

Transcript: Sources, The Prophet Muhammad

The Life of Prophet Muhammad

Muhammad was born in 570CE into a family of merchants in Makka. His father died before he was born and his mother by the time that he was six years old, and so he was brought up by his uncle Abu Talib. In his childhood, he minded sheep and when he got older he began to go on journeys with his uncle's camel train, which took him along the great trade routes towards Syria.

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.

Muhammad developed a reputation for being trustworthy and always speaking the truth, and also as a thinker and a source of wisdom. When Muhammad was in his twenties, he was employed by a wealthy widow called Khadija. He managed her camel-train business. Soon Khadija proposed and married him. Their sons died in infancy and one of their daughters was Fatima, who would later marry Ali, a cousin of the Prophet.

Muhammad was brought up in the tradition of his family who belonged to a group believing that there was only one God. They did not know a lot about God but used the Arabic title Allah (the one and only God). This was at a time when most of the Arab clans worshipped a wide variety of idols. The Ka'ba itself had become a centre for idolatry. They were displayed everywhere: in, on and around the building.

At about the age of forty, in 610, Muhammad 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].¹ A couple of years later, he was instructed by God to begin proclaiming his message in the market square of Makka [Q. 15:94].² 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 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, the Prophet'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

¹ Q. 26:214 And warn your closest relatives.

² Q. 15:94 So proclaim what you have been commanded, and turn away from those who give God partners.

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.

In 615 Muhammad sent a group of Muslims to seek refuge with the Christian King of Abyssinia. When he heard the verses from the Qur'an that they recited [Q. 19:1-36],³

³ Q. 19:1-36 Kaf. Ha. Ya. 'Ain. Sad.

[This is] an account of your Lord's mercy on his servant, Zachariah, when he called out to his Lord in secret. He said, "My Lord! Indeed my bones have become feeble, and my head has turned white with age, yet never have I, my Lord, been disappointed in invoking you! Indeed I fear my kinsmen, after me, and my wife is barren. So grant me from yourself an heir who may inherit from me and inherit from the House of Jacob, and make him, my Lord, pleasing [to you]!" "O Zachariah! Indeed We give you the good news of a son, whose name is "John." Never before have we made anyone his namesake." He said, "My Lord! How shall I have a son, when my wife is barren, and I am already advanced in age?" He said, "So shall it be. Your Lord has said, "It is simple for me." Certainly I created you before when you were nothing." He said, "My Lord! Give me a sign." He said, "Your sign is that you will not speak to the people for three complete nights."

So he emerged before his people from the Temple, and signalled to them that they should glorify [God] morning and evening. "O John! [We said] Hold on with strength to the Book!" And We gave him judgement while still a child, and a compassion from us and purity. He was God-conscious, and good to his parents, and was not self-willed or disobedient. Peace be to him, the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he is raised alive!

And mention in the Book Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the east. Thus did she seclude herself from them with a veil, whereupon We sent to her Our Spirit and he appeared before her as a well-formed human. She said, "I take refuge against you in the All-merciful, should you be God-conscious!" He said, "I am only the messenger of your Lord that I may give you a pure child." She said, "How shall I have a child seeing that no human being has touched me, nor have I been unchaste?" He said, "So shall it be. Your Lord says, "It is simple for me." And so that We may make him a sign for humankind and a mercy from us, and it is a matter [already] decided."

Thus she was pregnant with him, then withdrew with him to a distant place. The birth pangs brought her to the trunk of a date palm. She said, "I wish I had died before this and become a forgotten thing, beyond recall." Thereupon he called her from below her [saying] "Do not be sad! Your Lord has made a spring to flow under you. Shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, freshly picked dates will drop upon you. Eat, drink, and be comforted. Then if you see any human, say, "Indeed I have vowed a fast to the All-merciful, so I will not speak to any human today."

Then carrying him she brought him to her people. They said, "O Mary, you have certainly come up with an odd thing! O sister of Aaron! Your father was not an evil man, nor was your mother unchaste." At this she pointed to him. They said, "How will we speak to one who is yet a baby in the cradle?" He said, "Indeed I am a servant of God! He has given me the Book and made me a Prophet. He has made me blessed, wherever I may be, and he has enjoined me to [perform] the prayer and to [give] the *zakat* as long as I live, and to be good to my mother, and he has not made me self-willed and wretched. Peace is upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised alive."

he said that the Muslim belief was very like his own Christian belief and so he gave the Muslims refuge in his land for as long as they needed it.

A miraculous event occurred during these years in Makka [Q. 17:1].⁴ 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. 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 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.

The year 619 marked a double loss for Muhammad. His uncle Abu Talib, his protector, died and so did his wife Khadija, who had provided great support to the Muslim community.

Muhammad's reputation began to spread, and in 620-21 delegations came from Yathrib, a city 300 miles 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 Muslims began to move to Madina in small groups so as not to attract attention.

The Makkans had by this time decided to assassinate Muhammad. Ali slept in the Prophet's place so that he could not be found. Muhammad left for Madina, pursued

That is Jesus, son of Mary, the Word of the Truth concerning whom they dispute. It is not for God to take a son. Glorified is He! When He decides on a matter, he just says to it, "Be!" and it is. "Indeed God is my Lord and your Lord. So worship him. This is a straight path."

⁴ Q. 17:1 Exalted is He who made his servant journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the al-Aqsa Mosque whose surroundings we have blessed, that we might show him some of our signs. Indeed He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing.

by the assassins. At one point he hid for three days in a cave, where a spider spun a web over the opening to make the attackers believe that no-one could be inside.

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 – A.H., ‘in the Year of the Hijra’.

