

A Brief Background of Muhammad

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The religion of Islam centers itself on the teachings and life of Muhammad. Though it is denied that Muhammad was divine or deserving of worship (Sura 2:285), he is considered the greatest man to have ever lived, and **ultimate example of human existence** (Miller, p. 1; cf. Sura 33:21).

Early Life

Muhammad was born in 570 AD in **Mecca**, Saudi Arabia. He was born into the tribe of the Quraysh, guardians of the Ka'bah ("cube"), a structure believed to have been built by Abraham and Ishmael for the worship of Allah (Sura 2:125-127; 5:97), but by this time had become associated with pagan idolatry. His father, Abd Allah, died before Muhammad was born, and his mother, Amina, died when he was six years old, placing him in the care of his grandfather, Abd al-Muttalib, who later died when Muhammad was eight years old. This brought him under the care of his uncle, Abu Talib.

Abu Talib was a merchant, and took Muhammad with him on many excursions that would have brought the young boy into contact with **Jewish and Christian influences**. It is said that one Christian monk, Bahira, told Abu Talib that great things were in store for his nephew, and that he ought to be protected from the Jews. In addition to his travels, Abu Talib also trained Muhammad in the use of weapons of war, which proved useful in later years.

By age twenty, Muhammad had gained a reputation as being trustworthy, as he was entrusted to trade goods on behalf of others. One such employer was Khadijah, who offered marriage to Muhammad. He accepted, being twenty five years old, and Khadijah fifteen years older.

Revelations

Not much is known about the next fifteen years, though with the financial security resulting from his marriage, Muhammad had more time on his hands, some of which he spent in meditation. He had a "habit of retreating from the hustle and bustle of city life one month a year to a cave in Mt. Hira, a desert hill a few miles north of Mecca" (Miller, p. 5). The month was Ramadan, and in 610 AD, at age forty, he allegedly received his first revelation (Sura 96) from Allah through the angel Gabriel (Sura 2:97; cf. Gal. 1:8). He would receive an additional 113 revelations over the next 23 years, which would be recorded in the **Qur'an**, though it is believed that **Muhammad himself could neither read nor write** (Sura 7:157-158). While the actions and sayings of Muhammad outside of these revelations, contained in the Hadith, are highly esteemed, only the Qur'an is considered to be the word of Allah.

After his first revelation, Muhammad was not sure what to think, but was reassured by his wife, who put him into contact with her cousin, a Christian who had "possessed a strong sense of expectancy in their anticipation of a coming prophet who would turn the Arabs away from their idolatry" (Miller, p. 6), believing that John 16:13 referred not to the coming of the Holy Spirit, but to a future prophet (cf. Sura 7:157; 61:6, cf. Deut. 18:18; Jn. 14:16; 16:7). Encouraged, Muhammad began to preach privately.

After three years, he allegedly received a revelation that caused him to preach publicly in Mecca. "The cornerstone feature of his message was the condemnation of the idolatry that dominated Arab culture and, in contrast, the affirmation of one God." As a result, "Muhammad found himself in direct conflict with the economic interests of his mother tribe, the Quraysh" (Miller, p. 7). Persecution ensued. In

619 AD, Khadijah died, as well as his uncle Abu Talib, his protector, resulting in more hostility.

Trip to Heaven

According to tradition, shortly after the death of his wife Muhammad took a trip to heaven (al-mir'raj). He fell asleep one night near the Ka'bah, when he was awakened by Gabriel. He was then transported by a white horse with wings, named Buraq, to the temple mount in Jerusalem, where he met Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others. Muhammad then ascended through seven heavens, into heaven itself, where he was told Muslims must pray fifty times per day. As he descended back, he was asked by Moses how many prayers were required, upon which Moses told him to go back to Allah and request the number be reduced. This happened several times until the number was reduced to five, at which point Muhammad was ashamed to request any further reductions. This is why Muslims pray five times per day, and why the Dome of the Rock mosque was constructed in Jerusalem.

Wives

Muhammad was now fifty years old, and allegedly had a dream that instructed him to marry the daughter of his best friend, Abu Bakr. Bakr's daughter was named A'ishah, and was only six years old, though she continued to live with her parents until the marriage was consummated three years later. In the mean time, Muhammad had married Sawdah, and went on to marry several others (Hafsah, Zaynab (died shortly after marriage), Umm Salamah, Zaynab, Juwayriyah, Umm Habibah, Safiyyah, Mariyah, perhaps others), some of which were captives or widows of war, or the wives of other men given to Muhammad (see Miller, p. 20). The restriction of four wives did not apply to the prophet (Sura 4:3; 33:50-51). When problems arose in the home due to this polygamy, Muhammad received a revelation telling his wives of the privilege of being married to him, and the reward that awaited those who were submissive (Sura 33:28-36).

The Hijra

In 620 AD, Muhammad met some men from the city of Yathrib, and convinced them he was The Prophet. Contrary to many in Mecca, those in Yathrib were very receptive, and later asked Muhammad to move to the city to be their leader. As Meccan Muslims began leaving for Yathrib, the hostile Meccans decided to attack. Muhammad, informed of the plot by revelation, was able to escape and flee to Yathrib. "This event in the life of Muhammad, the Hijrah, or 'flight,' to Yathrib, has gone down in Islamic history as an event of such significant proportions that it constitutes the commencement of the Islamic era, and serves as the starting point of the Islamic calendar. It occurred in 622 AD." (Miller, p. 12) The city of Yathrib was later named **Medina** (Al-Madinah), meaning "the city."

Medina

The move to Medina marked a new phase in Muhammad's life, as he took on a leadership role of an entire community, with many willing to follow. He even tried to promote unity between Muslims and Jews in the city against polytheism, though true unity was never possible due to fundamental differences in beliefs, namely the view by Muslims that God's promises have come through Ishmael rather than Isaac.

While in Medina, Muhammad claimed to receive a revelation concerning the Meccans from whom he and his followers had fled, giving permission to fight because they had been wronged and driven from their homes (Sura 22:39-40). This encouraged the Muslims to take up arms against the Meccans, in particular the trading caravans traveling from city to city. When questions arose concerning the types of attacks made by the Muslims, Muhammad received revelations that made it clear that "persecution is

worse than killing” (Sura 2:217). Sometime during this period, perhaps due to opposition from the Jews, the direction of prayer (qiblah) was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca (Sura 2:144).

Raids against the Meccans and others continued, making many more conversions to Islam in the process, as well as taking captive, exiling, or killing those who opposed the Muslims, all while Muhammad received a fifth of the spoils. Muhammad soon amassed a great army of followers, and finally returned to Mecca, taking the city and removing all traces of idolatry. For all practical purposes, “Muhammad had firmly established himself as **emperor of Arabia**...all idolaters were given four months to repent (i.e., convert to Islam) or vacate the area. After that, any idolaters found would be slain or taken captive” (Miller, p. 34, emp. added; Sura 9:1-6).

Death

At age sixty-three, Muhammad led a final pilgrimage from Medina to Mecca, after which he uttered a revelation that “I [Allah] have perfected your religion for you and completed my favor unto you, and have chosen for you as religion AL-ISLAM” (Sura 5:3). Some months later, in May 632 AD, Muhammad became ill. He died on June 8th in Medina, in the apartment of his wife A'ishah, and was buried in the same place, around which is now the Mosque of the Prophet.

References

Miller, Dave (2005), *The Quran Unveiled: Islam and New Testament Christianity in Conflict* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press).

Note: The verses referenced here are from Pickthall's translation, as quoted in Miller, and provided at <http://www.islamicity.com/QuranSearch/>