

# I



## Muhammad: Islam's Prophet

**A**S THE EARTH TURNS and dawn moves west from Indonesia to Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Middle East, and North Africa, nearly one-fourth of the world's people start their day with prayer. The call to this prayer begins, "There is but one God, Muhammad is His Messenger." One and a half billion Muslims believe Muhammad to be the last and the greatest of all prophets. Muhammad vastly increased the number of people who believe in one God, and he made a violent society far more humane. He called his religion Islam, an Arabic word meaning "submission" (to God). A Muslim is "one who submits."

For fourteen hundred years, Islam has given meaning to the lives of generations of men, educated and illiterate alike, and to women, too. Muhammad loved the company of women and greatly improved their lives. The Quran (Arabic for "recitation," also spelled Koran), the scripture of Islam, gives a woman the right to divorce her husband if he treats her badly, and it commands that a woman receive a half-share of her family's property, a revolutionary idea in any part of the world until modern times. Muhammad also taught that a woman should be educated and have a say in choosing her husband.

Muslims consider the Quran to be the literal word of God, transmitted through Muhammad. But unlike Jesus and Buddha, Muhammad was a ruler as well as a teacher, and he made political and military decisions. The fact that Muhammad sometimes went to war does

not diminish his achievement. He founded one of the world's most widespread religions, dictated its scripture, and unified the Arabs.

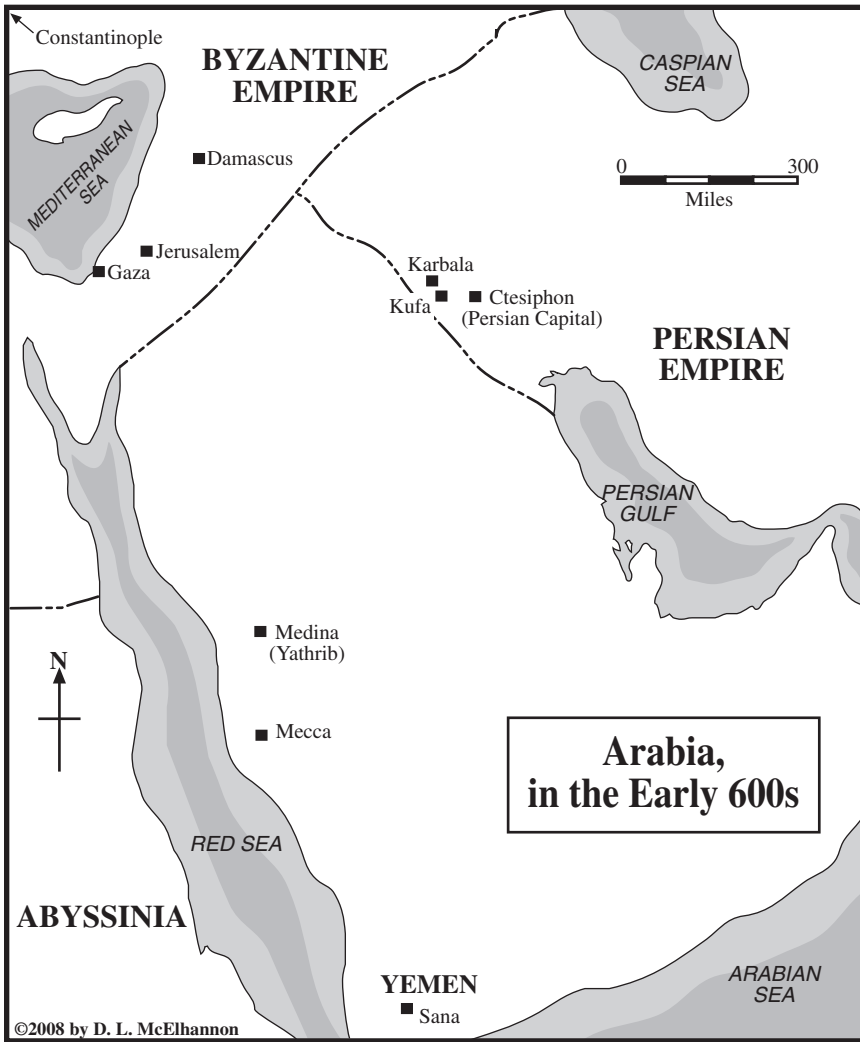
The common Western belief that Islam is "a religion of the sword" is mistaken. Muslim conquerors allowed Christians, Jews, and Hindus to keep their faith because the Quran forbids conversion by force. The millions of Hindus, Zoroastrians, and Syrian and Coptic Christians who converted to Islam in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries did so freely because their Muslim conquerors governed more justly than any rulers they had known before.

Muhammad (570–632) was born in Mecca, a city in one of the world's bleakest deserts, fifty miles inland from the Red Sea, in what is now Saudi Arabia. The name *Muhammad* means "the praised one." His father, Abdullah, died before he was born, and his mother, Amina, gave her baby to a nomad who raised Muhammad outdoors in the open desert. (This was the custom of urban women then, because cities were full of disease.) When Muhammad was six, his nurse, Halimah, returned him to his mother, but his mother died just a few months later. Orphaned at seven, Muhammad entered the home of his uncle, Abu Talib, although he and Halimah visited each other often.

When Muhammad was a child, he tended goats and camels, wrestled with other boys, and learned to shoot with a bow and arrow. Later, he accompanied his uncle on caravans north to Syria during the summer and south to Yemen in the winter. The trips took a month each way, and hundreds of camels carried loads of up to four hundred pounds each. The value of a caravan's merchandise was enormous.

Muhammad had no education, but he loved poetry, and during his travels to Syria, he learned many of the stories of the Jewish and Christian faiths. The Arabs at this time worshipped many gods and goddesses, represented by roughly 360 idols in and around the Kaaba (Arabic for "cube"). This stone cube in Mecca is almost forty feet high, with corners facing north, south, east, and west. The Kaaba is said to have been built (or rebuilt) centuries earlier by the prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael, long before the Arabs put idols inside it, and a black meteorite was placed in its southeastern wall. Among the Kaaba's idols were statues of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, the Egyptian god Isis, and three Arabian goddesses: al-Lat, al-Uzza, and al-Manat.