The Muslims migrating from Makka mixed well with those who had converted to Islam there. The Madinans shared their lands and businesses with them, a practical example of being one single community of Muslims, the *umma*, and bearing one another’s burdens [Q. 21:92, 9:71, 49:10].⁵

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 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”, acknowledges 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.

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. 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, or Trench, in 627, Muhammad took their case to arbitration, as was the Arab custom. The Jews 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.

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.

⁵ Q. 21:92 Indeed this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship me.

Following a dream [Q. 48:27],⁶ 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.⁷

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

The exemplary life of the Prophet

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

⁶ Q. 48:27 Certainly God has fulfilled his Messenger's vision in all truth: you will surely enter the Sacred Mosque, God willing, in safety, with your heads shaven or hair cropped, without any fear. So He knew what you did not know, and he assigned [you] besides that a victory near at hand.

⁷ Shortly before his death, the Prophet (pbuh) made the Hajj and preached from the Mount of Mercy, his 'Farewell Sermon', during which this verse of the Qur'an was revealed: "This day the disbelievers despair of prevailing against your religion, so fear them not but fear me. This day I have perfected for you your religion and fulfilled my favour towards you, and it has been my good pleasure to choose Islam for you as your religion." (Q. 5:3).

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".⁸ To see the Prophet was like seeing the Qur'an lived out in practice. Muhammad is *al-insan al-kamil*, the Perfect Man, 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, 33:45-46].⁹ 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, the Prophet did so. Then she asked the Prophet 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 frequently 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],¹⁰ 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

⁸ It is reported from A'isha that, "His behaviour was the Qur'an".

⁹ Q. 33:21 In the Messenger of God there is certainly for you a beautiful model, for the one who hopes in God and the Last Day, and remembers God greatly.

¹⁰ Q. 4:3 If you fear that you may not deal justly with the orphans, then marry [other] women that you like, two, three, or four. But if you fear that you may not treat them fairly, then [marry only] one, or [marry from among] your slave-women. That makes it more likely that you will not be unfair.

women fairly [Q. 33:50-52].¹¹ To people used to the idea of monogamy, this practice of having several wives might seem shocking. It must be remembered, however, that compared to earlier custom, including Biblical examples like Solomon, Muhammad had far fewer wives than many other leaders.

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].¹² 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.

Dr Buaben speaks of Muhammad as the exemplar of the love of God:

In Islam, the Prophet is a human being who has been chosen by God as a perfect model for humankind, and therefore the Prophet Muhammad, he himself said in one of his statements, that if you love God then love me. Because it's his love that leads you into the love of God. And the Qur'an also affirms the same thing, that if you want to love Allah then love the Prophet. So the love of the Prophet is essential because his human life becomes an exemplary life for all humankind.

Professor Michot stresses the way in which Muhammad opens up a new and direct relationship between human beings and God, free from intermediaries:

The love that Muslims have for the Prophet can be approached from various angles and I will just choose one: which is the fact that this last Prophet, sent as a mercy for mankind chooses to let a relationship develop between the

¹¹ Q. 33:50-52 O Prophet! Indeed We have made lawful to you your wives to whom you have given their dowries, and those whom your right hand owns, of those whom God gave you as spoils of war, and the daughters of your paternal uncle, and the daughters of your paternal aunts, and the daughters of your maternal uncle, and the daughters of your maternal aunts who migrated with you, and a believing woman if she offers herself to the Prophet and the Prophet desires to take her in marriage, a privilege for you, not for the faithful; We know what We have prescribed for them with respect to their wives and those whom their right hands own so that there may be no hardship for you, and God is All-forgiving, All-merciful... Beyond that, women are not lawful for you, nor that you should change them for other wives even though their beauty should impress you, except those whom your right hand owns. And God is watchful over all things.

¹² Q. 33:56 Indeed God and his angels bless the Prophet. O you who believe! Invoke blessings on him and greet him in a worthy manner.

believers and their Lord. And in some way withdraws from this relationship. He lets this relationship develop independently from him in some way. And from this point of view he liberates the human being from all kinds of intermediaries, and we can consider that the last revelation of the Qur'an and the Prophet, from those points of view, come as liberation for the human being. It raises the level of the human being in relation to God. The human being now is responsible. He has to develop this relationship between him and God directly. Of course he will follow the way of the Prophet, but the Prophet shows the way, he teaches the truth, he brings light. He is not the way, he is not the truth, he is not the light; those are independent of his personality. And it is because of this fantastic humility of the Prophet that he becomes so central and that we love him far more than we even love ourselves. And if you can consider that he is out of it, in some way, he becomes central again because in his own life he became the perfect implementation of the message that he was preaching. And so when he is attacked in any way, it is not just a person, a human being, who is attacked, it's this ideal image that we have of human perfection which is attacked as well. And of course, we all feel concern as soon as there is any kind of attack developed against the Prophet.

Maulana Raza emphasises that love for Prophet Muhammad is an essential part of Muslim faith:

Love for Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him and his holy family) means that it is an integral and essential part of *iman*, faith. Without the love of Prophet Muhammad, our *iman* is not complete because it is this element of love that encourages us to follow his teachings, to obey him and to respect him.

Shaykh Bahmanpour says that all the ideals of Islam are concentrated in Muhammad; he brings the message from God and so should be loved by all believers:

Human beings love their ideals. If they didn't love their ideals, they wouldn't strive towards them. And for a Muslim or for a person of any other faith with a Prophet or with a role model, the ideals of the faith are in a sense concentrated in the person of the Prophet or that person who is taken as the role model. And certainly, if your ideals are in a sense placed in one person, then certainly you would love that person. Add to that, that every human being, every person of faith, would certainly love God. God is someone who is in the heart of every believer and would of course occupy the biggest place in the heart. Now if someone is related to God, someone who has come from God, brings the message from God, brings the message of salvation and forgiveness from God: well certainly any believer, every believer would love him.