

## CHAPTER 24

# Islam: The Life of Muhammad

Islam is one of the largest and most influential of the world's religions. Its adherents live mostly in the Middle East, Northern Africa, Central Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Today more than one billion people around the world profess the Islamic faith.

Islam is an Arabic word which means "submission," "surrender" or "obedience." Another meaning of the word is "peace." It stands for "the perfect peace that comes when one's life is surrendered to God." The person who accepts Islam is called a Muslim. He believes that submission and obedience to the will of God is the only way that real peace can ever be achieved in the heart and mind of a person, and in society as a whole.

Islam can be considered the brother religion of Judaism and Christianity, since all three have Abraham as their common father of faith. Hence, both the history and the message of Islam cannot be distinguished as fully distinct from those of its two "elder brothers." Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is "a religion of the Book." For Jews the book is the Torah; for Christians, the Bible; and for Muslims, the Koran — the collected revelations that Muhammad received from God.

### The lineage of Islam

For Muslims, the story of Islam does not begin with Muhammad but with God. "In the beginning God ..." opens the book of Genesis in the Bible. The story of the creation of the world in the Koran closely resembles the Genesis account. It differs only in using the word "Allah," which is formed by joining the definite article "al" (meaning "the") with "Illah" (God). Literally, "Allah" means "the God" — not "a God," for there is only one: The God.

Allah created the world, and after it He created man. The first man was the prophet Adam. His task was to look after the world in the way that God wanted it to be looked after. However, Adam gave in to the temptation of Satan and with Eve was cast out of Paradise. Eventually, Adam and Eve repented and were reconciled to God. In gratitude they built a simple shrine, the Kaaba. A descendant of Adam, Noah, had a son named Shem. His name is the origin of the word "Semite." Thus both Arabs and Jews, as descendants of Shem, are Semitic people.

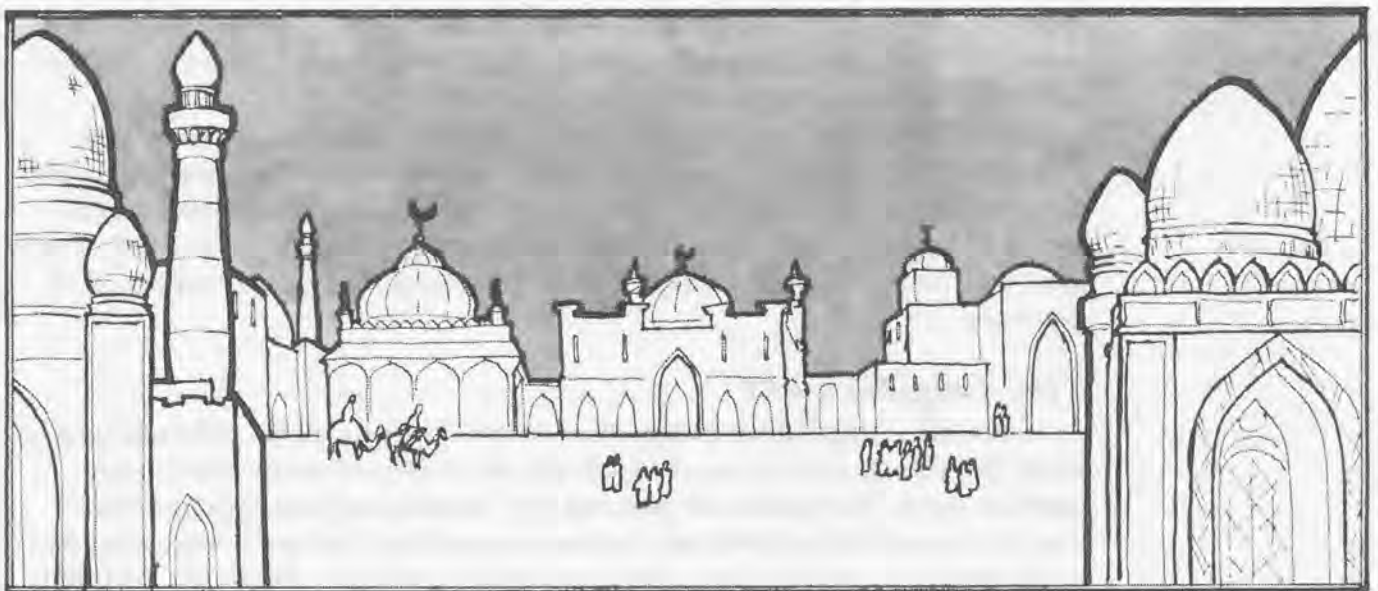
The Prophet Abraham, a descendant of Shem, lived with his childless wife, Sarah, and her maid Hagar. Wanting to continue his lineage, Abraham had a son by Hagar. He was called Ishmael. Later, Sarah too had a son, who was called Isaac. Abraham was instructed by God to sacrifice Isaac. It was the submission of Abraham to this supreme test, described in the Koran by the verb "*aslama*," that appears to have given Islam its name. Sarah then demanded that Abraham banish Ishmael and Hagar from the tribe. According to the Koran, Ishmael went to Mecca, and together with his

