

Muhammad, the Messenger of God: A Brief Biographical Sketch

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Birth to Commencement of Revelation

Muhammad al-Mustafa, the last Prophet of God, was born in Mecca, Arabia, on 17th Rabīʿ al-Awwal, 1st Year of ʿĀmul Fil (570 AD).

Prophet Muhammad (God's blessings and peace be upon him) was born in the family of Banu Hāshim, of the tribe of Quraysh, who were the most honoured of the Arab families. Banu Hāshim were descendants of Ismael, the son of Prophet Abraham.

The Prophet's grandfather, ʿAbdul Muttalib, was the chief of Banu Hashim and also the guardian of the Kaʿbah. His father was called ʿAbdullāh and his mother, ʿĀmina. His father passed away a few months before his birth. At the age of six, the Prophet lost his mother as well and was placed under the care of his grandfather, ʿAbdul Muttalib. But his grandfather also passed away after four years; and at this time the Prophet's uncle, Abu Tālib, took charge of him and became his guardian, taking him to his own house. Thus the Prophet mostly grew up in his uncle's house and even before reaching the age of adolescence used to accompany his uncle on business journeys by caravan.

Prophet Muhammad did not receive any schooling; yet, after reaching the age of maturity he became famous for his wisdom, courtesy, trust-worthiness and truthfulness. He soon became known as "the

truthful, the trustworthy – *as-sādiq al-amín*”. His uncle Abu Tālib used to say, “We have never heard any lies from Muhammad, nor seen him misconduct himself or make mischief. He never laughs unduly nor talks untimely.”

As a result of his sagacity and trustworthiness, Khadija bint Khuwaylid, a Qurayshi lady well-known for her wealth, appointed him as the manager of her businesses and left in his hands the task of conducting her commercial affairs. The Prophet once journeyed to Damascus with Khadija’s merchandise and because of his abilities made an outstanding profit. Before long she asked to become his wife and the Prophet accepted her proposal. After the marriage, at the age of twenty five years, the Prophet began the life of a manager of his wife’s fortunes. By the age of forty, he gained a widespread reputation for wisdom and trustworthiness.

He refused to worship idols, as was the common religious practice of the Arabs of the time. Occasionally he would make spiritual retreats to the cave of Hirā’ outside Mecca, in which he prayed and discoursed secretly with God.

The Beginning of the Mission

At the age of forty, when Prophet Muhammad was in spiritual retreat in the cave of Hirā’, he received the first revelation from God through Arch-Angel Gabriel: this was the beginning of the mission of propagating the new religion. At that moment the first five verses of Chapter 96, Surah al-Alaq, of the Qur’ān were revealed to him. (This event is known as *bi’that* — being raised to proclaim God’s message.)

That very day he mentioned the revelation to his cousin, ‘Alí bin Abi Tālib who declared his acceptance of the faith. After the Prophet returned home and told his wife of the revelation, she likewise accepted Islam. Soon after, Zayd bin Hāritha (a loyal slave whom he treated like his own son) also became a convert.

The first time that the Prophet invited people to accept the message of Islam, he faced a distressing and painful reaction. Out of necessity he was forced henceforth to propagate his message secretly for three years until he was ordered again by God to invite his very close relatives to accept the message. He organized a family feast and invited forty of his kinsmen. At the gathering, Muhammad asked if they had ever found him lying? The general response was: ‘We have never found you lying.’ Then he asked, “If I were to tell you that your enemies have gathered beyond the sand hills to attack you, would you believe me?” They replied, ‘Yes.’ Then he said:

“I know no man in all Arabia who can offer his kindred a more excellent thing than I now do. I offer you happiness both in this life and in the hereafter. God Almighty has commanded me to call you unto Him. Who, therefore, among you will assist me herein shall become my brother, my heir and my successor.”

But this call was also fruitless and no one heeded it except ‘Alí bin Abi Tālib, who in any case had already accepted the faith. According to the historical documents and the extant poems composed by Abu Tālib, Abu Tālib had also embraced Islam; however, because he was the sole protector of the Prophet, he hid his faith from the people in order to preserve the outward power he had among the people of Mecca.

After this period, according to Divine instructions, the Prophet began to propagate his mission openly. With the beginning of open propagation the people of Mecca reacted most severely because the Islamic message —of worshipping One God and of equality among the believers without any distinction of race, colour or wealth— fared completely against the status quo. Most painful afflictions and tortures were inflicted upon the Prophet and the new converts.

