

MUHAMMAD

Encyclopedia of Religion, MUHAMMAD, Vol.10, p.137

MUHAMMAD (c. 570-632 CE), the Prophet or (as Muslims usually call him) the Messenger of God, from whose activity the religion of Islam developed.

Life and Career

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Muhammad was a political as well as a religious leader, and it is convenient to look first at the external and political aspects of his career before considering the religious aspect in more detail; the latter, of course, cannot be completely excluded at any point.

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Background and Early Life. Muhammad was born in Mecca, allegedly in "the year of the elephant," that is, the year in which the territory of Mecca was invaded by an Abyssinian expedition from the Yemen which included a fighting elephant. This is thought to have been 570 CE or a little later. He was the only child of his parents, since his father, 'Abd Allah of the clan of Hashim, had died in Medina on a trading journey. His mother was Aminah of the clan of Zuhrah. He was entrusted for a time to a wet nurse belonging to a desert tribe; this was apparently a common practice to counter the bad effects of the climate of Mecca. Apart from this, his mother and her family looked after him until her death when he was six. His paternal grandfather, 'Abdal-Mut-talib, then took charge of him but died two years later, and then his father's brother Abu Talib became his guardian. There are reports of various miraculous events occurring during his childhood and youth—for example, two angels are said to have washed his heart in snow and taken from it a black clot—but such stories appear to be pious inventions. There may also be some exaggeration of 'Abdal-Muttalib's importance in the affairs of Mecca; though certainly important, he was by no means the leading man there.

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Mecca lies among barren rocky hills, and no agriculture is possible. The dominant group in Mecca was the Arab tribe of Quraysh, which was subdivided into clans. The chief asset of the town was a sacred building, the Ka'bah, which was a center of pilgrimage. Because the area around the Ka'bah was a sanctuary, and certain months were also held sacred, with blood feuds in abeyance, many nomadic Arabs came to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage and fairs. In this way it became an important trading center as well, and trade was the primary source of livelihood for its inhabitants. In the later sixth century the merchants of Mecca appear to have gained control of most of the trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. This was possibly because the route by the Euphrates and Iraq had been closed by the continuous warfare between the superpowers of the day, the Byzantine and ~ Persian (Sasanid) empires. As a result Mecca was now very prosperous, but prosperity had led to social malaise through the breakdown of traditional morality, which was a morality suited to desert conditions rather than to the world of commerce.

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According to Arab custom as it was at the time, Muhammad, because he was a minor, inherited nothing from either his father or his grandfather. This meant that he had no capital

with which to engage in trading on his own account, although he accompanied his uncle Abu Talib on trading journeys to Syria. When he was twenty-five, a wealthy widow, Khadijah, enlisted him as her steward on such a venture to Syria and, when he acquitted himself satisfactorily, made him an offer of marriage, which he accepted. Though she is said to have been about forty, she bore him two sons (who died as infants) and four daughters: Zaynab, Ruqayyah, Umm Kulthum, and Fatimah. After his marriage Muhammad seems to have occupied himself with trading in a relatively small way until he received the call to be the Messenger of God.

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First Preaching of Islam. It was presumably the frustrations he faced in the years before his marriage that made Muhammad especially sensitive to the malaise in the community of Mecca. He had skill in handling people and great intellectual gifts, and yet he was unable to use these qualities in trading because of his lack of capital. He is said to have spent a month each year in a cave near Mecca meditating on spiritual matters, including conditions in Mecca itself. About the year 610 he had some strange experiences, described more fully below, and as a result of these he became convinced that he had been called to be the "Messenger of God" (*rasul Allah*) who would bear messages or revelations from God to the people of Mecca. He was also convinced that these messages, which he "found in his heart," came from God and were not the product of his own thinking. After his death the messages were collected to form the book still in our hands, the Qur'an.

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The messages which were earliest, so far as we can tell, spoke of God's power and his goodness to human beings, called on them to acknowledge their dependence on God and to be generous with their wealth, and warned them that all would appear before God on the Day of Judgment and be assigned to Paradise or Hell according to whether their deeds were good or bad. These messages were clearly relevant to the situation in Mecca. The great merchants thought they could control everything because of their wealth and expertise and that they could flout traditional nomadic moral standards with impunity, especially in such matters as the use of their wealth. It was therefore salutary for them to be told that, ultimately, events were controlled by God and that there was a future life in which their prospects would depend on their conduct in this present life. Thus there was a sense in which the revealed messages were directed against the powerful merchants who were the effective rulers of Mecca.

