

Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture

To view the video that goes with this article, go to <https://chrishewer.org/>

Part Seven: Who was Muhammad?

Muhammad was born almost certainly in 570CE into a family of merchants in Makka, on the Red Sea side of the Arabian peninsula. Shortly before the time of Muhammad's birth, there was an invasion of Makka by an Abyssinian army. This army was noteworthy because it included war elephants, which were seen for the first time in Makka on this occasion. It was to be called "The Year of the Elephant," which is how we date Muhammad's year of birth. As the invaders were about to attack, a huge flock of birds arrived from nowhere and dropped stones on the invaders to kill them or drive them away [Q. 105:1-5].

His father, Abdullah, died before he was born and his mother, Amina, by the time that he was six years old. Thereafter, he was brought up by his grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, until he too died, and then by his uncle, Abu Talib. In his childhood, he minded sheep; then Abu Talib taught Muhammad the family business of trading by transporting goods with camels. They went south to Yemen to buy goods from India and East Africa. Some of these goods would be taken all the way to the markets of Syria. Makka was a great trading city.

On one of these journeys, when Muhammad was aged about twelve, they were crossing the Syrian Desert on their way to Damascus. A Christian hermit called Bahira saw the camel train approaching and was inspired to approach it to seek out Muhammad. After talking to him, he told Abu Talib that he had seen the sign of prophecy on Muhammad and that he should take good care of him.

In the middle of Makka stood a centuries-old simple cuboid building called the *Ka'ba*. Muslims believe that this was re-built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. It stood on the site of the first building on earth built by Adam for the worship of God. God contributed to the building of the *Ka'ba* by sending a stone from paradise. This was called the Black Stone and was built into one corner.

Over the centuries between Ishmael and Muhammad, the Arabs stopped worshipping God and started to worship idols of their own making. When Muhammad was young, there were reckoned to be three hundred and sixty idols in, on and around the *Ka'ba*. It had become a great centre of pilgrimage. The Bedouin from the desert would bring one of their gods there and then come on pilgrimage a few times each year to worship the god. The merchants of Makka encouraged this as it meant that the Bedouin could buy all that they needed for their next season of travelling in the desert. Muhammad's own family were not idol-worshippers but instead worshipped the one God although they did not have much knowledge about God at that time. We call them the *hanif*, the upright, the seekers after the truth.

Marriage and adult life

When Muhammad became a man, he established a reputation for being wise and truthful. He was known by the name, al-Amin, “the Trustworthy.” He was trusted as an honest merchant, who always dealt fairly with buyers and sellers. There was an occasion when some repair work was being done to the walls of the *Ka'ba*. The builders had taken out the Black Stone during the work. The question came up as to who should replace it. The elders of all the clans of Makka wanted the honour and it would soon have come to fighting. They agreed to ask for Muhammad’s help to decide. He laid a blanket on the ground and placed the stone on it. Then he asked for one from each clan to take hold of the blanket. Together they carried the stone in the blanket back to the *Ka'ba* and Muhammad steadied it into place. The tension was ended and all were satisfied that they had done their part.

There was a widow in Makka called Khadija. She had been left a trading business by her husband. She could run the business but she needed a reliable manager to travel with the goods. She asked around to find the most reliable young merchant. People pointed her towards Muhammad. She appointed him as her manager. After a while, she was so impressed by his character that she proposed marriage to him. They were married monogamously for twenty-five years until Khadija died in 619. One of their daughters was Fatima, who later married Ali, the cousin of Muhammad. Their two sons died when they were infants.

Muhammad was always a seeker after knowledge and spiritual wisdom. He had no time for the idol-worship of the Arabs. He wanted to keep away from their ways and develop a deeper knowledge of the one and only God. He used to go away from Makka into the surrounding hills. There was a cave on Mount Hira where he used to make a spiritual retreat. Sometimes he would take food and water with him and stay there for days.