For example, Bilal, an Ethiopian slave who had accepted Islam, was tied to the burning sand of the Arabian desert and a large stone was placed on his chest with the warning from his master Umayya that he would be left in that state until he rejects Islam. But the only sound heard from Bilal’s lips was: “*Ahad! Ahad!*” (One God! One God!)

The Quraysh treated the believers so harshly that a group of about 100 Muslims, under the leadership of Ja‘far bin Abi Tālib, left their homes and belongings, and migrated to Abyssinia. They were told by the Prophet that they would find the Abyssinian king to be a just ruler. With the intention of stopping the spread of Islam, the Quraysh pursued them to Abyssinia seeking their extradition. But Ja‘far eloquently presented the Muslims’ case to the Abyssinian king, and the request of the Quraysh was rejected.

Ja‘far said:

“O King! We were plunged in the depth of ignorance and barbarism; we worshipped idols, we lived an unchaste life, we ate dead bodies and we spoke abominations; we disregarded every feeling of humanity and the duties of hospitality and neighbourhood; we knew no law, but of the strong — when God raised among us a man, of whose noble birth, truthfulness, honesty and purity we are aware; and he called us to the Unity of God and taught us not to associate anything with Him; he forbade us the worship of idols; and enjoined on us to speak the truth, to be faithful to our trusts, to be merciful and to regard the rights of neighbours; he forbade us to speak evil of women or to eat the sustenance of orphans; he ordered us to fly from vice and to abstain from evil; to offer prayers, to render alms, to observe the fast.

We have believed in him, we have accepted his teachings and his injunction to worship God and not

associate anything with Him.

For this reason our people have risen against us, have persecuted us in order to make us forgo the worship of God and return to the worship of idols of stone and wood and other abominations. They tortured and injured us, until finding no safety among them; we have come to your country and hope you will protect us from their oppression.”

Back in Mecca, economic and social boycott was imposed on the Prophet and his family. Therefore, the Prophet and his uncle, Abu Tālib, along with their relatives from the Banu Hashim, took refuge for three years in the “mountain pass of Abu Tālib,” a fort in one of the valleys of Mecca. No one had any dealings or transactions with them and they did not dare to leave their place of refuge.

Although the idol-worshippers of Mecca at the beginning considered inflicting all kinds of pressures and tortures such as striking and beating, insult, ridicule and defamation of the Prophet, occasionally would also show kindness and courtesy toward him in order to have him turn away from his mission. They would promise him great sums of money or leadership and the rule of the tribe. But for the Prophet, their promises and their threats only resulted in the intensification of his will and determination to carry out his mission. Once, when they came to the Prophet promising him wealth and power, the Prophet told them, using metaphorical language, that if they were to put the sun in the palm of his right hand and the moon in the palm of his left hand, he would not turn away from obeying the One God or refrain from performing his mission.

The Migration to Medina

About the tenth year of his prophecy, when the Prophet left the “mountain pass of Abu Tālib,” his uncle Abu Tālib, who was also his sole protector, died, as did also his devoted wife Khadijah. Henceforth there was neither the protection of his life nor any place of refuge.

Finally the idol-worshippers of Mecca devised a secret plan to kill the Prophet. At night they surrounded his house with the intent of forcing themselves in the house at the end of the night and cutting him to pieces while he was in bed. But Almighty God informed him of the plan and commanded him to leave for Yathrib. The Prophet asked ‘Alí to sleep in his bed so that the enemy would not detect his absence; ‘Alí readily agreed to sacrifice his life for the Prophet and slept in the Prophet’s bed. Then the Prophet left the house under Divine protection, passing amidst his enemies, and taking refuge in a cave near Mecca. After three days his enemies, having looked everywhere, gave up hope of capturing him returned to Mecca. The Prophet left the cave and set out for Yathrib.

Establishing an Islamic Community

The people of Yathrib, whose leaders had already accepted the message of the Prophet and sworn allegiance to him, welcomed him with open arms and placed their lives and property at his disposal. In Yathrib, for the first time, the Prophet formed a small Islamic community and signed treaties with the Jewish tribes in and around the city as well as with the powerful Arab tribes of the region. He undertook the task of propagating the Islamic message and Yathrib became famous as “Madīnatu ‘r-Rasūl” (the City of the Prophet). Later on, it became famous as “Medina”

Islam began to grow and expand from day to day. The Muslims, who in Mecca were caught in the mesh of the injustice and inequity of the Quraysh, gradually left their homes and property and migrated to Medina, revolving around the Prophet like moths around a candle. This group became known as the “immigrants” (*muhājirin*) in the same way that those who aided the Prophet in Yathrib gained the name of “helpers” (*ansār*).