father, Abraham, rebuilt the Kaaba, the sacred shrine of Islam. Ishmael's descendants, growing up in Arabia, became Arabs, whereas those of Isaac, who remained in Palestine, are Jews.

Following the lineage of Ishmael, the first son of Abraham, we eventually come to the second half of the sixth century AD and Muhammad, the prophet through whom Islam emerged in its final form.

### *Muhammad's birth and childhood*

The period in Arabia before the call of Muhammad is often called by Islamic scholars "the days of ignorance." It was a particularly uncivilized and barbaric time. Arabia stood isolated, cut off from the rest of the world by vast tracts of desert. The people who lived in the desert, the Bedouins, felt almost no obligation to anyone outside their tribe. There was a shortage of material goods, and the fighting character of the tribes made robbery and brigandage the normal way of life. There was no law except the law of the strongest. Whatever notions they had of morals, culture and



civilization were primitive in the extreme. Blood feuds sometimes stretched over half a century. Drunken orgies ending in bloody brawls were common. The gambling tables were open all night, and dancing girls inflamed the passions of the young men from the desert. The dominant religion was animism, the worship of stones, trees, idols, stars and spirits. There is no evidence that they inspired any genuine religious enthusiasm and, even less, moral conduct. The time was ripe for a deliverer.

The Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca around 570 AD, a member of the Hashim clan of the Quraish tribe. According to Ibn Isha Q, an Islamic historian, the legend told of an angel approaching the Prophet's Mother during her pregnancy: "You are pregnant with the lord of this people, and when he is born say, 'I put him in the care of the One, away from the evil of every envier; then call him Muhammad (highly praised).'" The legend also says that Muhammad's birth was revealed to the Jewish community of his time through the movement of the stars, and to the Christian community through the hermit Bahira.

At this time, the people of Arabia were mainly superstitious pagans, with a few notable exceptions such as Muhammad's grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib. Many Arabs lived as nomads, and there were only a few cities, such as Mecca, Yathrib and Taif. Mecca was a wealthy trading post that also happened to be the most important shrine for Arab idols. The cube-shaped Kaaba temple at the center of Mecca origi-

nally had been dedicated to the One True God. But over the centuries various cults moved in, and by the time of Muhammad there were no less than 360 idols to different gods inside the Kaaba.

Muhammad's early life was filled with tragedy. His father, a merchant, died a few days before he was born, and his mother died when he was only six years old. He was brought up by his grandfather, a man famous for his saintly life. Muhammad grew up a particularly devout and honorable man and a believer in the One God. When his grandfather died, Muhammad was taken into the household of his uncle, Abu Talib, who was a merchant. He worked for his uncle first as a shepherd and later as a merchant. He was well liked and earned the nickname "the trustworthy one" for his piety, honesty, fair dealing, and practical common sense.

When he was twenty-five, he entered the service of a wealthy widow named Khadijah. His wisdom and integrity impressed her greatly, and after a short while she offered herself in marriage to him. Although she was fifteen years older than Muhammad, they were very happily married and had six children. Even though polygamy was normal among Arabs at this time, Muhammad never considered marrying any other woman while she was alive. During the difficult times that lay ahead, Khadijah remained steadfast at his side. "Allah comforted him through her," tradition says, "for she made his burden light."

Muhammad was now rich, a respected and influential citizen of Mecca, and seemed to have reached his goal in life. But he was not satisfied by material security. Questions about the way of the world oppressed him. He was restless and increasingly withdrew from business and family and sought the solitude of the desert. It was there that the event occurred that was to change his life and to affect the history of the world.

### *The religious quest*

There was a huge barren rock on the outskirts of Mecca known as Mount Hira, in which there was a cave. In search of solitude and a place where he could deeply meditate about the mysteries of good and evil, Muhammad found refuge in that cave. He was unable to accept the crudeness, superstition and evil environment that was considered normal, and he reached out for God. Through many sleepless nights of prayer and meditation, Muhammad became more and more convinced that Allah was as real as life and the universe He created, and far greater than any of his countrymen had ever supposed. He was what His name literally meant, the God, One without rival.