For years, Muhammad could work only for others on caravans because he was too poor to do any trading himself. Gradually, he earned the nickname al-Amin, "the trustworthy." In his early twenties, Muhammad began to work for a woman named Khadija, a rich trader.



Her first two husbands had died, and now she owned their businesses. At first, she hired Muhammad to look after a single caravan, but soon she put him in charge of all her caravans.

In time, Khadija fell in love with her employee. Muhammad was a determined worker but kind and gentle in manner, and he was strong, with broad shoulders and a lean, sturdy build. He had dark expressive eyes, thick black hair, a full beard, a fair complexion, and a winning smile. After two years, Khadija proposed marriage and Muhammad

accepted. Tradition has it that Muhammad was twenty-five and Khadija was forty when they married. They had two sons, who died in infancy, and four daughters, so it is more likely that she was only a few years older than he was.

As a wealthy man, Muhammad gave to the poor and now also had more time to devote to spiritual matters. He escaped the heat of the desert and spent several weeks each year in a cave on Mount Hira, high above Mecca. He stared at the star-filled sky of the desert nights and thought deeply about the condition of his city.

In the sixth century, Mecca had transformed from a tribal town into a great trading center. War between the Byzantine and Persian empires had disrupted the land routes between Europe and Asia. Chinese silk, Indian spices and cotton, and African ivory and ostrich plumes all began to arrive by sea at Yemen, where the Red Sea meets the Indian Ocean. (One of Yemen's ports is Al-Mukha, from which we get our English synonym for coffee, *mocha*.)

From Yemen, well-armed caravans carried their cargoes north to the bazaars of Damascus and Gaza and brought back gold, wine, and grain. Mecca grew in size not only because it was halfway between Yemen and Syria, but because it was a sanctuary where merchants could trade freely without fear of violence. For four months of the year, it was forbidden to avenge a blood feud in the vicinity of the Kaaba.

Some Meccan traders became rich beyond the wildest dreams of their nomadic ancestors. Others, especially widows and orphans, remained poor and hungry. Until Muhammad's lifetime, a tribal chief helped the poorer members of his clan as a matter of honor, but the merchants of Mecca had not grown rich from tribal raids but from their own shrewdness in the marketplace. They therefore felt no obligation to help anyone not connected with their businesses, not even hungry members of their own clan. Wealth had become more important than honor.

Muhammad, an orphan himself, had compassion for the poor. He was angry that the rich ignored their tribal duty to help others, and he was troubled by the lack of moral feeling among the people in his city. Most Meccans still prayed to local idols, but the only thing they really believed in was the power of their own wealth.

## Muhammad's First Years as a Prophet

One night on Mount Hira, when Muhammad was about forty, he felt a powerful, crushing presence. He believed it to be the archangel Gabriel, and the angel commanded him to "Recite!" three times.

Each time Muhammad, who was illiterate, replied, "I cannot recite." Gabriel then appeared a fourth time, commanded Muhammad to "Recite in the name of the Lord," and later said, "Muhammad! Thou art the Messenger of God."

Muhammad was greatly disturbed. He was afraid that he was possessed by an evil demon and even considered killing himself by jumping off a cliff. His wife reassured him with the words "You speak the truth and help anyone in need. God would not allow you to be led astray."

Khadija then asked her elderly Christian cousin Waraqa about Muhammad's vision. Waraqa said that God had approached Muhammad as he had once approached Moses, and Waraqa predicted that Muhammad would be "the prophet of his people." He also warned Muhammad that his preaching would make him many enemies.

The first Muslims were members of Muhammad's own family: his wife, Khadija; his cousin Waraqa; a ten-year-old cousin and adopted son named Ali; a freed slave, Zayd ibn Haritha; and Muhammad's four daughters, Zaynab, Ruqayyah, Umm Kulthum, and Fatima.

The first non-family member to convert to Islam was Muhammad's best friend, Abu Bakr. A moderately successful cloth trader, Abu Bakr was well known in Mecca for being wise, honest, and kind and for his skill in interpreting dreams. Abu Bakr, two or three years younger than Muhammad, persuaded several other men to become Muslims, including a few from wealthy families. But most of the early converts to Islam (as with Christianity) were poor and female, and several were slaves.

At first, Muhammad preached only to his family, friends, and a few followers. There are no spirits and demons to be afraid of, Muhammad said, Allah is the one and only God. (*Al-lah* is Arabic for "the God.") He is the source of all creation and is merciful to those who worship him. On Judgment Day, Allah will decide the fate of every man and woman, and no friend or relative will be able to intervene. Those who lead good lives and are generous to the poor will live forever in the gardens of paradise, attended by youths of great beauty. Those who are evil and too selfish to help others will suffer hellfire for eternity, growing new skin to feel new pain even as their old skin burns. The people of Mecca and especially its merchants, Muhammad said, should realize that there are things more important than credits and debts. Everyone should fear the power of Allah, the creator of life, and be kind to the poor.

Islam borrows heavily from Judaism. It often comes as a surprise to Westerners that Muslims revere Adam, Noah, Abraham,

and Moses as major prophets and honor Joseph, Job, Jonah, David, Solomon, and many other biblical figures. They regard the Torah and the Psalms as divine scripture and also revere Jesus as a leading prophet.

Muslims believe that Jesus was born to the Virgin Mary and that he healed the sick, walked on water, and was resurrected after his crucifixion. They say there is no miracle that Allah cannot perform. Muslims, however, do not believe that Jesus is the son of God. In its 112th chapter, the Quran says explicitly, "He is God Alone: God the Eternal! He begets not, and He is not begotten."<sup>1</sup> Muslims believe that in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the word of God has been distorted by the writings of men. To Muhammad and his followers, the belief in the Christian Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) was only somewhat better than a belief in the 360 idols in the Kaaba. Indeed, Muslims believe that on Judgment Day, Jesus himself will rebuke Christians for worshipping him as a god.

A simple belief in one God is what Muhammad wished to give to his followers, and in order to keep that faith simple, Muhammad was careful to emphasize, "I am a man like you, only the Word of God has been revealed to me." Muhammad considered himself to be just one more messenger in a long series of prophets; his mission was to bring God's word to the Arab people.