The Prophet formulated the society on the basis of justice and equality among the believers. Brotherhood —not just in words but in action— was established among the *muhājirin* and the *ansār*. The social system of Islam even extended its justice and protection to the non-Muslims under its rule.

Encounters on the Battlefields

Islam was advancing rapidly but at the same time the idol-worshippers of Mecca, as well as the Jewish tribes of Arabia, were unrestrained in their harassment of Muslims. With the help of the hypocrites of Medina who were among the community of Muslims, they created new misfortunes for the Muslims every day until finally the matter led to war.

Many battles took place between the Muslims, the Arab polytheists and the Jews. The Muslims were victorious in most of those battles. In all the major conflicts such as the battles of Badr, Uhud, Khandaq, Khaybar, Hunayn, etc., the Prophet was personally present on the battle scene. Also in all the major battles and many minor ones, victory was gained mainly through the efforts of ‘Alī bin Abi Tālib. He was the only person who never turned away from any of these battles. In all the wars that occurred during the ten years after the migration from Mecca to Medina, less than two hundred Muslims and less than a thousand infidels were killed.

The Battle of Badr

The Meccans continued their attempts to destroy Islam. They continued to harass the Muslims who remained in Mecca and also confiscated their properties and belongings. Abu Jahl, the leader of the Meccans, even sent a letter to the Prophet threatening him of the attack by the Meccans. It was in response to such aggression that Almighty God gave the permission to fight the unbelievers of Mecca. He said,

“Permission [to fight] is granted to those who are being killed because they have been oppressed...those who have been expelled from their homes without a just cause...” (Surah al-Hajj, 22:39–40)

In the **second** year of the migration (*hijra*), the Prophet with about 300 ill-equipped Muslims confronted a well-equipped Meccan force of about 1000 soldiers. Though outnumbered, the Muslims were able to defeat the unbelievers in their first armed encounter with the enemy.

The Battle of Uhud

To avenge their defeat at Badr, the Meccans raised another military force in the **third** year after hijra and marched towards Medina. After reaching the hills of Uhud, four miles outside Medina, the Prophet took up his position below the hill. The army arrayed in fighting formations. Fifty archers were posted, under the command of ‘Abdullah bin Jubayr, at a pass between the hills to guard the Muslims from any rear attack. They had strict orders not to leave their posts, no matter what the outcome of the battle.

The Muslims initially defeated the Meccans. The enemy, having suffered a heavy loss, fell back in disorder and the Muslims started gathering booties.

Thinking that the fight was over, most of the fifty archers guarding the hill passage left their posts against the orders of their commander. Khālid bin Walīd, a commander of the Meccan cavalry force, seized the opportunity and led his cavalry through the mountain pass and, after killing the few remaining archers, launched a furious attack upon the Muslims from the rear.

Because of the disobedience of a small group, the victory was taken away from the Muslims. Most fled from the battlefield. A few, especially ‘Alī, stood their ground and fought till the end. The Muslims finally retreated to the security of the heights of mount Uhud. Among the 70 Muslims who died in this counter attack of the Meccans was Hamzah bin ‘Abdul Muttalib, the courageous uncle of the Prophet. He was, indeed, the Lion of God (*asadullâh*).

The Battle of Khandaq (Ahzāb)

In the **fifth** year of the hijra, a Jewish tribe formed an alliance with the Meccans; and together they raised an army of about 10,000 soldiers. This battle is known as Ahzāb (i.e., alliance) and also as Khandaq (i.e., ditch) because the Muslims had dug a ditch around their campsite to prevent the enemy from entering the city.

The Allied forces of the non-Muslims besieged Medina for a month. Except for a few famous soldiers, they were unable to cross the ditch. The Allied forces finally retreated after 'Alí, in a one-to-one encounter, killed the most courageous of their fighters.

The Bani Qurazah Battle

The Bani Qurazah had concluded a peace agreement with the Muslims, but they violated the agreement by joining the Meccans in the Battle of Ahzāb. So, after the Battle of Ahzāb, the Muslims proceeded towards the Bani Qurazah who finally surrendered to the Muslims. The Prophet proposed to them to accept the arbitration of Sa'd bin Ma'z. They agreed and were dealt with by his decision: to kill the fighters and confiscate their properties.

The Bani Mustalaq War

In the **sixth** year of the hijra, the tribe of Bani Mustalaq violated the rights of the Muslims. As a result, they had to face the Muslim forces at a place called Maris'a and were defeated.

The Battle of Khaybar

A large number of Jewish tribes had settled in Khaybar forts and the surrounding area of northern Arabia. They had close ties with the Meccans and had constantly threatened the Muslims. In the **seventh** year of hijra, the Prophet decided to face the enemy. The Muslims marched to Khaybar, put it under siege and, finally, gained victory after 'Alí marched forward, conquered the main fort and killed the bravest of the Jewish soldiers.