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At first Muhammad communicated the messages only to his own household and a few close friends, but gradually an increasing number of people accepted the messages as true. A wealthy young man called al-Arqam offered his house as a meeting place, and the believers gathered there daily. Then, about three years after receiving the call to be Messenger of God, Muhammad began to preach publicly. By this time he had at least fifty followers (whose names have been preserved), and enough was generally known about the content of the messages for bitter opposition to have been aroused among the wealthy merchants. One of the interesting facts about those who became Muslims while Muhammad was still at Mecca is that they were mostly young men. They even included sons and younger brothers of some of the most influential merchants of the town. There were also older men from the less influential clans, as well as Arabs from outside Mecca and men from the Byzantine empire. Those in the latter groups, some of whom were moderately wealthy, were attached for protection—a formal guarantee of security for one's life and property as a *jar*, or neighbor—to one of the clans of Mecca, but the clans were not always ready to make their protection effective. From these facts it is clear that Muhammad's movement was not plebeian or

proletarian in character.

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Rejection at Mecca. A number of events are recorded in the period between the beginning of the public preaching about 613 and the Emigration, or Hijrah, from Mecca to Medina in 622, but the precise dating is uncertain. The earliest of these events may have been that known as the incident of the "satanic verses," which is recounted by early commentators on the Qur'an as an illustration of surah 22:51. The story is that, while Muhammad was wondering how the leading merchants could be induced to accept the Qur'anic messages, he received a fresh revelation (surah 53, *The Star*), of which a section permitted treating three pagan goddesses as having the power to intercede with God on behalf of their worshippers.

The goddesses were al-Lat, al-'Uzza, and Manat, and all had shrines within a day or two's journey from Mecca. When Muhammad proclaimed this revelation in the presence of the leading men, they joined him at the end in prostrating themselves in worship. Later, however, the angel Gabriel came to Muhammad and made him realize that the verses permitting the goddesses' intercession were not a genuine revelation but had been "put upon his tongue" by Satan, and the true continuation of the surah was then revealed to him. This "abrogation" or cancellation of the satanic verses increased the opposition to Muhammad and his followers. Some Muslims today reject this whole story, but it is difficult to see how any Muslim could have invented it, or how a non-Muslim could have persuaded distinguished Muslim scholars to accept it.

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About the same time as this incident, or a little earlier, Muhammad encouraged a number of his followers to go to Abyssinia, where they were hospitably received by the Christian emperor, the negus (*najashi*). Allegedly they went to avoid persecution in Mecca, but the reasons are more complex, since some of them remained there for years after they could have rejoined Muhammad at Medina. There were trading relations between Mecca and Abyssinia, and the merchants opposed to Muhammad sent a deputation requesting the negus to make the emigrants return, but this he refused to do. It is difficult to reconcile all the accounts, but some of the Muslims who went to Abyssinia certainly returned to Mecca while Muhammad was still there.

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Muhammad and his followers deeply resented the treatment they received at the hands of their opponents in Mecca, perhaps chiefly because in the end this made it impossible for Muhammad to continue preaching and gaining disciples there. In themselves many of the measures were not serious, although slaves and those without clan protection could suffer bodily harm. Muhammad himself experienced verbal taunts and petty insults. Other believers experienced various forms of family pressure. Most effective, however, was the economic pressure which the wealthiest men, acting together, could exert on others.

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In Arabia at this time the maintenance of public order depended on the clan or family exacting vengeance for any injury done to one of its members, according to the principle of "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." This meant that if opponents attacked a Muslim not of their own clan, there would be reprisals. That Muhammad was able to go on preaching in Mecca as long as he did was due to the fact that his own clan of Hashim continued, as custom and honor required, to protect him, although most of them did not accept what he preached. Attempts were made to persuade the clan either to stop the preaching or to refuse further protection, but Abu Talib, as clan chief, would do neither. In consequence, about 616, most of the clans of Quraysh joined together to boycott Hashim by refusing trade dealings and intermarriage. Although the boycott is said to have lasted for over two years, there is no record of Hashim's having suffered unduly. The reason for the end of the boycott was probably that some of the clans participating found that it was harming their own interests.

Shortly after the end of the boycott, probably in 619, Abu Talib died, followed a little later by Khadijah. Abu Talib was succeeded as chief of the clan by his brother Abu Lahab, who was probably not much older than Muhammad, since at one point he had agreed to marry two of his sons to two of Muhammad's daughters. He had, however, entered into business relations with some of the leading merchants opposed to Muhammad and had broken off the proposed marriages with Muhammad's daughters, and then he even joined in his own clan's boycott of Hashim. It would have been dishonorable for him to refuse outright to protect Muhammad, but he soon found an excuse for doing so, in that Muhammad had spoken disrespectfully of the former chief of the clan, ' Abd al-Muttalib, by alleging that he was in Hell. The sources are rather silent about Abu Lahab's subsequent actions; Muhammad then went to the neighboring town of Ta'if, but he was unsuccessful in gaining support and was roughly treated. Before returning to Mecca he had to ask the chief of another clan for protection and doubtless had to agree not to preach.

