

Early Life of the Prophet

The Prophet Muhammad, the revered founder of the Islamic faith, was born around 570 CE in Mecca, a prosperous city in modern-day Saudi Arabia. He was born into one of the most powerful tribes in the region, the Quraysh, but was orphaned at the young age of six. He was then raised first by his grandfather, and then by his uncle. Not much else is known about Muhammad's early life. He was not educated, and he could neither read nor write. Sometime in his teens, Muhammad took up the family trade, becoming a merchant and leading trade caravans. Successful trade routes, such as those led by Muhammad, were essential to Mecca's prosperous status. Muhammad was good at his work, as his nickname, Mecca al-Amin, or the "reliable one," indicates.



This is the Great Mosque at Mecca, with the Kaaba in the center.

When he was about 25 years old, Muhammad was hired by a wealthy widow named Khadijah bint al-Khwaylid to guide a caravan of goods to Syria. Soon after, the two married. They had four daughters, the most famous of which was Fātima. Also called al-Zahrā, Muhammad's daughter Fātimah married his cousin Alī. Some Muslims considered Alī to be the heir to Muhammad's throne. Muhammad's marriage was a happy one, and Muhammad continued to prosper as a merchant. However, when he was around 40, he started to suspect there was something wrong with the way the people of Mecca lived. Many people, including members of his own family, had grown wealthy, yet they did not share their wealth with the poor, and the tribes were constantly at war with one another.

First Revelations

Disturbed by the problems around him, Muhammad retreated to the mountains in solitude. He found a cave and spent several days there praying and fasting. Later, his time spent in the mountains would form the basis of the Islamic holiday, Ramadan. On his seventeenth day in the mountains, Muhammad had a miraculous vision. The angel Gabriel appeared to him.

According to the teachings of Islam, Gabriel revealed to Muhammad, in Arabic, the sacred word of Allah. He then commanded Muhammad to recite, or repeat, the word and then to share it with his people. At first, Muhammad was overwhelmed. He thought he might be losing his mind. When he returned home, he told only his wife and her cousin, who was a Christian. They both

encouraged Muhammad to do what Gabriel commanded. The cousin saw the vision as part of the long tradition of biblical prophecy. Muhammad had been chosen as a prophet to reveal Allah's will to the Arabic people, in their own language. Still, Muhammad kept the message to himself for two more years.

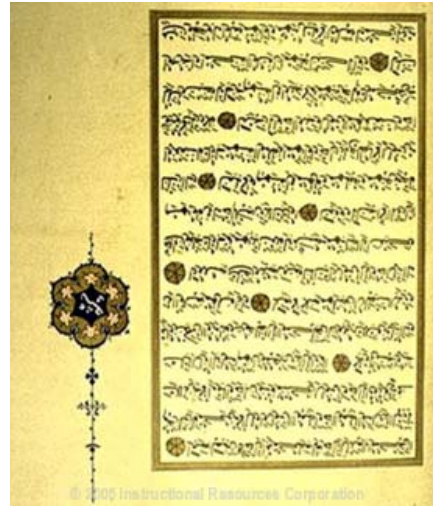
Becoming a Preacher

Muhammad continued to retreat to the cave, where Gabriel appeared and told him the teachings of Allah. In 612, Muhammad decided at last to share his vision. Filled with the spirit of God, Muhammad began to preach. He began to see himself as part of the line of great biblical prophets. Muslims eventually came to see Muhammad as a messenger, or prophet, of God, like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

Most importantly, Muhammad told the people that Allah was the only God all people should worship. He told them that neither Jews nor Christians should be forced to convert because they were already “people of the book.” The new prophet declared that it was the duty of the rich to share what they had with the poor. The strong had a duty to protect the weak. Also important, all people were to pray three times a day. They were to kneel face-down on the ground for prayer, in a position of submission. This was in keeping with the central concept of the faith, Islam, which means submission of the individual will to God.

Muhammad began to gain followers. Many were drawn to the power and beauty of his speeches. The poetic language of his messages also drew in listeners. Muhammad gave voice to the revelations that he believed Gabriel had spoken to him. When it was written down by others, it became known as the “Quran,” the Arabic word for recitation.