One night, when he was around forty years old, something happened that changed his life entirely. He became aware of the presence of an angel, and he was shown words and commanded to read. "I cannot read," replied a terrified Muhammad. According to the Koran (96:1-5) the angel insisted, and suddenly Muhammad knew what the words said:

Read! Read! Read in the name of your Lord, He who created and made man from an embryo. Read, for your Lord is merciful like no one on earth. He who instructed man by pen, He taught him what he did not know.

Coming out of his trance with the words written on his soul, Muhammad left the cave. He then heard a voice from heaven saying, "Muhammad, you are God's messenger and I am Gabriel."

Muhammad rushed home and told his wife he had either become a prophet or a madman. After hearing the full story, Khadijah became his first convert, a fact that speaks for itself, as no one knows a man as well as his own wife. But was this voice



really God's? Would it return again, and what would it require? Muhammad wondered. It was two years before the messages began again, and they continued for the rest of his life. He was chosen to preach the words of God with unyielding determination, in the face of relentless persecution, insult and outrage.

Not once did I receive a revelation without thinking that my soul had been torn away.

Hadith

Muhammad did not always see the angel Gabriel when he had his revelations. Sometimes he just saw his eyes, and sometimes he only heard a voice. Sometimes the revelations came when he was deep in prayer, and at other times they occurred spontaneously as he was engaged in daily life. The manner in which the revelations came made them stand out as something quite different from the thoughts and teaching of Muhammad himself. These visions always made him feel close to death.

### Early ministry

At first Muhammad did not preach in public but spoke privately to those who were interested or who had noticed a change in him. His first converts were his wife, Khadijah; his nephew, Ali; a slave boy, Zaid; and his friend the merchant, Abu Bakr. He began to daily practice the Muslim way of prayer, which drew comment from those around him. After a while, he began to preach on the street corners of Mecca. He told the town's traders that God would judge them by their works, and he challenged them to submit their lives to God and to practice love toward the poor and imprisoned, to slaves and foreigners.

It must have been very difficult for Muhammad to go out the first time to the people of Mecca, who knew him so well, and preach openly. Everyone was amazed. His kindness and gentle wisdom had shown him all his life to be a noble and devout man. But now he was claiming that he had received messages from God, and that he had been sent to change their lives. The moral teaching demanded an end to the immorality and corruption that the people did not want to give up. The message that all men were equal in the sight of God was intensely democratic and challenged the unjust class system. Although crowds gathered to listen, most people didn't want to change their lives.

The message of one invisible God was not suited to the taste of Meccans, who were used to worshipping many images of different gods made of wood and stone. Muhammad's own tribe was responsible for the care of the Kaaba and its idols. When his kinfolk realized that he was trying to stop people worshipping there, they were furious because it threatened the considerable income they made from the pilgrims who came to worship at the 360 idols.



They did not hurt Muhammad, but they threatened, ridiculed and insulted him. When this had no effect, they accused him of being a sorcerer, insulting the gods, and trying to split up families by making young men rebel against their fathers.

Muhammad's uncle, Abu Lahab, one of the tribal chiefs, tried argument, bribery and threat against him, but nothing would make him give in.

The people of Mecca were determined to stop Muhammad and his few followers at any cost. His enemies turned to abuse and slander, which soon turned into threats and outright persecution. They covered Muhammad and his followers with dirt and filth while they were offering their daily prayers. They pelted them with stones, beat them with sticks, threw them into prison, and tried to starve them by excluding them from all trade, charity and business. The first martyr of Islam was a woman, Sumayyah, and the first muezzin (caller to prayer) was the black slave Bilal, who was rescued after being left to die in the blazing sun with a huge rock on his chest.

### The Night of Ascent

During the first three years of heartbreaking effort, Muhammad found fewer than forty followers. However, the opposition of his enemies soon proved to be no match for the truth of his words. Gradually, worthy men with energy and talent became convinced of the authenticity of his message, and by the end of the decade he had a following of several hundred families.

Still, it was a very difficult time and many Muslims were reduced to penury. In 619 Muhammad's wife died. She had been his most ardent supporter and helper. In the same year his uncle Abu Talib, who had protected him from the worst persecution, also died. Without their support Muhammad went through a time of bleakness and despair. The persecution became worse as his enemies took advantage of his difficulties. The wife of his uncle Abu Lahab used to take sharp thorns and rubbish and throw them down outside his house every day. Later, though, when she was taken ill, Muhammad did housework for her until she recovered.

