Muhammad again replied, "I cannot read." Gabriel embraced Muhammad a third time and then imparted the first revelation of the Qur'an:

*Read in the name of your Sustainer  
Who has created, created humanity out of a germ cell!  
Read, for your Lord is the Most Generous One  
Who has taught [the use of] the Pen,  
Taught humanity what they did not know!*

(96:1-5)

Muhammad realized that he was commanded to "read," to receive and understand, God's Message and teach it to humanity. He returned home deeply shaken by his experience. He was shivering, in a state of shock. Khadijah held him and covered him with a blanket. She asked him what had happened, and he told her the story and added he was not sure if he had really encountered an angel or a *jinn* (a supernatural spirit) or a figment of his imagination.

Khadijah consulted her cousin, a devout **Christian Arab**, who confirmed her belief that her husband was destined to be a prophet. Khadijah assured Muhammad that she believed in him. She was sure he had really met an angel. She knew that he had the impeccable character of a prophet and believed that he was to become a great prophet of God. Because of her faith in Muhammad **Khadijah** accepted the message he received and became the **first Muslim**.

The revelations continued, and Muhammad had to struggle to understand them. Some revelations were more like visions than words. For almost two years, he strove alone, still unsure if he was deluded or not. Finally, Muhammad began to share with others what had been revealed to him.

His message was simple. His teachings about God were basically the same as the teachings of the Jews and Christians. Muhammad stressed social equality and social justice. He taught that the wealthy were obliged to help the poor and that all men and women were equal before God. He guided his followers to behave with honesty, equity, and compassion for others.

Many of the members of wealthier and more powerful clans became jealous. They refused to believe that an obscure, unlettered orphan was a prophet. They were sure that they were more worthy of prophethood. A small community of believers developed. Many were poor or slaves. As the Muslim community grew, the envy of the more powerful turned to hatred and persecution. More and more people began to follow Muhammad and his following grew to some 70 families.

However, when Muhammad taught that people were to worship God alone and to abandon their worship of the old tribal gods, many of his followers left. The wealthy and powerful became incensed when he warned that on the Day of Judgment each individual would be judged on his or her merit, and wealth and position would be of no help. His teachings split the city of Makkah. It became dangerous for the poor and less influential Muslims. Many were ridiculed or beaten for their beliefs. Some of the Muslim slaves were tortured by their owners.

The verses of the Qur'an began to circulate within and also beyond Makkah. Many became Muslims because of the power and beauty of the Qur'an. The Qur'an created a new literary form, a masterpiece of Arabic poetry and prose. These revelations inspired listeners, as great art always does.

**Umar**, one of the more powerful men of Makkah, was passionately opposed to Muhammad's teaching and vowed to wipe out Islam. However, when he first heard the words of the Qur'an, he was overcome by their eloquence. Later, he said, "When I heard the Qur'an my heart was softened and I wept, and Islam entered into me." Umar became one of the closest companions of the Prophet, a great defender of Islam, and the **second caliph** after the passing away of the Prophet.

The powerful Makkan clans responded to the spread of Islam in about 616 C.E. with a boycott of those clans that supported Muhammad and his followers. No one could marry or trade with boycotted clan members, or sell them food. The persecuted clan members were expelled from the city to a barren valley a few miles away. The ban lasted for over two years and created food shortages and tremendous hardships for the Muslims and their relatives and supporters.

Muhammad asked the **Christian king of Abyssinia** to take in the most vulnerable Muslims, and the king agreed. About **83 Muslims** and their households left Makkah for Abyssinia.

In about 619 C.E., after the ban was lifted, both Khadijah and Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib passed away. The new chief of Muhammad's clan was one of his worst enemies, and Muhammad and his followers became much more vulnerable to the persecutions of his adversaries.

When things looked darkest, Muhammad had his greatest mystical experience, known as the *Lailat ul-miraj*, or the Night Journey. He was awakened by the archangel Gabriel. Accompanied by Gabriel, Muhammad was carried on a heavenly steed to ride to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the location of the Prophet Solomon's temple and the place where Jesus taught. At first, the Muslims prayed in the direction of Jerusalem and not toward the Ka'bah in Makkah.

In Jerusalem Muhammad met with the spirits of **Abraham, Moses, Jesus**, and many other great prophets. They all prayed together, with Muhammad leading the prayer. Then Gabriel took Muhammad and they ascended through the seven heavens. Finally, Muhammad ascended alone to the **Throne of God**, and there he conversed directly with God.