The revelation begins

At about the age of 40, in 610, Muhammad was in this cave when he received the call to Prophethood and started to receive the revelation of the Qur'an. After a short while he began recounting the message to his friends and family [Q. 26:214; 74:1-7]. A couple of years later, he was instructed by God to begin proclaiming his message in the market square of Makka [Q. 15:94]. These early verses of the Qur'an, call people to live ethical lives in the worship of God alone and to stop worshipping idols. The Makkans were reluctant to abandon idolatry; they made money out of the pilgrims who came to worship their idols at the *Ka'ba*. Muhammad had a hostile reception and only a small group of perhaps a few hundred became Muslims, most of these were people without status in society, including a number of poor people and slaves. Amongst the first Muslims were Khadija, Muhammad’s wife, Ali, the cousin of Muhammad, Abu Bakr and Uthman; all three men became early leaders in the Muslim community. These early Muslims faced persecution. Some who were more vulnerable

were beaten, denied food and drink, and tortured. Muhammad and his immediate family were spared the worst because they were protected by his uncle, Abu Talib.

As refugees to Abyssinia

The persecution of the young Muslim community grew stronger. In 615, Muhammad sent part of his community away from Makka. They crossed to Ethiopia (Abyssinia) because there was a Christian king there. They told the king that they had been sent by the Messenger of God and asked for protection. He asked them to recite verses from the Qur'an so that he could hear the message. We know that one group of verses that they recited told about the birth of Jesus [Q. 19:1-36]. The king consulted with his bishops and judges then stood up with his royal staff in his hand. He drew a line in the sand. He said that the difference between what he had heard and his own Christianity was the thickness of the line. He took them in as refugees until it was safe for them to return.

Scenes from life in Makka

A miraculous event occurred during these years in Makka [Q. 17:1]. Muhammad was woken one night by an angel and seated on a wonderful mount called *al-Buraq*. He rode with the angel as far as Jerusalem. The journey is called the *isra*, or Night Journey. He stepped down from *al-Buraq* on the Temple Mount, that is on the Rock, today covered by the Dome of the Rock, where all the earlier Prophets greeted him and he led them in prayer. Then from here he was taken up to heaven where he had an audience with God. During this, he received knowledge known only to God and, amongst other things, the instruction that Muslims should pray five times a day.

He then descended from heaven, returned to the Temple Mount and then was taken by *al-Buraq* back to Makka. This was a journey outside time; it all took place in a single instant and scholars discuss if it was physical or spiritual. This journey stresses the importance of Jerusalem, along with Makka and Madina, as the three holy cities of Islam. The early Muslim community faced towards Jerusalem in prayer and the Dome of the Rock has long been a site of visitation for Muslims. Each year, on the 27th night of the month of Rajab, the ascension or *mi'raj* is celebrated on the *Laylat al-Mi'raj*, the Night of the Ascension of the Prophet.

In 619 Muhammad suffered two tragedies. His wife Khadija died. She had been a great support both to him and the infant Muslim community. Also his uncle, Abu Talib died. He had become the head of their clan and so he was able to give Muhammad protection. Now that protection was withdrawn. The persecution increased and there were plots to kill Muhammad. He tried to take his message to a nearby city called Ta'if. They rejected him. Stones and dirt were thrown at him. The children drove him from their city. Muhammad rested, cut and filthy, in a vineyard outside Ta'if. The angel Gabriel came to him. He said that God had given him permission to destroy the city if Muhammad agreed. Muhammad said no. If the people were dead, then they would never have a chance to repent and choose to follow

Islam. Muhammad then prayed. He said that he did not complain about the way that he had been treated but only about his own failure to put over the message properly. As long as things were in order between Muhammad and God, then he did not care about anything else.

Muhammad's reputation began to spread and in 620-21 delegations came from Yathrib, a city 350kms to the north of Makka. The people there came from many clans. The city consisted really of a group of clan settlements, including several groups of Jews. The inhabitants had been in conflict for some years and they felt the need for wise leadership and a new way of life. They came to Makka to invite Muhammad to come to live in their city as their leader. Some would convert to Islam and he would establish an Islamic way of life in Yathrib, which would from now on be called *Madinat al-Nabi*, the City of the Prophet, or just Madina.