Emigration from Mecca to Medina. Muhammad next approached one or two nomadic tribes while they were attending fairs at Mecca, but nothing came of this. Then at the annual pilgrimage of the year 620, he met six men from Medina who were interested in what he had to say. At the pilgrimage of 621, five of these came back, along with seven others, representing most of the clans of Medina, and they promised to accept Muhammad as Messenger of God and to refrain from sins. In the following year a stronger party of seventy-three men and two women came from Medina, met Muhammad secretly at Aqaba, and to the earlier promise added an undertaking to fight on behalf of God and his Messenger. This is known as the Second Pledge of Aqaba or the Pledge of War (July 622). After this about seventy of Muhammad's followers began to immigrate to Medina in small groups, and they were not opposed by the people of Mecca.

At length only Muhammad himself, his chief adviser Abu Bakr, his cousin' Ali (the son of Abu Talib), and some of their families remained in Mecca. Muhammad's life was in some danger. There was a plot to kill him in Mecca in a way that would have made retaliation impossible. Apparently, too, while on the journey between Mecca and Medina, he had protection from neither city. He and Abu Bakr therefore set out secretly, eluded pursuit from Mecca by various ruses, and reached Medina safely on 24 September 622. This is the Hijrah, or Emigration of the Prophet and the believers; the word connotes a breaking of relationships, not "flight" (as it was formerly translated). The Islamic era commences with the beginning of the Arabian year in which the Hijrah occurred, namely, 16 July 622; it is indicated by the letters AH (*anno Hegirae*).

Medina, about 250 miles north of Mecca, was an oasis in which dates and cereals were grown. The inhabitants included various groups of Jews and Arabs. The groups who were called Jewish had intermarried to a considerable extent with Arabs and had adopted Arab customs, while still following Jewish religious practices. It was probably they who had developed agriculture in the oasis, and for a time they had been politically dominant. One or two weak Arab groups were still in alliance with them as inferiors. Later Arab settlers, however, had achieved political control, and Jewish groups were now subordinate to them, though still holding some of the best lands. For over half a century before Muhammad's arrival there had from time to time been bitter fighting in Medina between various groups, and this had increased in intensity and in numbers involved until, in the Battle of Bu'ath about four years before the Hijrah, nearly all the inhabitants of the oasis, including the Jews, had participated. Fighting had ceased because of exhaustion, but peace had not been formally reestablished. It seems likely, then, that one of the reasons why many people wanted Muhammad to come to Medina was the hope that he would be able to maintain peace between the rival factions.

These factions were roughly, but not exactly, identical with the two Arab tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj, and Jews were also involved on both sides. A document has been preserved, usually

known as the Constitution of Medina, which records the agreement between Muhammad and the people of Medina. It is now generally held that the document as we have it is a conflation of several others, but it presumably reflects the basic agreement which made the Hijrah possible. Formally it establishes an alliance between eight Arab clans from Medina and the "clan" of Emigrants from Mecca, while a number of Jewish groups are mentioned as dependents of Arab clans. The document describes itself as "a writing from Muhammad the Prophet between the believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathnb and those who follow them, are attached to them, and fight along with them." (Yathnb was an older name for Medina.) Strictly speaking, Muhammad was only one clan chief among nine, but he was recognized as Prophet, and all the primary parties to the agreement were Muslims; it was also stated that disputes were to be referred to him. Thus he was far from being the absolute ruler of Medina, but gradually, as he got the better of his opponents in Mecca and elsewhere, and as many Arab tribes joined his confederacy and became Muslims, he came to have almost unquestioned control of the affairs of Medina.

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Struggle with the Pagan Quraysh of Mecca. In the early biographies of Muhammad, the decade from the Hijrah until his death in 632 is characterized by accounts of a series of "expeditions" (*maghazi*) by the Muslims, about ninety in all. In some of these only a handful of men, or even just one, might have been involved on the Muslim side, while the last expedition, led personally by Muhammad, involved an army of thirty thousand. The aims of the expeditions were very varied, such as gaining booty, punishing those who had raided Medina, dispersing a concentration of hostile forces, reconnoitering routes for later expansion, and so on. Since the main enemies were the Quraysh of Mecca, the expeditions which led to battle with them receive most attention in the sources.

