

Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet Study Guide

**Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet by Karen
Armstrong**

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Plot Summary

Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet, by Karen Armstrong, tells the story of the Prophet Muhammad and how the religion of Islam came into existence. At this time, Christianity and Judaism had developed and had a form of written scripture. The Arabs, who were still basically a tribal nomadic society, did not have any written scripture which bothered them. This is what the Prophet Muhammad provided them with even though he was illiterate.

At the time of Muhammad, some of the Arabs had settled in urban areas. Mecca was a trading and financial center. Society was based on tribal law and tradition and the prevailing religion was paganism. al-Llah was accepted as the High God but the people also clung to the lesser gods. Muhammad like the others, was a pagan who took his religion seriously. He made his yearly spiritual retreat to a cave on Mount Hira when in 610, he was visited by an angel who commanded him to recite. Muhammad began to recite what would become the Quran.

Several years later he began his preaching for a society based on decency and humane treatment for the disadvantaged and women. Others around him wrote down his preaching and revelations which formed the basis for the religion of Islam. Many Arabs were reluctant to give up their pagan gods and tribal traditions, which brought the Prophet into conflict with the Quraysh tribes of Mecca. When Muhammad's uncle died, he lost his protection in Mecca and moved to Medina. There he developed the concept of the umma or community where the converts gave up their tribal membership and became members of the umma. The religion of Islam grew and flourished.

Armstrong does a good job explaining how the Quran came into existence and what the different precepts of Islam are. She feels that the cause of the tensions between the Islamic world and the West are due to a misunderstanding of the Prophet, and she wrote the book to try to clear-up the misunderstandings. Contact with the West and the acceptance of some Western culture resulted in a loss of identity for the Arabs. Fundamentalism, she feels, is an attempt to re-establish roots and the Arab identity.

The book is rather quick reading and good for anyone seeking information about how Islam and the Quran were formed. It is informative and not boring to read. The reader will learn the information without straining because all the concepts and terms are defined and explained in an easy way for the reader to understand.



Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

Religion became more important by the end of the twentieth century, after a period in the 1950s and 1960s when many felt that religion had been outgrown. There was a revival of sorts in most of the major religions, and people began to adopt the religions of other cultures like Zen and Buddhism. Christians and Jews began working together. The religion of Islam was excluded from most of this and is basically viewed with hostility in the West.

The challenge of Islam to the West dates back to the Ottoman Empire which conquered much of Europe. The Muslim Empire was viewed with fear and the Prophet Muhammad was viewed as the Great Pretender. Islam was viewed as a violent religion. The views that the Europeans developed during the period of the Crusades carried over into the present day and became intensified as the followers of Islam developed a hatred of the West. This hatred is the result of Western behavior in the Islamic world and led to the development of Muslim extremists. Fundamentalism developed in Islam just as it did in other religions of the world. Armstrong doesn't believe that a religion should be judged on the basis of the actions of the extremists. Armstrong feels that radical Islam is the faith of the young.

According to Armstrong, most of the Western views of Islam are based on the lack of knowledge about the religion fueled by reports in the media. They hear about the taking of hostages and the oppression of women, and they base their views on these news reports. And these kinds of incidents are played up by the media, which doesn't give much attention to the religious authorities that proclaim fatwa and the taking of lives as illegal and against the teachings of Islam.

Armstrong sees much of Western views of Islam as being the result of stereotyping. The fact is that there is a great deal of variety in Islam and its practices. Many of the conditions and practices in the Islamic world are typical of any pre-modern society. Many of the views and values of Islam are similar to those of Judaism and Christianity.

Most of the Western views of Islam come from reports in the media. Very few people have taken the time to study the religions and learn its teachings, so Islam, to most Westerners, is the Islam of the radicals. This is what led the author to look at the religion and at the Prophet Muhammad. If more people understood the teachings of the religion instead of the teachings and practices of the radicals, the Islamic world might be viewed differently.



Muhammad the Enemy

Muhammad the Enemy Summary and Analysis

This section examines the hatred of the Prophet Muhammad and looks at how it developed. This was brought to public view when Salman Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses* with its unfavorable views of the Prophet that caused an uproar in the Muslim world. This wasn't the first denunciation of the Prophet by a Muslim. In 850, the monk Perfectus denounced the Prophet and was put to death by the Qadi. This led to a string of denunciations and deaths of those who became martyrs for their beliefs. Armstrong views these denunciations as the result of a loss of identity due to the encroachment of Western ideas.

The Western view of Muhammad is that he was an impostor who tried to deceive the world by portraying himself as a prophet. He used his sword to force people to convert to Islam. This made him an enemy of the West several centuries later. Europe was actively fighting Islam by the eleventh century. This was the era of the Crusades and Islam was viewed as the enemy of Christianity and as a breakaway corrupt version of Christianity, and this attitude toward Muslims continued for centuries and was evident in the literature of the times.

Christians have been reluctant to acknowledge that Muslims worship the same God as they and the Jews do, which is why, over the years, many have viewed Islam as a form of paganism. During the period of the Crusades, there were many attempts to convert the Muslims to Christianity, as Christians did also with the pagans and the Jews. Both Christians and Muslims viewed the other as the infidel which is what led to so many executions. This view dominated the thinking of the Middle Ages as scholars began to compare the two religions. Many, like Martin Luther, felt that Christianity would be overcome by Islam. After reading the Quran, Luther felt that the real enemy consisted of the Catholic Church and the pope and that this would lead to Europe being defeated by the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire.