Not everyone was happy with Muhammad's message, including the Quraysh, who were content to worship their pagan gods. The merchants of Mecca were also unhappy with Muhammad. In 617 Muhammad and his converts, called “Muslims,” began facing discrimination in Mecca. The leaders of the city declared that the Muslims should be boycotted, which meant that no one could sell or give Muhammad, or his followers, food. They faced starvation. The boycott lasted two years, during which time two of the people closest to Muhammad, his wife, Khadijah, and his last living relative, Abū Tālib, died.



This is a page from the Quran, the holy book of Islam, which was revealed to Muhammad.

Around this time, Muhammad had another powerful vision. In the dream, he flew to Jerusalem, where he preached to the great biblical prophets and then was taken on a tour of the heavens. Upon waking, Muhammad found that he and his followers were still threatened by the powerful rulers of the city. Then in 621 a group of tribes from Yathrib came to Mecca to talk to Muhammad. They were tired of fighting amongst themselves. They sought his wisdom and council to end their conflict. They heard his message and converted to Islam, pledging to protect one another. This became the first Islamic community.



Muhammad is buried under the green dome of this mosque in Medina.

The Flight from Mecca

Muhammad knew the Muslims were still in danger; his own life had been threatened too. In 622 he and his followers left Mecca and moved to Yathrib. The year 622 is considered the beginning of the Muslim era.

The Quraysh were furious and vowed revenge for the Muslims' departure. What Muhammad had done was extraordinary. Never before had part of an Arab tribe split off to create an independent tribe. Before the split, all relationships, statuses, and social allegiances were based on kin, or family, but the new tribe had only religious allegiances to bind it together. This was something different and unique. As the leader of the new Muslim group, Muhammad gathered together all the other religious groups of Yathrib. He pledged that they would protect one another and respect one another's religions. This settlement would become the city of Medina.

Medina

Muhammad set out to build a Muslim city. In doing so, he set many precedents for the faith. For example, his home in Medina served as the first mosque. Its rooms were large and spacious, yet the purpose of the building was to nurture the community. This has been the basis for every mosque built since.

After his first wife, Khadijah, died, Muhammad took as many as 11 wives. The rule he had established had been a maximum of four, but the prophet regarded his ties as politically necessary. He also declared that it was permissible, or acceptable, to break the rule if the man was trying to help a woman in need.

This could include poverty, or financial trouble, or the early death of a woman's husband. To this day, four is set as the maximum standard, but many see this rule as flexible, or able to change depending on the situation.

In Medina, Muhammad allowed the followers of all faiths to worship freely. He had another vision, which inspired him to make another important change to Islamic religious ritual. In accordance with his vision, he changed the *qiblah*, or the direction that Muslims face for their prayers. Previously, Muslims had prayed facing Jerusalem, the city that both Jews and Christians claim as their holy city. Now, Muhammad declared that they should face Mecca. This change became part of the daily practice of Muslims and is still followed today.

By the time of his death in 632, Muhammad had united most of the region under his leadership and the faith of Islam. After his death, Islam continued to spread around the world. Today, there are more than 1.5 billion Muslims in the world. They are all followers of a man named Muhammad, whose visions of God inspired a religion and way of life that has spread to every corner of the globe.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Where and when was Muhammad born?
 - A. in Medina around 622
 - B. in Mecca around 570
 - C. in Cairo around 630
 - D. in Yathrib around 612
2. In what way did Muhammad receive the teachings of Islam?
 - A. as a written text, found in a cave
 - B. from a holy man in Mecca
 - C. from traveling pilgrims seeking Mecca
 - D. as a revelation from the angel Gabriel
3. It was not until much later in the establishment of Islam as a religion that Muhammad changed the city where Muslims face during prayer. What did this change from Jerusalem to Mecca say about Islam as a religion?
 - A. Muhammad was angry about being kicked out of Mecca.
 - B. Islam was now a monotheistic religion.
 - C. Islam was establishing itself as a world religion.
 - D. It proved to the world that Mecca is an up and coming city.
4. What were some of Muhammad's teachings? Based on what you have learned, describe how his teachings and the way they were presented to people helped draw in converts to this new religion. Provide details and evidence to support your answer.