After three years of preaching among friends, Muhammad began to preach in public, but the people of Mecca rejected his message. Meccans made money from pilgrims who came to worship and trade at the Kaaba, and they did not like to hear the gods inside referred to as idols of stone. The Meccans particularly scoffed at Muhammad's claim to be a Messenger of God since he did not perform any miracles, and they mocked him as a "mad poet."

Muhammad said that he was just a "warner" about Judgment Day and his only miracle was receiving the Quran. From the time of his first vision on Mount Hira until his death twenty-two years later, Muhammad had many revelations, usually oral rather than visual. He would shake for a while and sometimes moan. He once said that he had never received a revelation without feeling as if his soul were being torn away. When it was finished, however, he calmly told his followers what God or one of God's angels had said to him. Because Muhammad was illiterate (although he was quick with numbers), one of his followers wrote down the verses on parchment if it were available or, if not, on wood, leather, or the shoulder-blade bone of a camel or a sheep. Then the congregation memorized the new verses. Muhammad was careful to distinguish between the Quran and

his own thoughts, for he sincerely believed that his revelations came directly from God.

After Muhammad's death, his followers collected all of the verses into the book we know as the Quran. In length, it is about the same size as the New Testament. Muhammad's followers also recorded the Prophet's sayings, which became known as the *hadith*, and his deeds (and his explanations of his deeds), which became known as the *sun-nah*. Together, the Quran, the *hadith*, and the *sunnah* form the core of Islamic law, the *sharia*.

In Arabic, much of the Quran is in rhyme, giving it a power and a majesty that no translation can convey. Even the most basic tenet of Islam, "There is but one God," is melodious in Arabic: "*La ilaha illa Allah*." This is why hundreds of millions of Muslims whose native language may be Persian, Bengali, Malay, or Swahili nevertheless recite the Quran each day in its original Arabic.

The Quran is not a narrative book like Genesis or Matthew. It is a collection of lyric appeals to virtue and stern warnings of judgment, rather like Isaiah or some of the Psalms. It was the beauty of the Quran that converted Umar (also spelled Omar) to Islam; he later presided over the conquests of Persia, Syria, and Egypt.

Umar had been a strong young pagan with a fierce temper. One day he decided to kill Muhammad, whom he regarded as a trouble-maker. But on the way, a friend suggested that perhaps Umar should talk to his sister first. The friend knew that Umar's sister and her husband had secretly become Muslims. Umar immediately marched to their house and heard them reciting a new verse of the Quran. In a fit of anger he hit his brother-in-law; then, when his sister tried to stop him, he hit her, too. The sight of his sister's blood brought Umar to his senses. Ashamed and slightly calmer, he asked to read the pages of the Quran that she had been reciting, but his sister insisted that he wash his hands first. Then, having washed himself, Umar read the opening verses of Sura (chapter) 20:

Not to sadden thee have we sent down this Quran to thee,  
 But as a warning for him who fears,  
 It is a message from Him Who has made the earth and the lofty  
   heavens!  
 The God of Mercy sits on His throne:  
 His, what is in the heavens and what is in the earth,  
 and what is between them both, and what is beneath the humid soil!  
 Thou need not raise thy voice, for He knows the secret whisper, and  
   the yet more hidden.<sup>2</sup>

“What noble and beautiful words,” Umar exclaimed, and he promptly went to see Muhammad and become a Muslim.

For a decade, conversions to Islam came slowly. Typical was that of Muhammad’s uncle Hamza. In an angry argument with someone who had insulted Muhammad, Hamza shouted, “And I also do not believe in your gods of stone.” Hamza, recognizing his true feelings for the first time, walked to Muhammad’s home and became a Muslim.

Another young man, Khalid ibn Sa’id, hesitated to convert to Islam because he did not want to quarrel with his father. One night he dreamed that his father was pushing him off a cliff into hell and that Muhammad rescued him at the last moment. When Khalid woke the next morning, he became a Muslim.

Intelligent men gave Muhammad their loyalty not only because of his message, but because of the man himself. Everyone who knew Muhammad recalled how kind and down-to-earth he was. He insisted that servants, slaves, and animals be well-treated, and he gave old peasant women the same full attention that he gave to a tribal chief.

Muhammad tried to lead by gentle example. Once, when Abu Bakr was about to beat a servant who had let a camel go astray, Muhammad laughed and said, “Just look at what he is doing.” The hint was enough for Abu Bakr, who stopped immediately.

Muhammad himself could also feel shame. When a girl had neglectfully allowed a prisoner to escape after a battle, Muhammad exploded, “May Allah cut off your hand!” Later, when he saw the girl staring sadly at her hands, wondering which one Allah was going to cut off, Muhammad apologized for his outburst and told her he would pray for Allah to bless everyone he had ever cursed.

Around the year 614, not long after Muhammad began to preach in public, he recited the “Satanic Verses,” lines made famous in the West by Salman Rushdie’s controversial novel. Muhammad was dismayed by how many people in Mecca were hostile to his religion, and he wondered how he could win them over. One day he had a revelation that three local goddesses, al-Lat, al-Uzza, and al-Manat, would take the form of high-flying swans and mediate between God and man on Judgment Day. The revelation delighted the people of Mecca because it confirmed the faith of their ancestors who had worshipped the three deities. Many Meccans even began to join the Muslims in their prayers.

Muhammad quickly saw that something was terribly wrong. Suddenly, there were four gods—Allah and the three goddesses—instead of one and three priests at local shrines who could dispute



Muhammad's revelations. Perhaps most galling, rich sinners now had the hope that if their offerings to the goddesses were lavish enough, the offenders could negotiate their way out of hell on Judgment Day.

In a few weeks, Muhammad had a new revelation. Satan had tricked him into reciting the verses about the goddesses, and now God refuted these lines. The three goddesses were "mere names" and had "no authority."

When the people of Mecca learned that Muhammad would not compromise with their religious beliefs, they felt betrayed and began to oppose Islam more vigorously. Some threw dirt, garbage, and even sheep innards at Muhammad. Others spread thorns on his doorstep. Pagan masters began to beat Muslim slaves so brutally that Abu Bakr had to buy and free several slaves to rescue them from further beatings. One freed slave was an African, Bilal, who soon became famous for his beautiful prayer calls.