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When Muhammad arranged the Hijrah of his followers to Medina, he presumably did not intend them to make their living by farming or by depending on the hospitality of the Muslims of Medina. Trade was a possibility but would have led, sooner or later, to conflict with the Quraysh. It is likely, then, that Muhammad realized all along that he would have to fight Quraysh. Certainly in his first fifteen months at Medina he sent out, or personally led, several expeditions of between twenty and two hundred men with the aim of intercepting and plundering caravans on the route between Mecca and Syria. All failed in this primary aim, apparently because the plans for the expeditions were being communicated to the intended victims. Eventually a small expedition was sent out with sealed instructions which were not to be opened until the men were two days east of Medina. This made surprise possible. They moved south, near Mecca, seized a small caravan and captured two of its four guards, then returned safely to Medina. This action was calculated to provoke Quraysh, and much more was to follow. Emboldened by the first success, Muhammad led a force of over three hundred Muslims to intercept a much larger caravan returning from Syria. The caravan managed to evade the Muslims, but a supporting army from Mecca of about nine hundred men made contact with them at a place called Badr, and a battle became inevitable. The outcome was a complete victory for the Muslims. Only fourteen of them were lost, but some fifty of the enemy were killed, including several of the leading men, and nearly seventy taken prisoner.

This victory seemed to Muhammad and the Muslims to be God's vindication of his prophethood. The year was AH 2/624 CE.

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When the remaining leaders in Mecca had recovered from the shock of the disaster, they realized they must exert themselves to the utmost to destroy Muhammad's power. About a year after the Battle of Badr they marched on Medina with three thousand men. Against his better judgment Muhammad was persuaded to station his forces, who numbered only about one thousand, on the hill of Uhud in the north of the oasis. The Muslims routed the enemy infantry but then suffered severe casualties from a cavalry attack. In military terms the battle was a draw, since the invaders were too battered to take advantage of their cavalry success and withdrew immediately. The ordinary Muslims,

however, felt it more as a defeat, partly because they had lost seventy-five men, nearly three times as many as their opponents, but even more because after Badr they had thought that God was fighting for them, and now it looked as if this were not so. Before long, however, Muhammad was able to restore the confidence of his followers.

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During the next two years Muhammad's strength increased, though he had some ups and downs. Meanwhile in Mecca wealth and diplomacy were being used to form a grand alliance, including nomadic tribes. Eventually, in 5/627, about ten thousand men marched on Medina, but Muhammad had prepared for invasion by digging a ditch (*khandaq*) to protect the main settlements. The device was successful, efforts to cross the ditch were repulsed, and after about a fortnight the grand alliance broke up and abandoned the siege. This supreme effort to dislodge Muhammad ended in fiasco.

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It seems virtually certain that by this time Muhammad had evolved a longterm strategy, looking to a time when most Arabs would have become Muslims. The alliance of clans in Medina had already swollen into a wider confederacy with the accession of several nomadic tribes. Those who joined the confederacy had to accept Islam and refrain from fighting other members. A feature of desert life in Arabia, however, had been the *razzia* or raiding expedition (*ghazw*) for some purpose such as seizing a hostile tribe's camels—the practice from which Muhammad's expeditions had developed. If tribes in the confederacy were not to raid other tribes, into what direction were their energies to be channeled? And, if more and more tribes joined the confederacy, what then? Muhammad seems to have realized, first, that the energies of the nomads must be directed outward to Syria and Iraq and, second, that the organizing skills of the merchants of Mecca would be essential in the vast enterprises such thoughts suggested. That he had some such strategy is borne out by the size and number of the expeditions he sent along the route northward to Syria and by the fact that he tried to win over the Meccans, not to inflict a decisive defeat on them.

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About a year after the "siege" of Medina Muhammad had a dream, as a result of which he led a party of fifteen hundred men to Mecca with the aim of performing the lesser pilgrimage (*umrah*). The Meccans refused to allow them to enter the sacred territory, but

eventually, after some perilous confrontations, both sides accepted the treaty of al-Hudaybiyah. The two parties were to refrain from hostilities for ten years, and the Muslims were to be allowed to perform a pilgrimage in the following year. The pilgrimage was duly made without incident, but about nine months later apparent breaches of the treaty by allies of the Meccans gave Muhammad a justification for marching on Mecca with ten thousand men. Only one or two pagans who had personal reasons to fear reprisals took to flight, and Muhammad was able to enter the town without encountering serious resistance. A general amnesty was proclaimed, although some persons guilty of criminal or treasonable acts were excluded. Most of the chief merchants of Mecca were ready to serve under Muhammad.

There was no pressure on them to become Muslims, but a few did so immediately, and the others followed in the course of time.

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Muhammad had been in Mecca only a fortnight or so when word was received of a great concentration of tribesmen to the east, apparently threatening Mecca as much as the Muslims. Accompanied by two thousand men from Mecca, Muhammad led his army of Muslims against them. Battle was joined at Hunayn, and for a time the enemy had the best of it, but the bravery of Muhammad himself and some close followers helped to turn the tide, and in the end, they achieved complete victory. Again the defeated enemy was treated with magnanimity.