The age of the Renaissance resulted in more objectivity as thinkers tried to develop an understanding of the Muslim world. The view of the Muslim world changed to one that the Muslim world would never be conquered by war or missionary activities so it was important to open a dialogue with the Muslims. This view carried over into the era of the Enlightenment, but Christians still couldn't overcome their past prejudices about Muhammad being an impostor. There was more understanding of Islam by the eighteenth century as Islam became accepted as a legitimate religion. In the nineteenth century, attempts were made to view the Prophet in a positive way and Islam as a religion that was just not understood by Westerners. This view still believed that Christianity was superior to both Judaism and Islam. European imperialism resulted in colonies being established in the Muslim world and the belief that the Arabs could not manage their own affairs. This was used as the reason for establishing colonies in the region.

In spite of all of this, most of the Muslim world remained untouched by the West with most of their contact with Westerners in the border regions. Areas like Iraq and Iran were not yet alienated by the West, but this changed as they learned of the Western contempt for their Prophet. The Muslim world has come to view the West as a decadent society. The rise of radical Islam is the result of Arab identity crises as Western culture and ideas confront the Muslim societies. Most of the problems stem from the Western view of Muhammad.



Muhammad the Man of al-Llah

Muhammad the Man of al-Llah Summary and Analysis

There was an Arab merchant named Muhammad who lived in Mecca in the seventh century. He followed his religion and made the yearly spiritual retreat to a cave in Mount Hira, where he had an experience that would affect Islam and the world. At this time, the al-Llah of Islam was accepted as the one God even though there were no scriptures for the religion or messenger for the religion. This changed in 610 when Muhammad had an experience with an angel who commanded him to recite. Muhammad responded by reciting what would become the Quran. As a result of this experience, he began preaching to the Arab world, which consisted of a variety of tribes without any unified laws. He preached for the next twenty three years, until his death on June 8, 632.

Muhammad founded a Muslim community that was eventually accepted by the Arab world during the twenty-three years of his preaching. He realized that the Arabs could never be an independent polity unless they were unified, and they united under his preachings.

The Quran serves as a source of information about the history of Muhammad's Islamic community. It is the result of the messages that Mohammad received from God during the twenty-three years of his preaching. The Quran was revealed to Muhammad in piecemeal version. The illiterate Muhammad did not write the suras of the Quran but recited them. Others wrote down his preachings and compiled them into the Quran in 650. The published version was not based on the order in which Muhammad preached the teachings but with the longest suras presented first. The suras are basically God's teachings or rules on various subject.

Armstrong compares the writing of the Quran with Christian writings. Writing about the preachings of Jesus did not begin until more than twenty years after his death. The writings of both religions are based on oral traditions. Unlike the Christian views of Jesus, Muslims do not attach any divinity to Muhammad. Muhammad connected the pagan Arabs to the monotheism of Islam and belief in Allah in the space of twenty-three years, which was much faster than Christianity or Judaism developed.



Jahiliyah

Jahiliyah Summary and Analysis

Jahiliyah means the period of ignorance and is used to describe Arab society before Muhammad. Arabia was considered to be unimportant to the world powers at this time. Arabia was basically pagan, particularly the Bedouin tribes. Monotheism was viewed as a form of control by the imperialists as the Byzantine Empire spread into Arab lands. Conversion to monotheism was associated with loss of political autonomy and subjugation to imperialistic control. Thus, the Arabs viewed both Christianity and Judaism with suspicion.

Arab society at this time was characterized by nomads, even though the areas around oases were settled by farmers. The farmers provided the nomads with food and the nomadic tribes provided the farmers with protection. The various groups were united by blood which was the only way they could survive. Loyalty was to the tribe and the chief. There was no common law among the tribes except that deaths were avenged by killing an equal number of members of the murderers' tribe. This is how order was maintained. This system, called muruwah, basically prevented any form of Arab unity.

The Arabs had a spiritual life under the muruwah and holy places like the shrines at Mecca and other places. The most important shrine was the Ka'aba at Mecca which played an important part in the life of Muhammad and other people. Arabs made a yearly pilgrimage which began at the Ka'aba and proceeded to the shrines of other gods. The shrines represented a place of relaxation and mediation since no fighting was allowed in the areas around them.

Muhammad was a descendant of the Quraysh tribe which took control of Mecca and developed the city into a trading center. The Ka'aba was central to their success and development of the wealth of Mecca. The Quraysh were strong capitalists in contrast to the rest of the Arab world. By the time of Muhammad's birth, there were three different divisions within the Quraysh based on wealth. This is the atmosphere at the time Muhammad began to preach and build his religion around the God, al-Llah or Allah.

At this time, many Arabs accepted al-Llah as the High God, the same God that was worshiped by the Christians and Jews. What bothered the Arabs was that they had no scriptures, as the other religions had. This is what the Prophet Muhammad gave them.



Revelation

Revelation Summary and Analysis

Not much is known about the early life of Muhammad. He didn't perform miracles as Jesus did but claimed that the Quran was a miracle in itself. He never claimed any divinity. The Arabs of the time believed in the coming of an Arab prophet, as so did others from the different religions.