No one dared injure Muhammad because he enjoyed the protection of his clan, the Hashim, headed by his uncle Abu Talib. Although many Hashim were not Muslims, they still felt a duty to defend Muhammad as a matter of tribal honor.

Muhammad's enemies tried a different strategy. The merchants of Mecca declared a boycott against the entire Hashim clan and a related family, the Muttalib, and refused to do any business with them. Khadija, Abu Bakr, and others lost a large part of their fortunes. It is a tribute to Muhammad's leadership that his followers stuck with him despite their financial losses. The boycott lasted more than two years before the coalition behind it broke up. The Muslims could trade only with nomads from the desert and a few of the poorest families in Mecca.

In 619, soon after the end of the boycott, Muhammad's wife, Khadija, died. Muhammad grieved. He had been a faithful husband for twenty-two years, and she had been his first supporter. She had stood by him steadfastly, even when his preaching hurt her business. Then, only a few days later, Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib also died.

The new chief of the Hashim clan vigorously opposed Muhammad's preaching. To trap Muhammad with a trick question, Abu Lahab asked whether his own father, a former chief, was in hell because he had worshipped other gods besides Allah. Muhammad tried to avoid the question but finally said that yes, the new chief's father was in hell. Abu Lahab took the answer as an insult and was able to withdraw his protection from Muhammad without a loss of honor. Muhammad was suddenly without any shield from physical harm and had to stop preaching in public.

During this difficult time, Muhammad dreamed one night that the archangel Gabriel put his (Muhammad's) spirit (not his body) on a winged horse that flew to Jerusalem. There he met Abraham, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, Jesus, and other prophets. Muhammad prayed with them a while, then soared through seven levels of heaven and saw the prophets again, this time as beautiful heavenly beings. On Muhammad's way back through the heavens, Moses told him that it was God's will that Muslims did not need to pray constantly; five times a day was enough.

Muslims call this journey the "Night Flight to Jerusalem," but at the time, the people of Mecca mocked Muhammad for having such a grandiose dream. Seventy-two years later, however, the Muslims who ruled Jerusalem built the huge Dome of the Rock over the stone near the Temple Mount where they believed that Muhammad had left a footprint when he made a second trip to Jerusalem, just before he died and ascended to heaven.

In 620, Muhammad's fortunes improved. Six men arrived from Yathrib, an oasis 220 miles to the north that would soon be renamed *Medinat al-Nabi* ("the City of the Prophet") or, more simply, *Medina*. The six sheikhs had long talks with Muhammad and were impressed by his message and his character. Medina was a collection of orchards, fields, and palm groves where eleven tribes lived together, although they often quarreled violently. Three of the tribes were Jewish, so the Arabs there were familiar with the idea that there was just one God, and sometimes they felt inferior to the Jews because they did not have a scripture of their own. The men from Medina were thrilled to meet an Arab prophet with an Arabic scripture, and they thought that perhaps Muhammad was the Messiah whom the Jews said would come one day.

The six leaders also realized that because Muhammad was an outsider and not aligned with any tribe in Medina, he could probably settle disputes and make life there much more peaceful. These men became Muslims at once and told Muhammad they would return the next year.

The following year, five of them did return to Mecca, along with seven others whom they had converted. The twelve men represented most of the Arab tribes of Medina, and they solemnly promised to worship Allah exclusively, to obey Muhammad, and to avoid adultery and other sins.

During 621 and the spring of 622, whole clans in Medina became Muslim. In an age where poetry was a means of communication as important as television and movies are today, the beauty of the Arabic Quran won many hearts and minds.

Muhammad also tried to win the support of the Jews of Medina, who spoke Arabic, owned most of the city's palm groves, and made swords, clothes, and wine. He told his followers to stop eating pork, to fast on Yom Kippur, to pray in the direction of Jerusalem, and to hold prayers on Friday afternoons when the Jews were about to begin their Sabbath. (Friday has been the Muslim Sabbath day ever since.)

Finally, in June 622, the eight Arab tribes of Medina invited Muhammad and his followers to live in Medina. They pledged to obey him as the Messenger of God and to fight for him against any enemies. Because this was a promise by different tribes to give protection to a group unrelated by blood, it was a revolutionary social arrangement, unprecedented in Arabia.

During the summer, Muhammad asked his followers to leave their homes and possessions behind and begin new lives in Medina. He could not command them to take such a drastic step, and several Muslims chose to stay in Mecca. But quietly, a few at a time so as not to draw any attention, seventy Muslim families made the scorching, ten-day trek through the desert to Medina.

By September, the people of Mecca finally realized what was happening. They worried that the Muslims in Medina would threaten their trade route to Syria, and they decided that they had to kill Muhammad. The plan was for one member of every major clan in Mecca to stab Muhammad to death. This would make revenge impossible because no one could declare a vendetta against the entire city.

Muhammad got word of the plot and left Mecca in the middle of the night with his friend Abu Bakr, who had camels and food ready for the journey. To make the Meccans think that Muhammad was still at home, Muhammad's cousin Ali wrapped himself in Muhammad's green cloak and slept in the Prophet's bed with the window open. Not until morning did the Meccans learn of Muhammad's escape and set out in pursuit.

For Muhammad, it was the end of a difficult era. After twelve long years of preaching in his home city, he had almost no following in Mecca. He was fleeing for his life.

## The Years in Medina

Muhammad and Abu Bakr headed south, in the opposite direction from Mecca, and hid in a cave for three days while the Meccans hunted for them, spurred by an offer of a hundred female camels as a reward for the Prophet's capture. According to traditional legends,

several Meccans found the cave, but they did not go in because a spider had covered the entrance with a large web. At last, Muhammad and Abu Bakr traveled north toward Medina, zigzagging along rarely traveled routes through particularly harsh desert. This journey is known as the *hijrah* (also spelled “hegira”) or “emigration,” and the Muslim lunar calendar dates from this year, 622, when the Muslims first began to be a self-governing community.