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There was now no Arab leader capable of raising a force which could meet Muhammad in battle. During the remaining two and a half years of his life many, probably the majority, of the nomadic tribes throughout Arabia entered into his confederacy and accepted Islam. This was now a vast political unit, and much of Muhammad's time was devoted to ordering its affairs. About nine months after his occupation of Mecca, he led a great expedition of thirty thousand men on a three-month journey to Tabuk on the road to Syria, doubtless with future expansion in mind. During this expedition treaties were made with small Jewish and Christian groups on the Gulf of Aqaba which became a model for the "protected minorities" of non-Muslims within later Islamic states. Such groups retained their religion and had internal autonomy in return for a payment of tribute to the head of the Islamic state.

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In the year 10/632 Muhammad led in person the greater pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hajj*, but was seen to be in poor health when he returned to Medina. About two months later he became too ill to conduct the daily prayers, and he died on 13 Rabi' al-Awwal 11,8 June 632. He had made no arrangements for the succession but had appointed Abu-Bakr to lead the prayers in his stead. 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, later to lead the community himself, was able to persuade the Muslims then in Medina to accept Abu Bakr as head of state with the title of caliph (*khalifah*, "successor, deputy") of the Messenger of God.

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Relationships with Jews and Christians. When Muhammad made the Hijrah to Medina he hoped that the Jews there would accept him as a prophet, since he had been told that the messages or revelations he was receiving were identical in content with those of the biblical prophets. One or two Jews did so accept him and became Muslims, but the majority not merely rejected his claim but used their knowledge of the Bible to make it seem false. For the first year and a half at Medina, he tried to reconcile the Jews to his new religion. While still at Mecca he had adopted Jerusalem as his *qiblah*, the direction to be faced in prayer, and he had encouraged the Muslims to observe the fast of the Jewish Day of Atonement. By the

month before the Battle of Badr, however, it was clear to him that the Jews were not to be reconciled, and a series of changes took place which constitute "the break with the Jews." Instead of facing Jerusalem in prayer, the Muslims were to take Mecca as their *qiblah*. The fast of the Day of Atonement was replaced by the fast of the month of Ramadan, though perhaps not until the following year. At the same time Muhammad was coming to rely more on an anti-Jewish party in Medina. Above all, however, the Qur'an put forward an intellectual response to the Jewish criticisms of Islam. Islam was asserted to be the true religion of Abraham, from which Jews and Christians had deviated. It was pointed out that Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian (which is true) but a *hanif*, which the Qur'an takes to be one who believes in God without being attached to either Judaism or Christianity.

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This ideological "break with the Jews" was followed over the next four years by physical attacks. After the victory of Badr, the Jewish clan of Qaynuqa', who were goldsmiths and armorers and had a market, were attacked on a trivial excuse and forced to leave Medina for Syria. Fifteen months later similar treatment was meted out to the clan of al-Nadir, who were agriculturists, and they went to the Jewish settlement at Khaybar, seventy miles to the north. A third clan was attacked after the failure of the "siege" of Medina by the grand alliance. This clan, Qurayzah, had been intriguing with the besiegers, probably planning some act of treachery. They were forced to surrender unconditionally, and then one of the leading Muslims of Medina, who had been in alliance with the clan, decreed that all the males should be executed and the women and children sold as slaves. After this there remained in Medina only a few small groups of Jews, now thoroughly chastened and very dependent on their Arab allies. Finally, soon after the expedition which led to the treaty of al-Hudaybiyah, Muhammad led the same force against the Jews of Khaybar, who had been trying to bribe Arab nomads to join them in mntnr.king the Muslims. When the Jews surrendered, they were left cultivating the lands but had to hand over to the Muslims half the produce of dates. Some smaller Jewish colonies also submitted to the Muslims on similar terms.

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There were few Christians in either Mecca or Medina, although Waraqah, Khadijah's cousin, is said to have been a Christian and to have had a good knowledge of the Bible. After the welcome given to the Muslims who immigrated to Abyssinia, Christians in general were accounted friends (as is shown by surah 5:82). In the last years of Muhammad's life, however, the Muslims had to fight against hostile Christian tribes along the route to Syria, and attitudes changed. Some of the Qur'anic arguments against Jews were also used against Christians, and there were also arguments against specifically Christian doctrines. The Qur'an asserted that it was impossible for God to have a son and attacked the doctrine of the Trinity, interpreted as a doctrine of three gods (4:171 and elsewhere). The apparent denial of the crucifixion of Jesus (4:157) was not aimed against the Christians but against the Jews.

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Political and Social Achievement. Since the religion of Islam arose out of the social malaise at Mecca, it was necessarily concerned with the alleviation of this malaise. There were various underlying causes for the situation, such as the transition from nomadic life to urban, the transition (encouraged by trading activity) from communalism to individualism, and the transition from matrilineal kinship to patrilineal. The insistence of the Qur'an that God would make judgment on the Last Day provided a sanction for an individualistic morality where communal sanctions had broken down. The elaborate rules for inheritance in the Qur'an (4:11-18 and elsewhere) are aimed at preventing powerful individuals from seizing more than a fair share of communal property. To maintain security of life and property the

communal system of the blood feud was retained, but Muslims were exhorted to accept a blood-wite (of camels or money) instead of a life and were forbidden to exact more in revenge than the equivalent of the injury (4:92).