#### CONTINUED PERSECUTION

Makkan persecution continued, and even Muhammad was no longer safe. He had to do something to save his followers and himself. In 620 C.E. Muhammad met with a group of pilgrims from the city of Yathrib. He explained Islam to them, and they accepted it. Then, Muhammad sent one of his most able followers to Yathrib to teach the Qur'an and the principles of Islam.

Two years later a group of over 70 pilgrims came from Yathrib and secretly met with Muhammad and accepted Islam. The tribes that had settled in Yathrib were fighting constantly, raiding each other's territory or seeking to avenge damage done by a rival tribe. The visitors represented two of the major tribes of Yathrib and they invited Muhammad to rule their strife-torn city. He agreed and then instructed his followers to leave for Yathrib. They left quietly in small groups. It was the year 622 C.E., and Muhammad had been teaching Islam in Makkah for 12 years.

The year of **emigration to Yathrib** became the **start of the Muslim calendar**. It was a life-changing decision for the early Muslims. In Arabia, the tribe was sacred. To leave your blood relatives and join another community was unheard of, even blasphemous. The Quraish were infuriated over the exodus of the Muslims and vowed to exterminate the small emigrant community.

The Makkans decided to destroy Islam by murdering Muhammad. Young men from each clan were to sneak into his house at night and stab him together. This way Muhammad's clan would be unable to take revenge on any single group.

When Muhammad found out about the plot he slipped out of town with Abu Bakr, one of his closest friends and most devoted followers. They hid in a cave for three days while the Makkans sent warriors scouring the desert. Then, the two men set out in the opposite direction of Yathrib and circled back, eluding the searchers. They finally reached **Yathrib, which soon became known as Madinah**.

The Muslim immigrants had come with only the few belongings they could carry, and so Muhammad asked the Muslims of Madinah to "adopt" the immigrants. Each immigrant family was taken in by a Madinah family, who shared their homes and food with the newcomers.

#### A NEW SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Muhammad wrote a city charter guaranteeing the rights of all residents, and he sent treaties of friendship to neighboring tribes and cities. Bolstered by continuing revelations, he developed a new legal code, and new moral and ethical standards for the growing Muslim community. Muhammad founded a radically new social structure for Arabia. He became head of a collection of tribal groups bound together by shared beliefs, not by blood kinship.

No one was forced to convert to Islam. The Qur'an clearly states, "There shall be no coercion in matters of faith" (2:256). Jews and Christians were honored as "People of the Book." Muhammad never felt they had to embrace Islam as they had their own divinely revealed scriptures and laws to follow.

Three times in the next five years (624-629 C.E.), Makkah sent invading forces to destroy Islam. The Muslims were outnumbered in each battle, but each time managed to defeat the invaders. Before the battle of Badr, Makkah assembled a thousand warriors, well equipped with horses, camels, weapons, and armor. Muhammad had a force of only 313 poorly equipped followers. (The Muslim warriors were accompanied by their wives and daughters who tended the wounded on the battlefield. The women even took an active part in the battles on occasion.)

Muhammad decided to confront the Makkah army at the oasis of Badr. The Muslims got there first and took control of the wells. Even though they were tired and thirsty from their long desert journey, the Makkans saw that they outnumbered the Muslims and engaged them in battle. They were routed, losing several leaders. Almost one hundred men were killed or taken prisoner, while the Muslims had minimal casualties.

At the battle of Uhud, Makkah assembled an army of three thousand warriors to attack the Muslims. Muhammad managed to gather one thousand men and proceeded to Mount Uhud, a small mountain just outside Madinah. The day before the battle, one of the Madinah leaders deserted with three hundred of his men, leaving only seven hundred men to fight three thousand.

Muhammad formed his men in close ranks and placed fifty archers on a side hill to prevent the enemy cavalry from sweeping around to attack from the rear.

The enemy charged, and the Muslim soldiers held. The Muslims countercharged, and the enemy began to retreat in confusion. The archers left their position on the hill to join in the battle, and the Makkah cavalry raced around Mount Uhud and attacked the Muslims from behind.

The Muslims were forced to retreat, losing their chance of a stunning victory against great odds. Muhammad tried to stop the retreat but was knocked unconscious by a blow to the head. Muslim women surrounded him and protected him from the enemy. The Makkah army withdrew, thinking that Muhammad was dead and Islam destroyed.