The Treaty of Hdaybia & The Fall of Mecca

In the **sixth** year of the hijra, the Prophet decided to go for pilgrimage to Mecca. The Meccans stopped the Muslims at a place called Hdaybia and did not allow them to enter the city. This encounter ended in a peace agreement between the Prophet and the Quraysh of Mecca. This peace agreement created a relatively safe environment for the Prophet to embark on extending the call of Islam to the tribes and people far away from Arabia.

As a result of the activity of the Prophet and the selfless effort of the Muslims during that period, Islam spread through the Arabian Peninsula. There were also letters written to kings of other countries such as Persia, Byzantine and Abyssinia inviting them to accept Islam.

During this time the Prophet lived in poverty and was proud of it. He never spent a moment of his life in vain. Rather, his time was divided into three segments: one for God, in worshipping and remembering Him; a segment for himself and his household and domestic needs; and a segment for the people. During this part of his time he was engaged in spreading and teaching Islam and its sciences, administrating to the needs of the Islamic society, removing whatever evils that existed, providing for the needs of the Muslims, strengthening domestic and foreign bonds, and other similar matters.

One of the conditions of the peace treaty was that the Quraysh would not harm the Muslims or any of their confederates. This condition was, however, violated by the Quraysh when they helped Bani Bakr tribe against the Khuza'a tribe—the former an ally of the Quraysh and the latter an ally of the Muslims. The Prophet asked the Quraysh to respect the treaty, break their alliance with Bani Bakr and compensate the victims of their aggression. The Quraysh refused to abide by the terms of their treaty. The Prophet, with a well-equipped and well-disciplined force of about 10,000 soldiers, marched into Mecca in the **eighth** year after the *hijra* and conquered it without much resistance.

The city, which had rejected his message, plotted against his followers and conspired to assassinate him was at his mercy. Prophet Muhammad asked the Meccans: “What can you expect at my hands?” “Mercy! Generous and Noble Sire!” they replied. If he had wished, he could have made them all his slaves. But Muhammad —“mercy for the universe”— said: “I will speak to you as Joseph spoke to his brethren. I will not reproach you today; God will forgive you, for He is Merciful and Loving. Go, you are free!”

With the fall of Mecca, the last barrier in the way of Islam had been removed and many people and tribes of the Arabian Peninsula started accepting the message of Islam. Thus the **ninth** year of hijra is known as the “Year of Delegations” because of the unusual number of delegates coming to pay their homage to the Prophet at Medina.

The Last Pilgrimage & Death

In the **tenth** year of the hijra, the Prophet decided to go for hajj (pilgrimage). He invited Muslims to join him and be acquainted with the hajj rituals. Over a hundred thousand Muslims joined him in the hajj. Although this was the first and the last hajj of the Prophet, it is known as “*al-Hajjātu ‘l-widâ’* — the Last Pilgrimage.” He seized the opportunity of the unprecedented gathering to remind the Muslims of many important values of Islam.

On the way back to Medina, he stopped at Ghadir Khumm and delivered a lengthy sermon in which he summarized the major teachings of Islam, informed the Muslims of his approaching death and appointed ‘Alí bin Abi Tālib as his successor.

After ten years of stay in Medina, the Prophet fell ill and died after a few days of illness. According to existing traditions, the last words on his lips were advice concerning slaves and women.

La Martine’s Homage to the Prophet

An eighteenth century French historian, La Martine, writes the following in his *Histoire de la Turquie* (1854) about the Prophet of Islam:

“Never has man set for himself, voluntarily or involuntarily, a more sublime aim, since this aim was superhuman: to subvert superstitions which had been interposed between man and his Creator, to render God unto man and man unto God; to restore the rational and sacred idea of divinity amidst the chaos of the material and disfigured gods of idolatry, then existing...”

“If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astounding results are the true criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in modern history with Muhammad?...”

“Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images; the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad. As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he?”

This short biographical sketch of the Prophet is from: ***Islam: Faith, Practice & History.***

Recommended Books on the Prophet's Life

1. *A Glance at the Life of the Prophet of Islam*

By Dar Rah-e Haq, Qum.

2. *The Life of Muhammad the Prophet*

By Syed Saeed Akthar Rizvi

3. *The Message*

By Ja'far Subhani

4. *Muhammad: A Western Attempt to Understand Islam*

By Karen Armstrong

Items 1 to 3 are also available on-line at www.al-islam.org [4]

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