It was during this year that Muhammad experienced the second most important night in his life, the Night of Ascent. It is not clear whether this experience was a vision, dream or psychic happening. Muhammad was awakened from his sleep and taken by a miraculous beast to Jerusalem. From the site of the old Jewish Temple on Mount Zion, he was taken through the seven heavens and shown paradise and hell. In each of these heavens he met and spoke with earlier prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus the Messiah. During these conversations, he was given the number of times per day a devout Muslim should pray. Muhammad thought fifty times to be about right, but Moses said the burden would be too great for ordinary human beings, and the number was finally settled at five. Gradually, Muhammad approached the highest heaven and the Throne of God. Muhammad was aware only of great peace and the brilliance of pure light. Neither he nor the angel accompanying him could go beyond a certain point. Time, thought and feelings were stilled as Muhammad experienced the overwhelming blessing of the presence of God, an experience that he could never adequately put into words, for it was beyond all human expression and understanding. This experience brought great comfort and strength to the Prophet and confirmed that Allah had not deserted him.

### Flight to Medina

From now Muhammad's fortunes changed drastically. He was invited to come to live in Yathrib, a town some 320 kilometers to the north of Mecca, by 75 of the leading citizens. This town originally had been a Jewish settlement but had been taken over by two Arab tribes who were fighting each other for sovereignty over the town. It seemed that this blood feud, which also involved the Jewish clans, would never end. The group of citizens who visited him were looking for a strong but just leader to bring peace. After considering this offer and receiving the pledge of the people to support Islam, Muhammad finally agreed to migrate to Yathrib.

First, he sent 70 Muslim families there, while he remained behind in Mecca. But when the people of Mecca learned about his intention to leave, they were determined to stop him at any cost. They wanted to destroy the revolutionary movement in case it grew further and threatened their very existence. When he finally managed to flee with one of his followers, a large group of his enemies pursued him, coming so close that his friend Abu Bakr in total despair cried, “We are only two.” Muhammad answered, “No, we are three, for God is with us.”

When Muhammad arrived in Yathrib, so many people rushed out to offer him refuge in their homes that he was embarrassed by their kindness. Not wanting to cause offense, he left the choice of residence up to his camel. The animal stopped where there were dates spread out to dry, and this place was given to the prophet to build his new home. He ensured that this new house had a huge courtyard which could be used as a place of prayer by the whole city.

The year was 622. The migration — known as the *hegira*, or “flight” — is regarded by Muslims as the turning point in world history and is the year from which they date their calendar. Yathrib soon changed its name to *Madinat al-Nabi*, “the city of the Prophet,” and then simply to Medina, “the city.”

## Muhammad the ruler

Once in Medina, Muhammad was faced with many problems. He had to unite the different clans and tribes into a single strong community; he had to deal with Mecca, which was bound to attack Medina if Muhammad succeeded in making it strong; and he was concerned about how to convert the whole of Arabia.

Muhammad initiated the creation of a charter which would enable all the disputing tribes and factions in Medina to accept him and abide by his decisions. In this way they could end the blood feud. He ruled that all the citizens should be free to practice their own religion in peaceful co-existence, without fear of persecution or disfavor. He asked only that if the city faced any aggression from outside or tyranny from within, the citizens should join together and cooperate in the face of the enemy. The previous tribal laws of both the Arabs and Jews were replaced by the basic principle of general justice for all, irrespective of class, color or creed. In this way Muhammad challenged the whole political arrangement of Arabia, which until then had been based on the tribe. While each tribe and clan kept its own leader, Muhammad used his religious authority to make himself the leader of the whole city.

Muhammad had expected that the Jewish clans would support him, as they already believed in one God. However, when he talked to them about the Koran there was always controversy. There were certain differences between the Islamic and Jewish faiths. Muhammad could not deny his revelations, and the Jews maintained faith in their scriptures. Later, when all the Arab clans officially became Muslim, Islam became more Arabic and less Jewish. The direction of prayer was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca. The conflict between Arab and Jewish clans increased, finally resulting in the expulsion of the Jews from the city.

Although he was now the ruler of a city-state and in receipt of increasing wealth and influence, Muhammad never lived like a king. His dwellings were simple mud-brick houses. In his home he built the first mosque and led regular prayers. He believed strongly in good manners, always greeting people kindly and showing respect to elders. He balanced his serious teachings with a gentle good humor, saying, “The dearest of you to me are those who have good manners; the most offensive to me are the most boring and long-winded.” He was never arrogant or superior, despite his position as leader, and never made people feel small, unwanted or embarrassed. Muhammad slept on a very simple mattress on the floor and made it his practice



never to fill his stomach. He did not think it right to be idle while others were working, and he helped in the various labor projects of his friends. He owned few clothes and used to patch and sew his own clothes and shoes whenever the need arose.