Muhammad arrived in Medina at the end of September. At first, he was just one of a dozen tribal leaders in the city, with some extra prestige that allowed him to arbitrate disputes. To remain impartial and to avoid having to accept the hospitality of any one particular tribe, Muhammad let his camel loose and made his home where the camel stopped and rested. He offered to buy the land from its owners, but they insisted on giving the plot to Muhammad. He then built two mud-brick huts, with palm-thatched roofs and dirt floors, and laid out a small courtyard for prayer and business.

Like his followers, Muhammad lived simply. He slept on a mat, cobbled his own shoes, mended his own clothes, and tended goats. He ate mostly dates and milk, but some nights, if dates were not in season and there was not enough food, he and his wives went hungry. He was careful about his personal hygiene. Muhammad washed before prayer, kept his teeth clean by using a root as a toothpick, and rubbed oil on his sun-baked body. He looked quite young for a man in his fifties.

During their first months in Medina, the Muslims from Mecca were completely dependent on the hospitality of their new converts. The trading skills that had served the Muslims so well in Mecca were of limited use in Medina, a much more fertile oasis where there was less need to trade. The Muslims knew little about farming, and it would be several years before they were fully self-sufficient.

In the spring of 623, the Muslims built a large mud-brick mosque next to Muhammad’s courtyard. At last, they had a temple of their own where they could pray in public. Muhammad loved prayer and compared it to bathing in a fresh river. He said that the archangel Gabriel had shown him the proper movements and prostrations of a Muslim prayer.

Once, when Muhammad spent the night at the home of a friend, ibn Abbas, he recited a long prayer that included these lines:

My Lord, to You belongs all praise. You are the light of heaven and  
earth and all therein;  
Praise be to You, the true Lord; Your promise is true; Whatever You  
say is true;

The meeting with You is true; Heaven is true; Hell is true; the  
Prophets are true;  
and the Hour is true.  
I submit myself to You; I believe in You and depend on You. To You  
I return.<sup>3</sup>

Devout Muslims pray five times a day: at dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and early evening. At the first light of dawn, the prayer caller, or *muezzin*, wakes up the faithful by shouting "*Allahu Akbar*" ("God is great!") three times, followed by the profession of faith, "There is but one God, Muhammad is His Messenger." The *muezzin* also says, "Prayer is better than sleep!" When Muhammad was alive, men and women prayed side by side. Later, when Medina became a bigger city, prayers were segregated to prevent the mingling of strangers of the opposite sex.

Muhammad did not expect to convert the Jews of Medina to Islam. He deeply admired Judaism and hoped only that the Jews would acknowledge him as another messenger in their long line of prophets. Instead, the Jews pointed out that Muhammad's knowledge of the Bible was limited, denied the sanctity of the Quran, and challenged his claim to be a prophet.

In the course of his discussions with Jews, Muhammad became more familiar with the Torah. He learned that the Jews had rejected many prophets throughout their history, and he claimed that they were doing so again. He also learned more about Abraham and concluded that Abraham had not been a Jew, for Judaism did not really begin until after his lifetime. Abraham became the prophet Muhammad admired most because Abraham was not a religious scholar but simply an ordinary man who believed in one God and in Judgment Day. Muhammad said that Islam was a return to the simple faith of Abraham, a faith untarnished by the many arguments between Jews and Christians.

After a year and a half in Medina, Muhammad gave up trying to win the acceptance of the Jews. One day early in 624, after some Jews had scoffed at his prayers, Muhammad turned his body in the middle of a service, and instead of bowing toward Jerusalem, he bowed toward the Kaaba, the stone cube in Mecca that Abraham and his son Ishmael were said to have built long ago. Later, Muhammad also changed the time of fasting from Yom Kippur to the month of Ramadan. Because of Islam's 354-day lunar calendar, Ramadan moves backward through the seasons eleven days every year, so the fast is not associated with any one season or its decorations.

The Muslims from Mecca desperately wanted to make their own living. Since they were not farmers, they began to raid caravans traveling to and from Mecca. Caravan raiding was a common practice in Arabia, something of a sport, and was not considered wrong as long as no one was killed. The Muslims' first raids were unsuccessful because enemies in Medina leaked information about the raids to the merchants of Mecca. But in January 624, Muhammad gave sealed instructions to his raiders, and this time they captured a small caravan, taking two Meccans as prisoners in the process. One prisoner was so impressed by the happy egalitarian community in Medina that he chose to stay and become a Muslim himself. Later, other prisoners made the same decision.

Two months later, a huge caravan of a thousand camels passed near Medina on its way from Gaza to Mecca. With 320 men, Muhammad tried to raid the caravan at a desert crossroad called Badr. The leader of the caravan, Abu Sufyan, scouted the path himself in advance of his caravan, and seeing camel droppings, he rubbed them and found date seeds inside. He concluded that the camels must have come from Medina because it was the only place nearby where dates were so plentiful that people fed them to camels. He realized that Muhammad's men were scouting this crossroad, too. Abu Sufyan quickly moved his caravan away from Badr and safely down the coast of the Red Sea.

The people of Mecca were outraged that Muhammad would try to attack the biggest caravan of the year. They decided to send more than nine hundred men to Badr, including a hundred in armor, to teach Muhammad a lesson. The Muslims were outnumbered three to one, but they reached Badr first and filled all of its wells with sand except one. When the thirsty Meccans arrived at the well that the Muslims had left intact, they were at the bottom of a hill, with the morning sun shining in their eyes.

Battles in ancient Arabia began with the strongest men on each side fighting in hand-to-hand combat, but soon everyone joined in a wild free-for-all of swords, javelins, and bows and arrows. The Muslims were more disciplined than the Meccans, and their archers shot volley after volley of arrows. The chief difference between the two armies was in their fighting spirit—Muhammad had told his soldiers that death in battle would lead to paradise, and they believed him.

The fearless Muslims routed the Meccans. They killed about fifty men, took seventy prisoners, including two of Muhammad's cousins, and lost only fourteen men of their own. The prisoners were held for

ransom, but Muhammad insisted that they be treated kindly and that they should eat the same food the Muslims ate. Today, when Muslim extremists mistreat their hostages, they are violating one of the traditional laws of Islam.