The Migration

The Muslims began to move to Madina in small groups so as not to attract attention. The Makkans decided to assassinate Muhammad. Ali slept in Muhammad's place so that he could not be found. Muhammad left for Madina, accompanied by his companion, Abu Bakr, and pursued by the assassins. At one point they hid for three days in a cave, where a spider spun a web over the opening to make the trackers believe that no-one could be inside. It is a sign of the trustworthy character of Muhammad that even his enemies had entrusted things to him for safekeeping. Ali was left behind for a time in Makka to ensure that all these goods were given back to their rightful owners.

In September 622, Muhammad arrived in Madina to take up the responsibility of leading the community. This event, known as the Hijra or migration, is so important in the history of Islam that it marked the start of a new system of dating: AH, 'in the Year of the Hijra'.

When he arrived in Madina, Muhammad allowed his camel to wander freely, so he wouldn't be deemed to have shown favouritism to any one family or group. The place where his camel stopped became the site of his house and the first mosque in Madina, the *Masjid al-Nabi*, or the Prophet's Mosque. The Muslims were now settled and free from immediate persecution.

The Muslims who migrated from Makka mixed well with those who had converted to Islam there. The Muslims from Makka (called *al-Muhajirun* – the Migrants) were traders. Those in Madina (called *al-Ansar* – the Helpers) were farmers. Muhammad paired up one from each community so that they could share their land and talents. This was a practical example of being one single community of Muslims, the *umma*, and bearing one another's burdens [Q. 21:92; 9:71].

Although the young Muslim community had now moved to Madina, Makka still remained the spiritual centre of Islam. The early Muslims in Makka used to offer their

prayers at the *Ka'ba* so that they were also facing Jerusalem. When they moved to Madina, for the first sixteen months they faced Jerusalem for prayer. Then verses were revealed [Q. 2:142-145,149-150], commanding the faithful to change their direction for prayer so that they faced towards the *Ka'ba* in Makka. This direction is observed by Muslims worldwide and is called the *qibla* or direction.

Life in Madina

The verses of the Qur'an revealed from this time are often described as laying down the pattern of life for a settled community. A document from this period, the "Constitution of Madina", acknowledged Muhammad as the leader and final judge under God. A mutual defence treaty between all the parties in Madina was drawn up, including the Jewish communities in the city. During these years, in addition to being the spiritual leader, Muhammad was also the head of the community, the interpreter of God's guidance in the Qur'an and the ultimate arbiter in disputes. He also had the awesome task of calling the men to arms.

The Makkans still feared that Muhammad would harm their trade and way of life. So they continued to attack with the aim to kill Muhammad and wipe out the young Muslim community. They came under attack by armies from Makka on three principal occasions: the Battle of Badr in 624, the Battle of Uhud in 625, and the final and conclusive Battle of the Ditch (or Trench) in 627.

Some of the Jewish clans in Madina had strong trading and economic links with the Makkans, which led them to become openly hostile and treacherous towards the Muslims. Some helped the enemy in time of battle and so were sent into exile. Finally, after a major act of treachery during the Battle of the Ditch, Muhammad took their case to arbitration, as was the Arab custom. The Jewish clan leaders appointed the arbiter who decided to impose the customary penalty for treason. This was confirmed by Muhammad: all the clan's goods were forfeit, the men were executed and the women and children sold into slavery.

Makka becomes a Muslim city

Following a dream [Q. 48:27], Muhammad wanted to make the *umra*, the minor pilgrimage to Makka. So in 628 he approached Makka but met with armed opposition. In the end a treaty was made with the Makkans at a place called Hudaibiyya, under which he agreed to make his sacrifices in the desert and return with his followers to Madina. Some of the Muslims believed that the Prophet had given too much ground in this treaty but it allowed Muslims to trade with the Makkans and paved the way for Makka to become a Muslim city. Under the terms of this treaty, Muhammad returned with two thousand Muslims in 629 and the city was evacuated for three days, so that they could make their *umra*. The pilgrimage took place peacefully. However, in 630 the treaty was breached by the Makkans and Muhammad marched on Makka with his men. The Makkans surrendered almost

without bloodshed or loss of property. They agreed to embrace Islam and a Muslim governor was installed.