When pregnant, his mother, now a widow, was told she was to deliver the lord of the Arabs. The grandfather took the newborn to Ka'aba and was told he would be a great man. There are many stories surrounding Muhammad's youth, but none is documented. He was orphaned at an early age and his grandfather died when he was eight so he lived with his uncle. A monk told his uncle to protect him because he had the mark of prophecy between his shoulder blades.

After his first encounter with the angel Gabriel, he was terrified and wanted to commit suicide, but the angel presented himself again to prevent the act. Muhammad then believes that he is comforted by the dead Kjadija, as he believes after every encounter. When Muhammad preached, he had no intention of forming a new religion and didn't really realize that he was. He was fulfilling the Arab need for scripture which they didn't have.

Muhammad's revelation differed from other forms of revelation because through Muhammad, God sent the Arabs scripture in their own language. The Quran gave to the Arabs the meaning of life and the value of life.

Many refer to Muhammad as the umma, or unlettered prophet because of his illiteracy. Some feel that the term meant that he represented the unlettered people who had no scriptures. Most Muslims are insulted by the use of the term because they feel that Westerners refuse to believe that Muhammad had a real calling.

For about two years, Muhammad was silent about the revelations. With the revelation of sura 93, he began to believe that he was the Prophet and that God was sending him the messages. He was now ready to begin his mission of spreading the world.



The Warner

The Warner Summary and Analysis

The message of sura 93, the Sura of the Morning, was that people were supposed to care for the disadvantaged. In response to sura 93, Muhammad began his mission in 612. He believed himself to be a nadihir, or Warner, and his role was to deliver a message in and around Mecca. He originally saw his purpose as warning them of the evil of their ways, although his conception of his purpose would change with time. His message was to create a just society in which there was decent treatment of the disadvantaged and society's wealth was distributed. The people should regularly give to the poor and should not strive for accumulation of wealth.

The disadvantaged were among the first members of the Muslim community because of the hope Muhammad's teaching held for them. Even though he did attract some of the wealthy, most of the wealthy did not accept his teachings. Muhammad began by preaching to a few select people. His preachings of the Quran did not teach them anything new in the beginning but merely reminded them of how they were supposed to live. The religion he preached became known as Islam which meant a surrendering to the Creator.

Much of the references in the Quran are symbolic, and the followers are encouraged to adopt this attitude of symbolism and to look at the world around them. They are to cultivate their intellect and curiosity. The religion does not teach theology but is based on the observance of customs, or orthopraxy. People who don't re-order their lives live in opposition to God.

During the first three years of his preaching, Muhammad developed a small group of followers. They met twice a day for prayer since the Quran was meant to be chanted in a group environment and not read in public. The early converts were from Muhammad's immediate family and circle of friends. They were not the rich and powerful. Many young men then began to join, some of them from the powerful clans. Eventually, families became divided over the issue of Islam, which became more apparent as Muhammad became more open in his preaching. The situation worsened as time went on. Many of the wealthy felt threatened by the new religion because it required them to give away much of their wealth and lifestyle.

In the early days of his teachings. Muhammad did not emphasize the monotheistic nature of the religion. When he began to do this in 616, he lost most of his supporters. They were not ready to accept one God.



The Satanic Verses

The Satanic Verses Summary and Analysis

When Muhammad insisted on the worship of only one God, trouble broke out among the Quraysh. The Muslims were attacked during their prayers, or salat, and the leaders of Mecca declared Muhammad to be an enemy of the people. Muhammad was asking the people to break with the past and they were reluctant to do so. They felt threatened since polytheism was a part of their culture and many of the gods represented protection. The dispute continued until Muhammad made an apparent concession to polytheism. A revelation revealed that this apparent concession was the work of Satan. The Quran was changed to omit the concession.

In 1988, Salman Rushdie published his novel, the Satanic Verses. Muslims objected to Rushdie's portrayal of Muhammad. They believed that Rushdie had adopted the Western view of Muhammad and portrayed him as an impostor having political ambitions and using his position to use women. They felt that Rushdie's portrayal of the Quran indicates the inability to distinguish between good and evil. Supporters of Rushdie felt that Islam suppressed scholarship and artistic freedom.

This again reopened the issue of the removal of the polytheistic acceptance from the Quran and questions Muhammad's intentions as a prophet. God sent another revelation that Satan was the cause of the misinterpretation, but that did not mean that the Quran was contaminated. Muhammad began to demand monotheism. Societies eventually evolved to a point where they no longer need polytheism which was the case with seventh century Arabia. Some Arabs were ready to accept monotheism; others were not. A belief in one God would bring unity to the life of the believer. But many of the Quraysh were not ready to accept this and asked Muhammad's uncle to withdraw his protection from Muhammad. The clans were against his uncle because he kept protecting Muhammad. The rift in the community widened and it began to look as if there was no solution. It became so bad that Muhammad had to find a home for some of the Muslims where were suffering due to their beliefs. They were sent to Abyssinia.

In Mecca, the Quraysh continued to persecute Muhammad. To the consternation of the Quraysh, the harassment resulted in more converts to Islam so they soon left him alone. The Quran itself was the cause of many conversions at this time also. The beauty of the Arabic verses and the chanting attracted them. It was more of an art form to them and they were drawn by the beauty of the words. It was a blend of art and religion to them and allowed them to make the break with the past and accept al-Llah as the one and only God. They were ready to change their lives as Islam demands. Armstrong again reiterates that reading the Quran in Arabic is a very different experience than reading it in English.