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The most interesting reforms are in the sphere of marriage and the family. The previous situation was complex and has not been sufficiently studied by scholars with the relevant anthropological skills. A likely hypothesis, however, is that a formerly widespread matriliney was being replaced by patriliney, which fits in better with an individualistic outlook. As practiced in Arabia, matriliney did not imply matriarchy, for the head of a matrilineal household was the uterine brother of the senior woman. Under this system, since physical paternity was not important, loose forms of polyandric marriage were permitted, some little different from prostitution. The basic reform of the Qur'an was to restrict a woman to one "husband" at a time, so that physical paternity would be certain (2:228,2:234). The Qur'an encouraged Muslims to have up to four wives at once (4:3), not as a restriction on a supposedly unlimited polygamy but to prevent women from relapsing into some of the former polyandric practices. Muhammad himself is said to have had fourteen wives or concubines, of whom nine survived him, but for each of his marriages there was a social or political reason; thus he bound his two chief lieutenants, Abu Bakr and 'Umar, more closely to him by marrying their daughters, 'A'i-shah and Hafsa. By arranging for his wives to have separate apartments within his house, Muhammad helped to make virilocal marriage the norm, as against uxorilocal marriage in matrilineal society.

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Among minor social reforms were the prohibition of wine and of usury. What exactly was prohibited as "usury" (*riba*) is not clear, but it was certainly not an obstacle to the development of trade by Muslims. In this century some Muslims have emphasized these points, not for social reasons but in order to show that they have an Islamic identity distinct from that of Westerners.

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In the sphere of politics, Muhammad established a state which proved capable of developing into a great empire. At the time of his death the state was basically a confederacy of tribes according to traditional Arab principles, except that all the main participants were Muslims. Non-Muslim groups could be attached to the confederacy as "protected minorities." This structure was adequate to bring about the unification of the Arabs and to channel their energies into an expansionist drive.

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During his lifetime Muhammad thus laid the foundations for a stable social and political order. Circumstances favored him in many ways, but he could not have achieved what he did without his personal qualities, his far-seeing wisdom as a statesman, his skill as an administrator, and his tact in handling individuals.

Prophethood

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In Qur'anic usage there is little difference between the terms *nabi* ("prophet") and *rasul* ("messenger, apostle"), and they will here be treated as equivalents. Some Muslim scholars have held that, while all prophets received messages from God, a messenger had in addition a mission to a particular community, but this cannot be fully justified from the

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The Call to Be a Prophet. The experiences which led Muhammad to believe that he was called to be a messenger of God or prophet began with two visions which are briefly described in the Qur'an (53:1 -18). In the first, he saw a mighty being on the horizon, who then came nearer; in the

second, he saw the same being in mysterious circumstances. At first he appears to have thought that this being was God, but later he concluded it must have been the angel Gabriel. The early biographers of Muhammad present accounts of how the angel Gabriel appeared to him and said, "You are the Messenger of God," and then continued, "Recite in the name of your Lord..." (the beginning of surah 96, said to be the first revealed). Other accounts make the first revelation "Rise and warn ..." (74:1-7). Both versions may well be only the conjectures of later scholars.

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Later Muslim scholars also made a list of the "manners of revelation" (*kayfiyat al-wahy*). In the first vision something was revealed to Muhammad, but we are not told what it was, and the combination of a vision with a revelation seems to have been exceptional. One verse (42:51) seems to mention several "manners": "It was not given to any person that God should speak to him, except by revelation [*wahy*] or from behind a veil, or should send a messenger to reveal what he will by his permission." The distinction between these "manners" is by no means clear, but the third is generally taken to be the usual one. This is supported by the statement that Gabriel "caused it to come down on your heart by God's permission" (2:97; also 26:193f.). Still further "manners" are described in the *hadith*, but these seem to have happened only occasionally. It is fairly certain that normally Muhammad neither had a vision nor heard voices, but simply "found the words in his heart. These messages he remembered and then recited to his followers, who also memorized them, and then sometimes wrote them down. Most of the revelations were short passages. Muhammad himself seems to have begun to join them together into surahs, but the final collection of the Qur'an was not made until about twenty years after his death.

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The Qur'an regards Muhammad as coming in a long series of prophets, including in particular Moses and Jesus, from whom Judaism and Christianity took their origin. All the prophets were commissioned by God and received revelations from him. Many verses imply that Muhammad was a prophet to the Arabs, but there are also suggestions that his mission was universal, such as the title "Mercy to the Worlds" (21:107). Another title applied to Muhammad, "Seal of the Prophets" (*khatam al-nabiyyin*; 33:40), which Muslims today interpret as "the last of the prophets," probably meant to its first hearers only "the one who confirms previous prophets."

