

Muhammad: The Biography



Image description: A painting of Muhammad receiving his first revelation from the angel Gabriel, from Jami' al-Tawarikh by Rashid al-Din (14th century)

PART 1: A prophet was born

In 570 a son was born to ʿAbdallah and Amina of the tribe of Quraysh in Mecca, an important oasis in the Arabian Peninsula. The child would become Muhammad, the prophet of a new monotheistic religion: Islam.

PART 2: Muhammad in Muslim tradition

New terms:

Title – English	Sunna
Title – Arabic	سنة
Description (English)	The model of Muhammad upon which Muslim believers should fashion their norms, actions, and beliefs.

Title – English	Hadith
Title – Arabic	حديث
Description (English)	"Narrative"; collection of accounts customs, deeds, and sayings of Muhammad

Muslim tradition provides us with countless details regarding Muhammad's life since infancy (going back even to his mother's pregnancy, if not before) till his death in 632.

According to Muslim belief, the set of customs and views that are most meaningful and epitomize the normative way of life are embodied in Muhammad's personal example.

This is the *sunna*: the model of Muhammad. The *sunna* is recorded in the *Hadith* (literally "narrative"), that is the collection of accounts narrating Muhammad's customs, deeds, and sayings. Originally, these accounts were circulated orally.

Based on the identity of the transmitters, Muslim scholars during the early Islamic centuries created a mechanism of distinguishing between the correct reports and those that were determined as dubious or altogether false.

Transmitters who were known to be close companions to Muhammad and thus could be eye-witnesses to the reported event, and were known to be of sound character and of good memory, were regarded as trusted, and their accounts were then assembled in six canonized compilations.

PART 3: Muhammad in the eyes of the believers

Historians of Islam point out that Islamic tradition is to promote a religious agenda rather than document history. Furthermore, one can assume that Muhammad's life was always of interest to believers, but the need to document it in such detailed attentiveness as a manual for everyday life evolved in retrospect, as the concept of *sunna* took root among early Muslims.

Hence the Muhammad we meet through the pages of Islamic tradition is the one that was envisioned by his believers, rather than the historical figure. Moreover, the portrayal of Muhammad is not static.

All believers accept Muhammad's model and his being the last prophet and messenger of God, but in order to explain this unique position believers interpret and re-interpret Muhammad according to their different and changing understanding, circumstances, and the difficulties they wish to smooth.

PART 4: Muhammad's family

New term:

Title – English	Ka'ba
Title – Arabic	كعبة
Description (English)	Literally: cubicle. The building in Mecca which in pre-Islamic Arabia center of polytheistic religious ritual and became the holiest site in Islam located in the sacred mosque in Mecca.

Muhammad was born to a noble Qurayshi family. Muslim tradition presents a very impressive picture of success, which in reality may have been much more humble. Nevertheless, Muhammad's extended family was indeed involved in various aspects of leadership.

Hashim, Muhammad's great-grandfather and his brothers, set up a trade network in the region and beyond that situated Mecca as a commercial center. Members of that family also organized the pilgrimage to the Ka^ʿba (literally: cubicle) which was then the center of polytheistic religious ritual, and later on would become the most famous and most important sanctuary of Islam.

Muhammad was born to a privileged background, but when his father died, and a few years later his mother died too, Muhammad grew as an orphan under the patronage of his paternal relatives.

First it was his grandfather, ^ʿAbd al-Muttalib, who took him in, and then his uncle Abu Talib. His cousin, ^ʿAli bin Abi Talib, would later on marry Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, and become also a son-in-law.

PART 5: Muhammad's as a grown man

Muhammad was introduced into the family trade business. As a young man of 25 years old he married Khadija, a rich widow merchant and managed her property.

They had several children, of which only four daughters survived: Zaynab, Ruqayya, Umm Kulthum, and Fatima. After Khadija's death in 620, Muhammad married several other women and took concubines.

PART 6: Muhammad: the prophet in Mecca

New term:

Title – English	Sahaba
Title – Arabic	صحابية
Description (English)	Muhammad's companions and disciples; regarded as important eyewitnesses to Muhammad's deeds and words.

Islamic tradition places the beginning of prophecy in 610, when Muhammad was about 40 – the age wisdom and prudence in several monotheistic traditions.

Khadija was the first to recognize that Muhammad received a revelation, accepted its truth and converted to Islam. This is the beginning of a new religion called Islam (that is: submission to God) as a historical phenomenon.

Muhammad attracted a small circle of followers from Mecca. His companions (Sahaba) are key figures in early Islamic history. Muhammad encountered opposition on the part of the established Meccan elite who feared Muhammad's religious and social mission and leadership may undermine their own position, status, and traditional way of life.

A considerable portion of the opposition came from his own extended family. Muhammad's relatives tried to protect him but in 622, when the confrontation intensified and Muhammad himself was in physical danger, Muhammad left Mecca and headed to Yathrib.

PART 7: Muhammad: the prophet in Medina

New term:

Title – English	The Hijra
Title – Arabic	هجرة
Description (English)	Muhammad's migration in 622 from Mecca to Yathrib, later named Medina.

The journey (hijra; literally "migration") from Mecca to Yathrib, a town some 300 kilometers north, was a watershed in Muhammad's life, and in Islamic history.

Year 622, the year of the hijra is year 1 in the Islamic calendar.

Muhammad and his companions were welcomed and Yathrib became to be known as "Madina", that is "the city" ("madina" in Arabic) of the prophet. Muhammad reorganized his community, now composed of his Meccan followers (Muhajirun: those who performed the hijra) and new supporters (called Ansar) from Madina. Muhammad also went on a series of military campaigns against Mecca and other tribes in the Arabian Peninsula and near-by areas to expand his authority.

In 630 Muhammad even succeeded in capturing Mecca which he had to flee 8 years prior. Muhammad died in 632 at home in Madina and was buried there.

Alongside political and military maneuvers Muhammad articulated the contents of the new religion. Muhammad's home was turned into a mosque and an important site of pilgrimage.

PART 8: Muhammad's multiple roles

Muhammad played a historical role: he spread monotheism among Arabs and created a nascent new polity in the Arabian Peninsula.

Muhammad died in 632, but his actions and legacy remain relevant to millions of Muslims throughout the world to this very day.