By this time, many of those who had openly opposed Muhammad and threatened him and his uncle had converted to Islam. Those who still opposed Islam tried to starve



Muhammad and his followers but they did not have the support of the people in the clans who brought them food. The Quran begins to change in nature and predicts a disaster for Mecca since its people refuse to change. This is similar to the warnings of the prophets of other religions but Muhammad had very little knowledge of those prophets.

Eventually the situation was resolved. They stopped trying to starve Muhammad. Many of the Muslims who had fled to Abyssinia returned to Mecca. But it was not the end of the hostilities and after a follower's death in 619, Muhammad felt he could no longer remain in Mecca.



A New Direction

A New Direction Summary and Analysis

Muhammad's wife Khadija dies in 619 and then his uncle Abu Talib becomes gravely ill and dies. Muhammad lost most of his protection when his uncle died. The harassment of the Muslims began again and they began to leave Mecca. Muhammad went to Taif looking for protection and was treated rather badly there. With Khadija gone, he found refuge with al-Llah. He returned to Mecca, even though it was dangerous for him to do so. He found temporary protection with one of the clan chiefs.

While staying at his sister's, he had his greatest mystical experience when the angel Gabriel appeared and took him to Jerusalem to meet with Jesus, Moses, Abraham and other prophets. He and Gabriel climbed the ladder through the seven heavens to the Throne of God, where he is told that Muslims must make salat five times a day. This event is celebrated on the 27 Rajab, which is in the seventh lunar month. This type of experience is similar to those in other religions, which Armstrong discusses.

During the hajj to Mecca, Muhammad looked for a protector among the pilgrims. He found six pilgrims from Yathrib who quickly accepted Islam and would return to their tribe to try to convert them. When it was safe, Muhammad could meet them in Yathrib. Muhammad was acquiring a harem of wives at this time. He married Sawdah so she could run his household. Many of his marriages were for practical arrangement, not sexual pleasure.

The six pilgrims from Yathrib returned in 622, bringing others with them. They met with Muhammad and others in what is known as the First Aqaba to discuss the conversion of the tribe. When the leaders converted, so did the rest of the tribe. They adopted the Jewish name of Medina for Yathrib and in 622, Muhammad began the move to Medina when his protector died. He escaped a plot to kill him and hid in a cave for three days and then began the journey to Medina, where the Muslims and the Jews were supposed to live in peace together according to the terms of the covenant into which they entered. The tribal society was restructured into a theocracy. People made the hijra when they left their tribe and joined the umma, the new community unit. This was a form of unity.

Since there had been so much warfare among the tribes in Medina, the umma was something they were willing to try in the interests of peace. Muhammad built a mosque, which was completed in 623 and devised the call to prayer. Eventually the alliance with the Jews fell apart and the Jews rejected Muhammad.



Holy War

Holy War Summary and Analysis

Muhammad was very successful after the move to Medina. He became a political leader who changed Arabia. The fact that he had to fight to achieve his goals gave Islam the name of the religion by the sword. Muhammad was born into an era of fighting in the Arab world. In Medina, he began to work for Arab unity and the Quran began to change as Muhammad became more involved in political issues. The Muslims were being told to take part in the jihad, or what is known in the West as holy war.

Jihad is not one of the five pillars of Islam, but it is a duty for the Muslim to fight when required to do so, and they knew they would have to fight after the hijra. The Quran was beginning to preach the concept of just war to preserve decent values. Those who had emigrated to Medina had to find a way to support themselves. They began to stage raids on the caravans going to and from Mecca in 623, but they weren't successful until the attack on the big caravan at Badr. Instead of killing the Meccans, they took prisoners and held them for ransom. By this act, Muhammad and the umma had declared war on the Quraysh; he wanted to convert them. The Quran began to preach fair and humane treatment for prisoners. This is in contrast to the hostage taking of today which Armstrong claims is not consistent with Islam or its teachings.

Many of the prisoners converted to Islam and liked life in the umma. In 625, Muhammad took another wife, Hafsa. This was another marriage made for practical reasons.

The Badr situation enhanced Muhammad's prestige. The Meccans were forming alliances with the Bedouins against Medina. The situation was beginning to threaten the safety of Medina as the Jews began to side with Mecca. Recognizing the danger, Muhammad met with the Jews, but the meeting did not go well. Tensions continued to mount. Eventually the Jews were forced to leave.

When Muhammad's men captured another Meccan caravan, preparations for war began and Muhammad led an army to meet the Meccans. Muhammad is knocked unconscious in the battle and the world spread that he had been killed. Hearing the news, the Meccans stopped fighting and retreated. There were many widows and orphans as a result of the battle, and the Quran changed the status of women in the Arab world at this time giving them the right of inheritance.

The Meccans marched on Medina in March 627. They built a trench around the city, which defeated the plans of the Meccans who planned to use their cavalry. Medina managed to survive and Muhammad defeated one of the largest armies of the Meccans. The emphasis of the Quran now shifted to peace.



Holy Peace

Holy Peace Summary and Analysis

The Meccans were unable to get rid of Muhammad and the umma. Mecca's days of power were coming to an end and Muhammad still helped to convert them to Islam. Now Muhammad could see that Arab unity was not impossible. He was looking to bring the Quran to other parts of Arabia, Syria and Iraq.