In Medina, Muhammad remarried. Two of his wives were Jewish and one was Christian. His wives shared his devout way of life and made enormous personal sacrifices. They would often support him in his nightly prayers. Muhammad had only one more child, a son, who like his two sons by Khadijah died in infancy. His four daughters all married and bore children.

Muhammad's aim was the conversion of all of Arabia. He began initially by sending out missionaries to talk about Islam, followed up by proposals of alliances. By coming under the protection of Medina, other cities and tribes could escape from the destructive blood feuds. Still, the opposition from the Quraish tribe continued, and Muhammad was obliged to take part in warfare for the rest of his life. As a result of these wars, many rules of conduct of war and treatment of prisoners were laid down for Muslims, the rules of *jihad*. Jihad was never intended to be military activity for the sake of nationalism, tyranny or expansion. It was only for defense, and only until the enemy could be brought to peace. During the Prophet's battles, many of the enemy were converted to his side, impressed by Muslim chivalry, courage and faith in God.

## Return to Mecca

In 628 a peace treaty was signed with Mecca. However, the following year the Meccans attacked one of the tribes who were allied to the Muslims. The Prophet came down on Mecca with a force of 10,000 men. They camped outside the city, and the Prophet promised a general amnesty if the Meccans would formally submit. In the end, only 28 Meccans were killed, including some of Muhammad's greatest enemies. Muhammad entered the city in triumph, went straight to the Kaaba and walked round it seven times. He then entered the shrine and destroyed all the idols and pictures except, it is said, those of Jesus and Mary. Uthman ibn Talha, who had once refused Muhammad entry to the Kaaba and had persecuted him, was given the key to the shrine, and it remains with his family to this day.

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### Muhammad's Final Sermon

O people listen carefully to what I say, for I do not know whether, after this year, I shall ever be amongst you again. Listen carefully, and report my words to those who cannot be here today.

Regard the life and property of every Muslim as a sacred trust. Hurt no one, so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and that he will reckon your deeds. You will neither inflict nor suffer injustice. Remember that you have rights with regard to your women, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as wives only under Allah's trust and with His permission. Treat them well and be kind to them, for they are your partners and committed helpers.

Worship Allah, say your five daily prayers; fast during the month of Ramadan, and give your wealth. Perform hajj, if you can afford to.

An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab; a white has no superiority over a black, nor a black over a white, except by piety and good deeds. Every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim.

Muhammad returned to Medina, where he again was engaged in warfare against tribes who attacked the Muslims. In 632 the Prophet set out in pilgrimage to the Kaaba. During this pilgrimage revelations were given about the rules of the *hajj* which are followed by Muslims to this day. Muhammad also delivered his final sermon, the summarized text of which can be found in mosques all over the world:

At the end of the speech he looked around at the vast array of people. "Have I fulfilled my mission?" he cried. The crowd roared their approval. "You have fulfilled it, O messenger of God." Muhammad raised his eyes to heaven and called out three times, "O God, You are witness, You are witness, O God, You are witness." There was a moment's silence broken by the call to prayer from the powerful voice of Bilal.



After returning to Medina, Muhammad fell ill with a high fever and severe headaches. Still, he continued to lead the prayers in the mosque for as long as he was able but eventually requested Abu Bakr to take his place. He did not recover and died in the arms of his favorite wife, Aisha. He was sixty-two years old.

### The expansion of Islam

Muhammad died with virtually all of Arabia under his control. Within a century, his followers had conquered Armenia,

Persia, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt and Spain. They crossed the Pyrenees into France, and had they not been defeated in 732 by the Frankish king Charles Martel, the entire Western world might today be Muslim. The domain of Islam extended from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in Spain to India, an empire greater than that of Rome at its zenith.

It is not true that people were forced to become Muslims at the point of a sword. The formula was "Islam, tribute or the sword." No one can be forced to believe any religion, and Muslims were actually tolerant to unbelievers as long as they lived within the law. Non-Muslims had to pay taxes, but those who became Muslims lived tax-free. In fact, some rulers actively discouraged conversions in order to balance their budgets!

### Something to think about



- Do you think Muhammad would have been just as successful if he had lived in our time instead of when he did?
- Why do you think the Quraish merchants were so opposed to their kinsman Muhammad and his message?
- How true do you think it is that the most difficult people to impress are those in one's own family? Why do you think this is so? Is it a good thing?
- Write out an argument between Abu Lahab and Abu Talib, taking sides for and against Muhammad.
- Muslims believe they should place their loyalty to God before their loyalty to their families. Would this divide families or bring them closer together?