The battle at Badr was the first Muslim victory, and it was against the strongest city in Arabia. To the Muslims, it was proof that Muhammad was indeed the Messenger of God. Within weeks, almost all of the Arabs in Medina became Muslims; Medina now became a religious, rather than a tribal, community.

Meanwhile, in Mecca, Abu Sufyan swore that he would not sleep with women until he had his revenge against the Muslims, and he persuaded his fellow merchants to devote the entire profit of their large caravan to preparations for war. The following year, three thousand Meccans rode to Medina, two hundred on horseback and the rest on camels, and seven hundred of them wore coats of armor. They camped on a hill outside Medina called Uhud and let their animals graze in the Muslims' fields. Against this force, the Muslims had only seven hundred men, including fifty archers, and just two horses. When the battle started, Muhammad himself fired arrows. He ordered the archers not to break ranks, but at some point they began to plunder the dead, and the Meccans seized their opportunity to advance. The Meccans killed seventy Muslims, wounded Muhammad with a blow to his head, and lost only about twenty-five of their own.

The Meccans could not follow up on their gains, however, because most of their horses had arrow wounds and because Medina was a well-fortified city. So despite their efforts, Muhammad remained in power. The Meccans had to be content with revenge, and it was grisly. Some Meccan women made necklaces out of the ears and the noses of dead Muslims, and one woman, whose father died at Badr, chewed the liver of Muhammad's uncle Hamza. "Today is in exchange for Badr," Abu Sufyan shouted at the Muslims. "War is like a well-bucket, sometimes up, sometimes down."

Although the battle of Uhud was a draw, many Muslims counted their dead and saw it as a defeat. Like certain biblical prophets before him, Muhammad assured his followers that God was still on their side but was testing their faith. Still, the Muslims were in an angry mood. Muhammad accused one of the Jewish tribes in Medina of plotting to kill him, and he demanded that they leave the city. At first, the Jews refused to go, but when the Muslims began to cut down the tribe's palm trees, they agreed to leave. They moved to Khaybar, a city ninety miles to the north where they owned some land. Muhammad gave the Jews' palm groves to the seventy Muslim families who had

left Mecca. For the first time, these Muslims were owners of land and no longer dependent on anyone for support.

After the battle of Uhud, there were dozens of widows in Medina. It was at this time that Muhammad received the revelation that men could marry up to four wives, provided that they could support and genuinely care for each one. Although this portion of the Quran may seem sexist to Westerners today, it was a reform at the time. In ancient Arabia, a man sometimes married a widow for her property and then treated her with indifference; according to the Quran, a man can marry again only if he treats his new wife equitably.

Muhammad himself exceeded the limit of four wives, eventually taking a total of ten wives (and one concubine) in his lifetime. His followers did not see this as unusual because in the Middle East, until recently, most rulers had many wives. Solomon, for example, had more than seven hundred. Nor does the number of Muhammad's wives bother Muslims today. Even Muslim women will say with pride that Muhammad was the most human of the world's religious leaders.

As Muhammad took more wives, the possibilities for gossip grew. One wife's hand accidentally brushed against the hand of a male guest while she was serving him food. Another wife who was outdoors one evening received a bawdy comment from a non-Muslim. Soon there were two new verses in the Quran: one commanded women to dress modestly; the other required that the Prophet's wives stay at home, behind a curtain.

The practice of keeping women in *purdah*, or "seclusion," which still continues today in some Muslim countries, thus began as a sign of status, reserved for the wives of Muhammad. *Purdah* was already widespread, however, among upper-class women in Persia and in the eastern half of the Byzantine Empire. When the Muslims conquered these regions soon after Muhammad died, thousands of soldiers remained there, married, and adopted the "elite" new custom.

Muhammad's relationships with his wives and daughters were easygoing and informal; they were not afraid to talk back to him. Muhammad also wanted a son, but none of his sons lived beyond infancy. Because of this, he particularly loved his two grandsons, Hasan and Hussein, and even let them climb on his back during prayers.

Usually, the reason for a marriage was political. Muhammad married the daughters of his closest followers, the daughters of chiefs who had converted to Islam, and several widows of followers who had died in battle. Only about half of the Prophet's wives were thought to be attractive.



In general, Muhammad preferred mature women. Eight of Muhammad's ten wives were widows, and one was a divorcee. Each wife had her own hut next to Muhammad's courtyard, and Muhammad slept one night in turn with each of them, except that the elderly Sawdah, a housekeeper to whom Muhammad had given his protection, voluntarily yielded her turn to Aisha, the daughter of his best friend, Abu Bakr.

Aisha was nine when she married the fifty-year-old Muhammad, but she continued to live with her parents and play with dolls and toy horses. The marriage was not consummated for another four years. Aisha was the only virgin among the ten wives Muhammad ultimately married. She was mature for her age, beautiful, intelligent, and full of laughter. She remained Muhammad's favorite until he died.

One evening the wives flew into an uproar when Muhammad slept with a Christian concubine named Mary on a night that had been reserved for another wife. Greatly annoyed by the quarreling, Muhammad moved away from his harem and said that he would not sleep with any of his wives for a month. It was a tense time as each wife wondered whether Muhammad might ask for a divorce. Finally, after four weeks, Muhammad returned to Aisha's hut with a stern look. "I thought you said you would be away for a month," Aisha said with a smile. Muhammad had to laugh, "Well, this month has just twenty-eight days."

In 626, Muhammad made several raids against desert tribes allied with Mecca. During one raid, Aisha lost a necklace, and while she was looking for it, several soldiers put her curtained carriage back on her camel without realizing that she was not inside. When Aisha found the necklace and returned to the campsite, the soldiers and the camels were gone.

Eventually, a handsome young man named Sufwan rode by, put Aisha on his camel, and walked in front of the beast, pulling the rein. When they arrived at the new campsite, people immediately gossiped about what the young couple had or had not done together.

Muhammad did not know what to think. Most of the young people in Medina continued to believe in Aisha's virtue, but Muhammad's cousin and adopted son, Ali, coolly said that women were plentiful and could easily be replaced.

After a month, Muhammad asked Aisha directly to confess any sin, assuring her that God would forgive her. Aisha calmly said that she had nothing to confess. Finally, Muhammad had a revelation that Aisha was innocent and that three men who had slandered Aisha should be punished with eighty lashes each. Aisha resumed her role as

Muhammad's favorite wife, but she never forgave Ali for his unkind remark, and the enmity between them contributed to a civil war thirty years later.