In 627-628, Muhammad began to build an alliance with different tribes. Medina had developed to the point where it needed trade so Muhammad tries to weaken the Meccan monopoly. The people of Mecca and Medina continued to attack each other's caravans. The Meccans knew they had to prevent Muhammad from entering their city.

Muhammad sent an emissary, who the Quraysh took as a hostage and then sent word to the Muslims that they had killed him. Muhammad vowed not to leave the area until he had a confrontation with the Quraysh. They finally came to negotiate with him. Muhammad would return to Mecca the next year for the Hajj, and the Quraysh would vacate the city for the three days that the Muslims were there. There would be a ten-year peace if any one from Mecca who had converted without the consent of his guardians was returned. The Muslims wondered why Muhammad would consent to such terms. They had to sacrifice seventy camels.

The next year the Muslims spent their three days in Mecca and departed without any trouble. It was a great moral victory for Muhammad. Many young Meccans began to convert. In the last years of his life, Muhammad was very interested in the areas to the North around Syria. Most of his followers were appeased when Muhammad made a speech saying that Medina would remain his home until his death.

Since more and more tribes converted to Islam, it meant they had to find other caravans to attack further North. In October 630, Muhammad announced an expedition to the Byzantine frontier. Along the way, he negotiated pacts with the different local rulers. He returned triumphantly to Medina, happy with the pacts he had negotiated. He put down the dissension in Medina. By 631, his health was beginning to fail.



Death of the Prophet

Death of the Prophet Summary and Analysis

By 632, the umma dominated almost all of Arabia. Muhammad had laid the foundations for Arab unity and an empire that would last for more than one thousand years. Muhammad had undertaken the task to form a new society. Medina was not strong and independent and had many of the surrounding tribes joining its umma. Muhammad's goal had not been political. Muhammad told his men that the fight was not over. There would always be another challenge in the struggle for God's will.

Feeling that he was close to death, Muhammad wanted to make a longer than usually retreat for the hajj. His group departed Medina in February 632. Every Muslim is supposed to make the hajj at least once during his lifetime. It is believed that Muhammad preached his farewell sermon near Mount Arafat in 632 and today, the mosque of Namira is built on that spot. In it, he reminded the Muslims to deal fairly with one another and with women and to do away with blood feuds. They were all members of one umma, not individual tribes.

Returning to Medina after the pilgrimage, Muhammad suffered from terrible headaches and fainting spells. He continued to lead the prayer sessions as long as he could and then appointed Abu Bakr to lead the prayers. He dies in Aisha's arms on June 8, 632. After his death, his followers had to select a successor. They selected Abu Bakr, who died two years later. He was followed by Umar, then Uthman and then Ali in 656. Ali was the Fourth Caliph. All of them followed the principles of Muhammad. They were known as the rashidin, and the years of their rule were known as the Golden Age. The principles they followed continue to be a strong force in Muslim society today. Rulers who don't adhere to these principles, like Sadad and the Shah of Iran, are denounced as unIslamic and brought down.

Eventually the umma divided into the Sunnah and the Shiah-iAli, or the Sunni and Shiite. The two groups don't disagree on doctrine but do have different forms of piety.

After Muhammad's death, Islam grew, fulfilling a need of the people in the Middle East and North Africa. They developed the concept of jihad based on the idea that there should be one polity in the world and every Muslim had the duty to work for a just society. The umma is the House of Islam and the House of War is the rest of the world. The House of War must be made to surrender to the House of Islam. This philosophy was dropped once the Muslim empire expanded to its limits.

The solidarity of Muslims comes from their devotion to the Prophet Muhammad. They model their behavior on his to try to be closer to God. This results in similar lifestyles that gives Muslims an identity. Fundamental Islam is the result of Arabs losing their traditions and identity as a result of contact with Western culture. The fundamental movement is an attempt by Muslims to re-establish their roots.



"This reality is that Islam and the West share a common tradition. From the time of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims have recognized this, but the West cannot accept it. Today some Muslims are beginning to turn against the cultures of the People of the Book, which have humiliated and despised them. They have even begun to Islamise their new hatred. The beloved figure of the Prophet Muhammad became central to one of the latest clashes between Islam and the West during the Salman Rushdie affair. If Muslims need to understand our Western traditions and institutions more thoroughly today, we in the West need to divest ourselves of some of our old prejudice. Perhaps one place to start is with the figure of Muhammad: a complex, passionate man who sometimes did things that it is difficult for us to accept, but who had genius of a profound order and founded a religion and a cultural tradition that was not based on the sword - despite the Western myth - and whose name 'Islam' signifies peace and reconciliation." (Chapter 12, pg. 266)



Characters

Muhammad

Muhammad is the Prophet and founder of Islam. He was an Arab merchant from the city of Mecca, where he was born in 570. Muhammad's full name is Muhammad ibn Abdallah. He was married with a family. He practices his religion and made a yearly spiritual retreat. On the seventeenth night of Ramadan, he encountered an angel who ordered him to recite, and he began to recite what would become the Holy Quran. He then went on to preach to the Arab world trying to unify the different tribes under one common religious law. Muhammad was even able to draw the Bedouin into his community.

Muhammad was forty years of age at the time of his experience with the angel and not much is known about his early life. There are many myths and stories but not much that is documented. He was not considered to be an important figure until the last ten years of his life.