The first act of Muhammad in the Muslim city of Makka was to order that all the idols should be smashed so that the *Ka'ba* would be purified for the worship of God [Q. 17:80-81]. Muslims were now free to live in Makka and make their pilgrimages in peace. Muhammad's only Hajj took place in 632, shortly before his death. During this Hajj he made his Farewell Sermon on the Plain of Arafat.

Muhammad's influence began to spread. Many of the local Arab clans came to him to make treaties and many of them converted to Islam. In 631, one group came from the Christian city of Najran. Muhammad received them with courtesy in his mosque and allowed them to pray there. They discussed the person of Jesus and he invited them to convert to Islam [Q. 3:33-80]. Even though they did not, they had such respect for the Prophet that they asked him to appoint a wise Muslim to live amongst them to settle any disputes that they could not resolve themselves.

Muhammad died in June 632 and was buried in the house in Madina. Later a tomb was built over his grave and eventually this was incorporated into his mosque. The mosque has been hugely extended through the centuries and now Muhammad's tomb can be found in the *Masjid al-Nabi*. Many Muslims go there and pray to God near his tomb in the belief that he can hear them and lend his prayers to theirs.

The exemplary life of Muhammad

Muhammad was not only the conveyor of the Qur'an, he also perfectly put it into practice in his own life and in all that he said and did. Through the purifying gift of knowledge from God, Muhammad, like all the prophets, was rendered sinless. This meant that his every word and action became an example. So the story of his life, or *sira*, is a source of intense scrutiny and many biographies have been written about him.

Muhammad's life so manifested all that the Qur'an revealed as divine guidance that he is regarded as "the living Qur'an." To see the Prophet was like seeing the Qur'an lived out in practice. Muhammad is *al-insan al-kamil*, the Perfect Human Being, the archetype of all that it is to be human. So any attack upon the person of the Prophet is like an attack upon human perfection itself. This helps us to understand why Muhammad is the perfect role-model for human life, to be imitated by all who would be truly human [Q. 33:21,45-46]. He showed hospitality and trustworthiness in all his dealings, humility in his relations with other people and always claimed only to be the servant of God. Because he lived a long and full life, we see him crying over the body of his dead infant son, intervening in jealousy between his wives and guiding the younger members of his community. We see him as a merciful judge, turning his face away from things that he need not see, yet being fearless in judgement to support those who have been wronged. It is related that a young woman came to him with her father and husband. She complained that her father had given her in marriage against

her will and asked him to dissolve the marriage. After investigation, he did so. Then she asked Muhammad to marry her to the same man as she was now free to give her consent. He did so. In this way, he defended the free decision of a woman against the social practice of the time.

As a community leader, Muhammad had to make hard decisions and enter into treaties. He was far-sighted and saw that appearing to 'give way' today could lead to much greater success in the future, as in the Treaty of Hudaibiyya. His community in Madina was repeatedly attacked by the Makkans and so he had the awesome responsibility of leading his men into battle as the last resort rather than be wiped out.

As long as Khadija lived, Muhammad was married to her alone. In the years after her death, Muhammad contracted twelve marriages with women from various Arab clans. Some of these were political unions. Some were acts of kindness – for example when he took in and cared for a widow whose husband had been killed in battle. The Qur'an permits a Muslim man to marry up to four wives, provided he can treat them all equally [Q. 4:3], but the case of Muhammad was a one-off exception, explicitly allowed by the Qur'an, to provide practical guidance on how to treat all sorts of women fairly [Q. 33:50-52].

Because of their great love and respect for Muhammad, Muslims react with great sensitivity to any insult or bad word spoken about him. Whenever his name is mentioned, it is immediately followed by saying 'peace and blessings be upon him' [Q. 33:56]. Such respect is applied to all the prophets and compliments are added to their names also.

Most Muslims celebrate the Birthday of the Prophet, *Mawlid al-Nabi*, every year on the 12th of the Islamic month of Rabi' al-Awwal. There are processions and speeches in honour of the Prophet. Poems are written and recited and lectures are given to make his life and teaching better known.