In March 627, the Meccans marched toward Medina with almost ten thousand soldiers, an unheard-of number in Arabia. Their forces included many desert nomads and also the Jewish tribe that Muhammad had expelled from Medina.

Medina is surrounded by cliffs and lava formations on three sides, but the lower, northern portion of the city was vulnerable to attack. Fortunately for Muhammad, a recent convert from Persia named Salman suggested an idea that was new to Arabia: that the Muslims build a deep trench wide enough to stop horses. Muhammad himself started to dig. The entire city joined in, singing as they worked. They also harvested their grain early so that they would have plenty to eat. They completed the trench in six days, just in time.

When the horde from Mecca arrived, they halted in complete surprise just outside the range of the Muslim archers. They had never seen a trench before. Bewildered, they stared at it and shook their heads. They shouted insults at the Muslims and called the trench dishonorable and un-Arabic. But after three weeks, their camels and horses began to run out of grass to eat. When a driving rainstorm blew out their campfires, the massive army went home.

The unsuccessful siege of Medina was a great victory for Muhammad because it proved to everyone in Arabia that the Muslims could not be defeated by force. But during the three weeks of siege, the Muslims had been quite fearful. The last of the large Jewish tribes in Medina, the Qurayzah, had talked with the Meccans about the possibility of letting them into Medina through one of the lava formations on the south side of the city. The negotiations broke down over the issue of guarantees for the Jews' safety, but to the Muslims, any contact at all with the Meccans was treason.

As soon as the Meccan army left Medina, Muhammad ordered his soldiers to surround the Jews and demanded that they surrender unconditionally. The Jews asked to be allowed to go to the city of Khaybar, as other Jews had done two years earlier, but Muhammad saw no reason to swell the ranks of his enemies. He suggested instead that the dispute be settled by Saad ibn Mu'ad, the leader of the Aws, an Arab tribe in Medina that had long been allied to the Jews.

The Jews agreed to the arbitration, but to their horror, Saad ordered that all of the Jewish men be executed and all of the women and the children sold into slavery. The Aws chief, who was dying from a painful battle wound, had ruled far more harshly than anyone had expected.

Before each execution, the Muslims gave the Jews a chance to profess the Muslim faith, and when someone did, he was immediately accepted by the Muslims as an equal. But few chose this path. Almost all of the Jews chose to die. Five or six hundred men were beheaded, about six at a time. Most of the women and the children, fortunately, were bought and freed by their relatives in Khaybar.

As biographer Karen Armstrong has observed,

It is probably impossible for us to disassociate this story from Nazi atrocities and it will inevitably alienate many people irrevocably from Muhammad. But . . . this was a very primitive society, far more primitive than the Jewish society in which Jesus had lived and promulgated his gospel of mercy and love some 600 years earlier. . . . Medina was probably more like the Jerusalem of King David, who was a mighty slayer of enemies.<sup>4</sup>

Muhammad ordered the killing of the Jews because he thought they were a serious threat to Medina's security. He was not anti-Semitic. Once, for example, Muhammad stood up as a Jewish funeral procession passed by. When a companion asked him why he was paying respects to a non-Muslim, Muhammad answered, "Was he not a living being?" Another time, Muhammad became angry when a young Muslim beat a Jew because the Jew had sworn an oath, "By Him Who chose Moses above all mankind," which implied that Moses was superior to Muhammad. Muhammad, however, had no objection to the oath and scolded his follower, "Don't ever say that I am better than Moses."

Muhammad had enormous respect for Jews and Christians as "People of the Book [Bible]," and the Quran mentions Moses 130 times and Jesus dozens more. Later, as Islam spread throughout the world, tens of thousands of Jews prospered in Alexandria, Cordoba, Constantinople, and many other cities. Even in Medina, hundreds of Jews, unaffiliated with the large Jewish tribes, lived in peace among the Muslims for generations. Muhammad cannot be charged with personal bigotry; one of his wives, Safiyah, had been Jewish before her marriage.

In 628, one year after the siege, Muhammad dreamed that he was making a pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca. When he awoke, he invited his followers to come with him. Wearing white cloth and armed only with swords during a traditional month of truce, Muhammad took fifteen hundred men and women to the outskirts of Mecca. There, he asked Mecca's leaders to allow the Muslims to make the pilgrimage to the Kaaba, which by tradition was the right of all Arabs. The Meccans refused.

After much talk, Muhammad and the Meccans agreed to a treaty. The Muslims had to go home that year, but they could return in future years and pray at the Kaaba. Umar and many other of Muhammad's impatient soldiers were outraged and wanted to march to Mecca right then, but Muhammad restrained them. He had won the right to enter Mecca soon enough, and he knew this was a great victory.

Muhammad also agreed not to attack any Meccan caravans for ten years, and in turn, the Meccans agreed to give up their monopoly on trade with Syria and other nations. The older men of Mecca were content to win a decade of peace, but the young men knew that Medina was now the stronger and more dynamic city, and many of them began to convert to Islam. An interesting provision of the treaty was that if a young Meccan arrived in Medina to embrace Islam without permission from his father, the Muslims would have to send him back to Mecca. Muhammad made these concessions because he was not interested in conquering the Meccans but in converting them. Muhammad wanted to unify *all* of the Arabs under Islam, and he knew that he would soon need the administrative skills of the well-educated Meccan merchants.

The following year, Muhammad went to Mecca again with more than two thousand Muslims. Many Meccans left the city for several days but watched the Muslims from the hillsides. To their amazement, Bilal, the African they had known as a lowly slave, climbed to the top of the sacred Kaaba and gave the prayer calls.

Muhammad circled the Kaaba seven times, as was the tradition, and ignored the idols. The Muslims, back in Mecca after six and a half years, impressed the Meccans with their manners and their discipline and made conversions by the hundreds. The people of Mecca began to feel that they had nothing to fear from the Muslims because, even under Islam, the lucrative pilgrimages to the Kaaba were going to continue.