Muhammad was the source of the Quran which was revealed to him by God over the twenty-three years of his preaching. Muhammad was illiterate and recited the rules and teaching of al-Llah which others memorized or wrote down. Much of the knowledge of the later years of Muhammad's life is obtained from the Quran. Muhammad basically developed his religion and converted the Arabs to monotheism in the course of twenty-three years. He organized the Arab world on the basis of the tribal lines that existed in the system of muruwah.

Muhammad was a member of the Quraysh tribe which settled in Mecca in the fifth century. The tribe took control of Mecca. His father died before his birth and his mother was told she was carrying the lord of the Arabs. Orphaned at an early age, he was raised by his uncles and had a normal childhood. On a business trip in 595, a monk told Muhammad that he was the awaited Prophet. He married Khadija and had six children. He was devastated by her death in 619.

When Muhammad first began his preaching, they were private but he eventually went public with his preachings. Islam became very popular after Muhammad's move to Medina. Muhammad became active politically and militarily and developed a new society for the Arabs. He died on June 8, 632.

Abu Talib

Abu Talib is the uncle of Muhammad. After Muhammad's grandfather died, Abu Talib brought the boy into his household and raised him as his own. He brought the young Muhammad with him on a business trip to Syria where a monk told him to always protect the boy because he carried the mark of prophesy on his back.



Abu Talib would not allow Muhammad to marry his daughter but he did the best he could for the boy. By 616, Abu Talib was the leader of his clan, even though it was not a wealthy and powerful clan. Muhammad was publicly preaching the Quran at this time and announced that monotheism had to be enforced. This caused a rift in the community and the other tribal leaders complained to Abu Talib. They wanted him to stop protecting his nephew. Their threats did not work and Abu Talib continued to protect his nephew until the disagreement was settled.

When Abu Talib became ill in 619, the Quraysh attempted a reconciliation but Muhammad would not accept their religion. As Abu Talib lay dying, Muhammad tried to get him to convert to Islam, but he said no, he would die in the faith of his fathers. He died in 619.

Perfectus

Perfectus was a monk who lived in Cordova in 850. When questioned by a group of Arabs, he denounced the Prophet Muhammad and was put to death. This resulted in many deaths as other people followed his lead and denounced the Prophet in favor of Christianity.

Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie is the author of the Satanic Verses. The book is a novel that portrayed the Prophet Muhammad in a way that offended much of the Islamic world to the extent that his life was threatened and he had to go into hiding.

Zayd

Zayd was a slave given to Muhammad by Khadija. Muhammad gave the boy his freedom and raised him as his foster son. Zayd becomes an influential leader in the early Muslim community.

Aisha

Aisha is a wife of the Prophet Muhammad. The marriage takes place when she is a child. Muhammad dies in her arms in 632.

Khadija

Khadija was a wealthy widow, believed to be in her forties when she married Muhammad. They had six children together. She died in 619.



Zagnab

Zaynab was one of the four daughters of Muhammad and Khadija. She leaves her pagan husband and joins her father in Medina and dies in 626.

Ali

Ali is a son of a friend that was raised by Muhammad and became instrumental in the early Muslim community. He becomes the husband of Fatimah. Ali becomes the Fourth Caliph in 656.

al-Qasim

al-Qasim was the oldest son of Muhammad and Khadija and died in infancy.

Abdallah

Abdallah was a son of Muhammad and Khadija who died in infancy.

Ruqayyah

Ruqayyah was one of the four daughters of Muhammad and Khadija. She dies in Medina.

Umm Kulthum

Umm Kulthum was one of the four daughters of Muhammad and Khadija. She marries Uthman in Medina.

Fatimah

Fatimah was one of the four daughters of Muhammad and Khadija. Fatimah marries Ali in Medina.



Objects/Places

Spain

Spain was the site of a peaceful Christian-Muslim community.

Bradford, England

Bradford is a city in England with a large Muslim population.

Mecca

Mecca is a city in what is now Saudi Arabia. It is the birthplace of Muhammad.

Medina

Medina is a city in what is now Saudi Arabia.

Yemen

Yemen is a part of what was known as the Kingdom of Southern Arabia.

Ka'aba

The Ka-aba, located in Mecca, was the most important shrine during the days of Muhammad.

Mount Hira

Mount Hira is located in the Mecca Valley and is the site of the cave where Muhammad had his first meeting with the angel.

Taif

Taif is a town near Mecca that was the summer home to many Meccans.

Abyssinia

Abyssinia was a country in Africa where Muhammad sent the Muslims to escape persecution in Mecca.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem is where the angel Gabriel takes Muhammad to meet the other prophets.



Themes

Carrying Out a Mission

One of the dominant themes of the book is carrying out a mission. Muhammad did not start out with any big plan to found a religion and change Arab society, even though this is what he accomplished. He began by trying to improve the behavior of the people of Mecca. Muhammad did not have any political ambitions or goals in the beginning. He was not intent on conquering any territories.

Muhammad was terrified when he first began to have his visions and revelations. When he first began preaching, he did it in private to a few select people. When he felt more confident, he began to preach in public and attract converts to his beliefs. His preaching, particularly that of monotheism, brought him into conflict with the power structure of Mecca, and he was only able to survive due to the protection of his uncle.