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The Nature of Revelation. Traditional Islamic doctrine regards the words of the Qur'an as the actual speech of God, for which Muhammad was only a passive channel of transmission. He himself believed that he could distinguish such revelations from his own thinking, and in this his sincerity must be accepted. The insistence of Muslim scholars that Muhammad's personality contributed nothing to the Qur'an does not entirely rule out the possibility that the messages came somehow or other from Muhammad's unconscious. All these issues raise theological questions which have not yet been adequately discussed.

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Two points may be noted, however. First, even from a traditional Islamic point of view, the Qur'an is "an Arabic Qur'an" (12:2 and elsewhere). This means not merely that it is in the Arabic language but that it speaks in terms of the social and intellectual culture of the Arabs of the time, with references to Arabic practices such as *ijarah*, the granting of "neighborly protection" (23:88), which are unintelligible to Westerners without much explanation. Its references to Christianity and Judaism, too, are not to these religions as they are historically observed, but as they were supposed to be by the Arabs to whom the Qur'an was addressed; for example, Christians in general have never believed in three gods (as is suggested in 5:73), but some Christian Arabs may possibly have done so, or may have been thought to believe this by pagan neighbors. This gives a reasonable explanation of what Western Christian readers see as "mistakes" in the Qur'an, without denying its character as revelation. Second, when the positive religious content of the Qur'an is appreciated, it is difficult to deny that it comes from an experience of a kind similar to that of the prophets of the

Old Testament.

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Throughout the centuries Christians have mostly denied the prophethood of Muhammad. They have usually accepted Muslims as believers in God and have sometimes spoken of Islam as a Christian heresy, but they have found little of positive value in Quranic teachings. For Eastern Christians, the Muslims were a dangerous enemy. For Western Christians, Islam, when they first met it in Spain in the eighth century, was not merely a dangerous enemy but also a culturally superior society. An unfavorable verdict on Muhammad was thus almost essential as an aspect of Christian apologetics. A contributing factor to this verdict was a simplistic attitude to religious language, taking assertions at face value and failing to realize their symbolic character. As dialogue develops between Muslims and Christians the old attitudes are slowly disappearing.

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The Prophet as Political and Religious Leader. It does not belong to the conception of messenger as such that he should also be political leader of his community. In the earlier passages of the Qur'an Muhammad is spoken of as a "wamer" (*nadhīr, mudhakkīr*), whose function it was to "warn" his fellows that they would all have to appear before God to be judged on the Last Day. When Muhammad went to Medina, it was not part of the formal agreement that he was to be head of state; he was only one clan head out of nine. There was always, however, a readiness among the Arabs, even among his opponents at Mecca, to regard someone capable of receiving messages from God as being the person best able to guide the affairs of his community wisely. Muhammad's political power grew as he came to be respected more by the people of Medina; and the success of most of his expeditions contributed to that growth of respect. In his later years, too, many nomads who came to settle in Medina were attached to the "clan" of Emigrants, so that it became relatively more powerful. If at the end of his life Muhammad was ruling a large part of Arabia, that did not follow automatically from his being a prophet, but was due to his personal qualities. It is also to be noted that it was not his practice to seek revelations in order to solve political problems.

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What has not been so clearly recognized is that much of the establishment of Islam as a religion is due to him personally, even in the Islamic view that he contributed nothing to the Qur'an. Although some justification can be found in the Qur'an for the religious institutions of Islam (such as the profession of faith, the five daily prayers, the fast, and the pilgrimage), they are by no means clearly defined there; they derive their precise shape from the practice of Muhammad and the early Muslims, and this was in part recognized by the later use of the *hadīth* to justify these institutions.

Role in the Later Islamic Community

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Although Muhammad himself always insisted that he was an ordinary human being to whom God had chosen to reveal messages for his people, it was almost inevitable that after his death some of his followers would try to make out that he was more than this.

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Muhammad as Exemplar. A feature of Islamic religion is its possession of a kind of secondary scripture known as *hadith* or, in older works, "traditions." These are anecdotes about something Muhammad said or did, and they became of great importance as one of the "roots" on which are based the detailed prescriptions of the *shariah*, or revealed law. Muslim scholars developed criteria for distinguishing "sound" *hadith* from others, but some Western scholars in the late nineteenth century came to hold the criteria inadequate and to regard most *hadith* as unhistorical. Recent opinion is inclined to see more *hadith* as sound, and also recognizes that the *hadith*, whether "true" or not, were a powerful formative influence in Islamic society. Scholars made many collections of "sound" *hadith*, and six of these came to have a kind of canonical status among Sunni Muslims; the earliest of the six were those of al-Bukhari (d. 870) and Muslim (d. 875).