Before the third battle, Makkah made alliances with tribes throughout Arabia and assembled an army of over ten thousand to attack Madinah. Madinah was surrounded on three sides by cliffs and plains of volcanic rock. A Persian Muslim, **Salman al-Farsi**, had studied military tactics and strategy. He advised strengthening the walls of Madinah and building a deep trench or moat along the exposed front section of the city. Every family was responsible for a different section of the trench, and it took the concerted efforts of all the Muslims to get it finished in time.

The Makkah army tried to breach the trench for almost a month. Their cavalry was unable to breach the trench, and their attacks on foot were beaten back each time by the Madinah archers, firing down from a wall made up of the earth taken from the trench.

The Makkah army was not prepared for a siege. Desert warfare was usually a matter of sudden hit-and-run raids and cavalry charges. They were out of provisions, and the men and horses were hungry. A storm broke out, and one of the tribal leaders left along with his warriors. The other Bedouin then left as well, and the Makkans had to retreat. The siege was lifted.

Although these early battles give the impression that Islam is a militant, conflict-loving religion, the opposite is true. The Qur'an teaches that war is a catastrophe to be avoided if at all possible. Islam urges people to do everything possible to seek peace and end conflict.

After these victories, the Muslims gained great status throughout Arabia. Many tribes began converting to Islam, and Muslim strength began to rival that of Makkah.

The following year, 629 C.E., Muhammad initiated an unprecedented peace offensive during the pilgrimage season. He journeyed to Makkah with over one thousand virtually unarmed Muslims wearing the traditional white robes of the pilgrims. Makkah sent a troop of two hundred cavalry to stop the Muslims, but the Muslims took a footpath through the mountains and came to the edge of the city, where violence was forbidden by ancient custom.

The Makkans were afraid to let the Muslims into the city, but they knew that they could not simply forbid over a thousand pilgrims who were scrupulously observing the ancient Arab pilgrimage rituals. Their reputation would have suffered throughout Arabia. Makkah sent a delegation to Muhammad and worked out the treaty of **Hudaybiyyah**. This was a ten-year peace treaty between Makkah and Madinah. It also allowed the Muslims to make pilgrimages to Makkah. However, many Muslims wanted to continue their fight against Makkah and felt the treaty was shameful.

The treaty of Hudaybiyyah impressed many of the Bedouin tribes and the numbers of Muslims continued to increase. However, the treaty was broken when a tribe allied to Makkah attacked a tribe allied to Madinah. In 630 C.E. Muhammad brought an army of ten thousand Muslims to Makkah. They camped in the mountains surrounding the city, and Muhammad ordered his soldiers to make several campfires for each group, so his army seemed larger.

Makkah surrendered, and the next day, the Muslims entered the city without shedding a drop of blood. Muhammad pardoned those who had tortured him and his followers for so many years. Then he cleared out all the idols from the Ka'bah. None of the Makkans were forced to embrace Islam. After a few weeks, Muhammad returned to Madinah, which was to remain the center of the growing Islamic state.

In 632 C.E., when he was almost **63 years of age**, Muhammad made a final pilgrimage to Makkah. He delivered a famous talk on **Mount Arafat**, known as his **Last Sermon**. When Muhammad returned to Madinah, he fell ill and passed away several weeks later.

## A CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF THE PROPHET

- 570 C.E.** The Prophet Muhammad is born.
- 610 C.E.** Muhammad receives the first revelations of the Qur'an.
- 612 C.E.** Muhammad begins to teach/preach publicly.
- 615 C.E.** The Muslim community is persecuted by the rich and powerful in Makkah.
- 622 C.E.** Hijrah—Seventy Muslim families migrate to Yathrib (Madinah) followed by Muhammad.
- 624 C.E.** The Battle of Badr—Muslims win a dramatic victory over Makkah forces.
- 625 C.E.** The Battle of Uhud—Muslim forces are routed after an initial victory.
- 627 C.E.** The Battle of the Trench—Muslims hold off and defeat a besieging Makkah army.
- 628 C.E.** Peace treaty is signed between Makkah and Madinah.
- 630 C.E.** Makkah violates the peace treaty. Muhammad and his army enter Makkah unopposed.
- 632 C.E.** Death of the Prophet Muhammad.