He did not lose sight of his mission, no matter how he was treated or how much he was harassed. He would not compromise his views or mission by settling with the Quraysh in any way that would not accommodate the doctrine which he espoused, even when his uncle and protector died, leaving him in a dangerous position. Muhammad did what he had to do in order to survive and carry out his mission, no matter how he was threatened or treated. Because of the strength of his conviction, he was able to change the structure of seventh century Arab society and improve the living conditions of the Arabs.

Filling a Need

Muhammad's teachings and the formation of Islam fulfilled a need in seventh-century Arab society. The pagan society was based on the tribal law and traditions. Loyalty was to the chief and tribe, not to any Arab identity. The chief was the protector for the members of the clan. The society accepted the fact that any tribe's action against another tribe brought about an equal amount of retribution. As a result, there was a lot of bloodshed and fighting and many people were tired of the situation. Muhammad offered the Arabs an alternative to this kind of life which is why so many people were receptive to conversion.

Also, at this time in history, both Christianity and Judaism were developed with their own written scripture. The Arabs practiced their own form of paganism with Al-Llah as the High God. But they had no prophet or written scripture. The other major religions had a written basis, and the Arabs felt they have been ignored by God. Muhammad filled the void by reciting the suras that others wrote down. This was the Quran which became the written scripture for the religion of Islam.



Islam and Muhammad fulfilled a need that existed in the Arab society of the time. It provided a structure that was consistent with the needs and desires of that society, which is why it was so quickly accepted.

Decent Behavior

A third underlying theme of the book can be called decent behavior. Muhammad was always concerned with the behavior of the tribe members in Mecca. This is why he began his preachings and tried to correct the deficiencies that he saw in the behavior of his fellow Meccans. The decent behavior that he preached concerned the treatment of others, especially women and the disadvantaged members of society. Muhammad felt these two groups had a right to humane treatment. He did much to advance the status of women in seventh century Arab society.

At the start of Muhammad's preachings, Arab women had no rights. The society practiced infanticide and many female babies were left to die. In this way, there weren't that many women that had to be supported. Muhammad brought this practice to an end and gave women the right of inheritance.

Muhammad was also against the accumulation of wealth and preached the giving away of wealth in the form of alms. He felt that even the poor had this obligation and that people didn't need more than what was needed for their survival and comfort. Since Mecca was a trading and financial center based on capitalism, this brought him into conflict with the wealthy power structure of the city who fought him and plotted against him in every way.

Muhammad changed the structure of Arab society with his umma or community. This changed the social and living conditions and brought about Arab unity.

Style

Perspective

The book is written from the perspective of the third person with the author, Karen Armstrong, being the narrator. The book is informational and the result of the author's thorough research into the subject. The author does a good job in portraying Muhammad as a human being who was doing his best to bring about changes in the society around him.

The use of the third person allows Armstrong to provide all the necessary background material about the life of the Prophet and the details of the society in which he lived. Throughout the book, she draws analogies with the development of Christianity and Judaism and compares Muhammad with other prophets. She compares and contrasts the three major religions and explains how Islam developed to fulfill the need of the Arab culture, which, at that time, was based on tribal law and tradition, which included paganism.

The use of the third person is the proper mechanism for this sort of biography. It allows the author to present the facts and adequately present the details of the society and times in which the Prophet lived. Any other approach would have made this task more difficult and would have made it more difficult for the reader.

Tone

The tone of the book is objective, which is necessary for this kind of biography. Armstrong presents the facts in an unemotional manner without adding her own opinions. She lets the facts speak for themselves without trying to influence the reader in any way.

Armstrong wanted to present Islam in a way that would give Westerners an understanding of the religion. The only thing that most Westerners knew of Islam was what they learned from the media. There was a great deal of ignorance and misconceptions about Islam among Westerners which creates tension between the two cultures. Armstrong's purpose in writing the book was to try to bridge the gap between Islam and the West by providing information to try to alleviate the tension.

By providing the facts in an objective manner, the author allows the readers to form their own opinions and draw their own conclusions, which is an appropriate approach for a book of this kind. The reader does not fight the author as the reader would if the author tried to force the issue. Letting the facts speak for themselves is always the best approach, especially in this kind of book. Any other approach would detract from the subject matter and the author's purpose in writing the book.

Structure

The structure of the book is well planned and very appropriate for a biography of this kind. The body of the book consists of ten chapters, each with a title. Each chapter is complete in fulfilling the purpose of the chapter. For example, the first chapter, Muhammad the Enemy, explains how misconceptions about the Prophet and his teachings result in tensions between the Islamic culture and the West. The third chapter, titled Jabiliyah, explains the culture in which Muhammad lived. Each chapter does its job in completing its piece of the picture and contributing to the book as a whole.

The Prologue explains Armstrong's purpose for writing the book where the Introduction provides more background and reasons. Armstrong also presents maps of seventh century Arabia so the reader can see which area of the Middle East the author is referring to in various parts of the book. There are also Genealogy charts of the tribe of Quraysh and Muhammad's family, which are good information for the reader. There is a Notes section in which the author presents her research sources so readers can check for more details or other information. The inclusion of an Index makes it easy to look up information if the reader needs to. The chosen structure makes the book easy to read and work with. It imparts the necessary information to the reader in the most expedient manner and makes it interesting reading for the reader.