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The jurist al-Shafi'i (d. 820), who was mainly responsible for establishing the discipline of "roots of law" or principles of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*), also helped to give *hadith* their quasi-scriptural status. He quoted Qur'anic verses which speak of God giving to Muhammad "the book and the wisdom" (e.g., 2:251) and argued that, while the book was the Qur'an, the sayings and doings recorded in the *hadith* were expressions of this God-given wisdom. The use of *hadith* in jurisprudence was the chief reason for collecting them, but these also served to make Muhammad an exemplar and model for his community in other ways, for example, in liturgical practice and in the nonlegal aspects of morality.

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Although *hadith* are anecdotes about Muhammad, it should be noted that at an early date the study of *hadith* became distinct from the study of Muhammad's biography, the *sirah*. It is not merely Western biographers of Muhammad who find that the *hadith* offer little information relevant to their purposes. Muslim biographers also found this and found, too, that they had to use different scholarly methods from those of the *hadith* scholars. Of the canonical collections, only that of al-Bukhari has a chapter on the "expeditions" of Muhammad; the later collectors realized that, although such a chapter contained anecdotes about Muhammad, these were of no value for legal and liturgical purposes.

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In addition to regarding most *hadith* as unhistorical and rejecting Muhammad's prophethood, Western scholars have criticized his moral character and have accused him of such vices as dishonesty, cruelty, and lechery. Some of the evidence has been twisted and exaggerated by Christians. Apart from that, it is necessary to look at the standards by which Muhammad is to be judged. How is one to decide, for example, whether Islamic polygamy is superior or inferior to the ineffective monogamy now practiced in the West? What can be said is that by the standards of his own time and culture Muhammad was a good and upright man. If he is to be taken as an exemplar for all humanity, however, then Muslims have to make a better case for this than they have so far done.

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Muhammad as More than a Prophet. Islam originated in regions where there were strong Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian traditions, and where traces of older beliefs still survived in popular thought and practice. It was therefore inevitable that some of those who had held these older beliefs before becoming Muslims should soon attach earlier ideas about religious leaders to Muhammad.

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Some of the early developments within Islam came about as a result of the criticism, mainly from Christians, that Muhammad could not be a prophet since no miracles were worked through him. Muslim scholars began to search the Qur'an and the anecdotes about Muhammad to find incidents capable of being treated as miraculous, and many were found, even miracles of healing, such as the tending of a wounded eye so that the individual later declared that this eye was better than the other. Stories like this could obviously grow in the telling. Muhammad's birth and childhood gave further opportunities for introducing miraculous elements, an example of which was given above. The most spectacular of the miracles was the Mi'raj, Muhammad's night journey to the seven heavens. This is based on the verse "Praise be to him who brought his servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque ... that he might show him of his signs" (17:1). Presumably this referred to a dream, but piety transformed it into a miraculous physical journey on the winged horse Buraq, first from Mecca to the Farthest (al-Aqsa) Mosque in Jerusalem, and then to the seventh heaven, and accounts of what he saw on the way could be elaborated almost indefinitely. That this night journey and ascension were a reality was accepted by Muslims, though there were heated discussions of whether he had seen God. Another verse which was elaborated into a miracle is "The hour drew near and the moon was split" (54:1). This was traditionally one of the signs of the Last Day, but the people of Mecca were said to have seen the moon in two parts, one on each side of a local mountain.

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While these miracles might fill popular imagination, the theologians tended to say that the one "evidentiary miracle" (*mu'jizah*) was the Qur'an itself, because of the inimitability of its style and contents. The theologians also held that Muhammad, like other prophets, was preserved from sins, though they disputed the precise nature of his infallibility (*fismah*). It also came to be an article of belief that on the Last Day Muhammad would have God's permission to make intercession on behalf of the sinners of his community; though intercession is mentioned several times in the Qur'an, it is not specifically stated that it is permitted to Muhammad.

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Most of what has been mentioned so far was accepted by Sunni Muslims. Among the Shi'ah and the Sufis, however, there were some who went much further. Muhammad was identified with the Perfect Man of late Greek speculation, in whom God's consciousness became manifest to itself, and who then became the instrument or agent of creation. This image was associated in turn with the "light of Muhammad" (*nur Muhammad*). A different line of thought led to the somewhat similar conception of the *haqiqah muhammadiyah* ("reality of Muhammad"), which is something like the Active Intellect of Neoplatonism. Thus in various ways some of Muhammad's followers raised him above the sphere of humanity into that of preexistence and identification with the Logos, or Word of God. For the great majority of Muslims, of course, such speculations are anathema.

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[See also Hadith; Islamic Law, *article on* Shari'ah; Mi'raj; Qur'an; *and the*

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