In January 630, the patience and diplomacy that Muhammad had shown two years earlier paid off. With new converts from desert tribes, Muhammad surrounded Mecca with ten thousand men. For several days, he assured the people of Mecca that no one would harm them if they stayed in their homes. Finally, he and his followers entered the city.

Muhammad walked around the Kaaba seven times, then smashed the 360 idols, saying, "Truth has come. The lies shall stop." Muhammad spared a statue of Mary and Jesus and a painting of Abraham. Soon, it seemed as if the entire city of Mecca was converting to Islam. Encouraged by Muhammad, who offered an amnesty to

his former enemies, the Meccans even destroyed the idols inside their own homes. Only seven years earlier, Muhammad had fled Mecca for his life. Now the people of his home city acknowledged him as the Messenger of God.

During the next several weeks, Muslim soldiers destroyed the shrines of two of the goddesses mentioned in the Satanic Verses. But the people of the city of Taif, east of Mecca, quickly assembled an army of thousands of nomads to defend the shrine of the third goddess, al-Lat.

To confront this force, twelve thousand Muslims rode to Taif, including two thousand of the newly converted Meccans. The disciplined Muslims easily defeated the unorganized nomads, and from then on, tribes all over Arabia sent delegations to Muhammad to ask him for protection. Muhammad demanded that each tribe convert to Islam and pay an annual tax of one-fortieth of their crops and herds to help the poor. The tribesmen knew that paying this tax, called *zakat*, was preferable to being subject to raids. Even in faraway Bahrain, an island in the Persian Gulf, tribal chiefs sought a political alliance with Muhammad. For the first time in history, the Arabs were united.

One chief in central Arabia also claimed to be a prophet. When Muhammad's power grew, this chief wrote, "From Musailama the Messenger of God to Muhammad the Messenger of God, let us divide the earth between us." Muhammad replied with scorn, "From Muhammad the Messenger of God to Musailama the Liar, the earth belongs to Allah. He causes His servants to inherit it as He pleases."

In March 632, Muhammad made his last pilgrimage to Mecca, taking all of his wives along. On a hillside, he spoke to tens of thousands of his followers and reviewed the main points of Islam. He reminded everyone that all Muslims are brothers and sisters, whatever their tribe or race. He concluded by asking the crowd, "Have I delivered my message?" and when the Muslims roared their approval, Muhammad said, "Oh God, bear witness."

Muslims summarize Islam by its five "pillars":

- To make the profession of the faith: "There is but one God, Muhammad is His Messenger."
- To pray toward Mecca five times a day
- To fast during daylight during the month of Ramadan
- To give one-fortieth of one's income-producing assets to the needy each year
- To make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca during one's life, if possible

Three months after his last pilgrimage, Muhammad suffered a terrible fever and headache and died, possibly of pneumonia, with his head in Aisha's lap in her hut in Medina, on June 8, 632. Before dying, he insisted several times that only his old friend Abu Bakr lead the prayer services. His last words were, "Lord grant me pardon and join me to the companionship in Paradise." He was sixty-two.

When the fiery Umar heard the news, he did not believe that Muhammad had died. For twenty-two years, the Muslims had felt that the revelation of the Quran through Muhammad was a direct connection to God. Now Umar and others could not believe that this contact had ended. "Muhammad will return as Moses returned from Mount Sinai," Umar told a crowd, "and if anyone says the Messenger of God is dead, I will cut off his hands and feet!" But Abu Bakr arrived, told Umar to stop, and said to the crowd, "If anyone worships Muhammad, let him know now that Muhammad is dead. But if anyone worships God, let him know that God is alive and lives forever."

Within twelve years, the Muslims, led by Umar, conquered all of the land from Libya to Iran. Within eighty years, the Muslim Empire stretched from Spain to India. Today, after nearly fourteen hundred years, Islam remains the dominant religion from Morocco to Indonesia, the faith of almost one-fourth of humanity.

Muhammad's thousands of sayings (*hadith*) were carefully recorded by his followers after his death. Here are seven of them:

### Seven Sayings of Muhammad<sup>5</sup>

- Truly, reducing pride and conceit to nothing is a task of seventy years.
- Second only to faith in God is love for people.
- A father can give his children no possession more precious than good manners.
- On Resurrection Day the ink of the scholar will weigh more heavily than the blood of martyrs.
- No one ever suffered from seeking advice, nor gained by being willful.
- God helps His servant to the extent that His servant helps others.
- God's pardon exceeds your guilt.

## Five Excerpts from the Quran<sup>6</sup>

### Sura (Chapter) 1

Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds!  
 The compassionate, the merciful!  
 King on the day of reckoning!  
 Thee only do we worship, and to Thee do we cry for help.  
 Guide Thou us on the straight path,  
 The path with those to whom Thou hast been gracious;  
 With whom Thou art not angry, and who go not astray.

### Sura 29, Verse 45

Dispute not, unless in a kindly sort,  
 With people of the Book [Christians and Jews];  
 Save with such of them as have dealt wrongfully with you:  
 And say ye, "We believe in what has been sent down  
 To us and has been sent down to you.  
 Our God and your God is one,  
 And to Him we surrender our selves."

### Sura 107

What thinkest thou of him who treats our religion as a lie?  
 He it is who thrusts away the orphan,  
 And stirs not to feed the poor.  
 Woe to those who pray,  
 But in their prayer are careless;  
 Who make a show of devotion,  
 But refuse help to the needy.

### Sura 112

Say: He is God Alone:  
 God the Eternal!  
 He begets not, and He is not begotten;  
 And there is none like unto Him.

### Sura 56, Verses 22–23, 29–35, and 92–97

And theirs shall be the Houris [virgins], with large dark eyes,  
 Like pearls hidden in their shells,  
 In recompense of labors past. . . .  
 And in exalted shade,  
 And by flowing waters,  
 And with abundant fruits,  
 Unfailing, unforbidden,

And on lofty couches  
Of a rare creation we created the Houris,  
And we have made them ever virgins. . . .  
But for him who shall be of those who treat the prophets  
as deceivers,  
And of the erring,  
His entertainment shall be scalding water,  
And the broiling of hell-fire.  
Verily this is a certain truth:  
Praise therefore the name of thy Lord, the Great.