Quotes

"But I also think that any reader can benefit from learning about Muhammad. He was one of those archetypal figures whose lives have epitomized for millions of people what it is to be fully human. He was living in an age that was just as cruel and violent as our own. His society was in crisis. Many felt that their old world and, like many today, they were experiencing a spiritual vacuum. The Prophet's inspiring life shows that it is possible for one person to change the world forever, to give old traditions a new and luminous resonance, and that faith is not always easy but requires a creative struggle on our part." (Preface, pg. 7-8)

"The loss of our cultural roots can be a profoundly disturbing experience and even in our own day it can produce an aggressive, defiant religiosity as a means of asserting the beleaguered self." (Chapter 1, .pg. 23)

"In the Middle Ages, Christians had been able to see Islam only as a failed version of Christianity, and had created myths to show that Muhammad had been instructed by a heretic. Later, in the light of fresh internal divisions in Christendom, Westerners continued to see Muhammad and his religion in essentially Christian terms; they seemed unconcerned with the objective historical truth, nor does it seem to have occurred to them that Muslims had their own independent enthusiasms that could not adequately be defined with reference to Christian practice." (Chapter 1, pgs. 34-35)

"But, against all the odds, this Arab unity was preserved. Muhammad had political gifts of a very high order: he had entirely transformed the conditions of his people, rescued them from fruitless violence and disintegration and given them a proud new identity. They were now ready to found their own unique culture and new identity. They were now ready to found their own unique culture and Muhammad's teaching had unlocked such reserves of power that within 100 years, the Arabs' empire stretched from Gibraltar to the Himalayas." (Chapter 2, pg. 46)

"But it seemed that the Arabs could not hope for such power and splendor. The tribal system made it impossible for them to pool their meager resources and face the world as the united people they were dimly aware of being. The tribes seemed caught up in an endless cycle of wars and vendettas: one blood-feud led inevitably to another, at the same time as the new intimations of individualism were obscurely undermining the communal ethos." (Chapter 3, pg. 65)

"Muhammad probably believed that only a messenger from God could heal the problems of his city, but we know from the Qu-ran that He had never imagined for one moment that he was going to be that Prophet." (Chapter 4, pg. 82)

"The Qu-ran was not revealing anything novel: it claimed to be a 'Reminder' of things that everybody knew already. It was simply making the old facts clear, throwing them into more lucid relief. Frequently the Qu-ran introduces a new topic with words like 'Hast thou not seen?' or 'Have you not considered?' The Word of God was not thundering



commands arbitrarily from on high but was inviting the Quraysh to enter into a dialogue, was issuing a challenge which did not destroy the past but built on the old Arab insights and tradition." (Chapter 5, pg. 95)

"All other creatures are natural muslims who cannot choose but do God's will and surrender to the divine plan. Man alone has the freedom to make a voluntary act of islam and conform his life to the source and sustainer of his being. He is submitting not to an arbitrary tyrant, but to the essential laws that govern the universe." (Chapter 5, pg. 97)

"At this point a new emphasis developed in Muhammad's message, stressing the Diving Unity as the most important part of the revelation. From this point he became a jealous monotheist." (Chapter 6, pg. 116)

"It is unusual for Ibn Ishaq to give such an intimate account of Muhammad's state of mind and this suggests that it represented a crisis in his spiritual development. He could no longer rely on human companionship but had to realize that there was no god, no security, no true 'protector' but Allah." (Chapter 7, pg. 137)

"The change of ghiba was a sign of a proud new Muslim identity. Muslims were gradually assuming a common identity that was beginning to bond them even through they came from three separate tribes. They all rose at the same time when Bilal issued the call to prayer; all broke off their work together at midday and in the evening to make the salat. The alms reminded them of their common responsibility for the poor. Now, wherever they were, they would all prostrate themselves three times a day in the direction of Mecca, an orientation that all felt passionately attached to. But this new independence was made at a time when the Muslims were in an embattled position, surrounded by enemies on all sides. The Jews of Medina were very quick to interpret the change of ghiba as an act of defiance. They became even more determined to get rid of Muhammad, and at the time too the community at Medina was expecting an attack from the powerful city of Mecca." (Chapter 7, pg. 163)

"But after the hijra Muhammad became a spectacular success, politically as well as spiritually, and the Christian West has always distrusted this aspect of his career. Because he became a brilliant and charismatic political leader who not only transformed Arabia but changed the history of the world, his critics in Europe have dismissed him as an impostor who used religion as a means to power. Because the Christian world is dominated by the image of the Crucified Jesus, who said that his kingdom was not of this world, we tend to see allure and humiliation as the hallmark of a religious leader. We do not expect our spiritual heroes to achieve a dazzling success in mundane terms." (Chapter 8, pg. 164)

"Muhammad was moving towards an unprecedented political and religious solution for the Arabs, and that meant that he could never do the expected and obvious thing, because that tied him to the unhappy status quo." (Chapter 9, 220)

"When Muhammad had made the hijra in 622 the little Islamic community had taken its first step forward to political power: ten years later it dominated almost the whole of Arabia and had laid the foundations for a new Arab polity which would enable Muslims to govern a huge empire for over a thousand years." (Chapter 10, pg. 250)

Topics for Discussion

Where do most Westerners gain their knowledge of Islam? How does this affect their views?

What is the source of hatred of the Prophet Muhammad?

How has the Western view of Muhammad affected history?

How did the Quran come into being?

Explain why Muhammad moved to Medina?

Explain how Muhammad dealt with the Quraysh?

What are the basic teachings of Islam? How do the principles create solidarity among Muslims?