

The return to mecca, muhammad and the beginnings of islam



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Word Count: 4033 Muhammad, whose full name was Abu al-Qasim

Muhammad ibn ' Abd Allah ibn

' Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim, was born in Mecca around 570 AD after the

death of his father, ' Abd Allah. Muhammad was at first under the care

of his paternal grandfather, ' Abd al-Muttalib. Because the climate of

Mecca was considered to be unhealthful, he was given as an infant to a

wet nurse from a nomadic tribe and spent some time in the desert. At

six, he lost his mother, Aminah of the clan of Zuhra, and at eight his

grandfather. Though his grandfather had been head of the prestigious

Hashem clan and was prominent in Mecca politics, he was probably not the

leading man in Mecca as some sources suggest. Muhammad came under the

care of the new head of the clan, his uncle Abu Talib, and is reputed to

have accompanied him on trading journeys to Syria. About 595, on such a

journey, he was in charge of the merchandise of a rich woman, Khadijah

of the clan of Asad, and so impressed her that she offered marriage.

She is said to have been about 40, but she bore Muhammad at least two

sons, who died young, and four daughters. The best known daughter was

Fatimah, the wife of Muhammad's cousin ' Ali who is regarded as

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Muhammad's divinely ordained successor by the Shi'ah branch of Islam.

Until Khadijah's death in 619, Muhammad took no other wife. The

marriage was a turning point in Muhammad's life. By Arab custom, minors

did not inherit, and therefore Muhammad had no share in the property of

his father or grandfather. However, by his marriage he obtained

sufficient capital to engage in mercantile activity on a scale

commensurate with his abilities.

Muhammad appears to have been of a reflective turn of mind and is said

to have adopted the habit of occasionally spending nights in a hill cave

near Mecca. The poverty and misfortunes of his early life doubtless

made him aware of tensions in Meccan society. Mecca, inhabited by the

tribe of Quraysh to which the Hashim clan belonged, was a mercantile

center formed around a sanctuary, the Kabah, which assured the safety

of those who came to trade at the fairs. In the later 6th century there

was extensive trade by camel caravan between the Yemen and the

Mediterranean region (Gaza and Damascus), bringing goods from India and

Ethiopia to the Mediterranean. The great merchants of Mecca had

obtained monopoly control of this trade. Mecca was thus prosperous, but most of the wealth was in a few hands. Tribal solidarity was breaking up and merchants pursued individual interests and disregarded their traditional duties to the unfortunate. About 610, as he reflected on such matters, Muhammad had a vision of a majestic being (later identified with the angel Gabriel) and heard a voice saying to him, " You are the Messenger of God. " This marked the beginning of his career as messenger of Allah, or Prophet. From this time, at frequent intervals until his death, he received " revelations"; that is, verbal messages that he believed came directly from God. Sometimes these were kept in memory by Muhammad and his followers, and sometimes they were written down. About 650 they were collected and written in the Qur`an (or Koran, the sacred scriptures of Islam), in the form that has endured. Muslims believe the Qur`an is divine revelation, written in the words of God himself.

Muhammad is said to have been perturbed after the vision and first revelation but was reassured by his wife, Khadijah. In his later

experiences of receiving messages, there was normally no vision.

Occasionally, there were physical concomitants, such as perspiring on a cold day, giving rise to the suggestion, now agreed to be unwarranted, that he was an epileptic. Sometimes he heard a noise like a bell but apparently never a voice. The essence of such an experience was that he found a verbal message in his heart; that is, in his conscious mind.

With the help of Khadijah's Christian cousin Waraqah, he came to interpret these messages as identical with those sent by God through other prophets to Jews, Christians, and others. He also came to believe that by the first great vision, and by the receipt of the messages, he was commissioned to communicate them to his fellow citizens and other Arabs. Along with proclaiming the messages he received, Muhammad must have offered explanations and expositions of them in his own words, as is evident in the large body of prophetic traditions that the community has preserved.

Soon he gathered some sympathetic friends who accepted his claim to be a prophet and joined him in common worship and prayers. These

culminated in an act of prostration in which they touched the ground with their foreheads in acknowledgment of Gods majesty; still a cardinal act in Islamic worship. In about 613 Muhammad began preaching publicly, and he and his followers spent their days together in the house of a young man named al-Arqam. It is probable that they sometimes worshipped together in the Kabah, a sanctuary of the Arab pagans.

The people of Mecca at the time worshipped many gods, but few believed that man was dependent on supernatural powers. The merchants thought most things could be accomplished by wealth and by human planning. Some men regarded Allah as a " high god" who stood above lesser deities.

Allah, the Arabic word for God, is used by Christian Arabs as well as by Muslims. The earliest passages of the Qur`an revealed to Muhammad emphasize the goodness and power of God, as seen in nature and in the prosperity of the Meccans, and call on the Meccans to be grateful and to worship " the Lord of the Kabah," who is thus identified with God.

Gratitude is to be expressed in generosity with ones wealth and avoidance of niggardliness. As a sanction, men are warned that they

will appear before God on the Last Day to be judged according to their deeds and assigned to heaven or hell.

By proclaiming this message publicly, Muhammad gained followers, said to be 39, before he entered the house of al-Arqam. The names of 70 followers are known prior to the appearance of opposition to the new religion, and there were probably more. Most were young men under 30 when they joined Muhammad. They included sons and brothers of the richest men in Mecca, though they might be described as persons excluded from the most lucrative forms of commerce. A handful of Muhammads early followers were spoken of as “ weak,” which merely means that they were not of the tribe of Quraysh and so not effectively protected by any clan. The new religion was eventually called Islam, meaning “ surrender (to the will of God)”, and its adherents were called Muslims, meaning “ those who have surrendered”, though the Qur`an speaks of them primarily as “ the believers. “

Although Muhammads preaching was basically religious, there was implicit in it a critique of the conduct and attitudes of the rich

merchants of Mecca. Attempts were made to get him to soften his criticism by offering him a fuller share in trade and a marriage alliance with one of the wealthiest families, but he decisively rejected such offers. In about 615, more active opposition appeared. Points in the message of the Qur`an were questioned, such as the assertion that men would be resurrected before the Judgment. Commercial pressure was brought to bear on Muhammads supporters, and in some families there was mild persecution of junior members who followed him. It is sometimes suggested that the main reason for opposition was the merchants fear that the new religion would destroy the recognition of the Kabah as a sanctuary, but this is unlikely. Certainly, attacks on idols appeared in the Qur`an, and Islam began to be characterized by the insistence that "there is no god but God" (Allah). Despite this, no attack was made on the Kabah, and the idols mentioned had their chief shrines elsewhere.

A leader of the opposition arose in the person of Abu Jahl who probably felt that Muhammad, despite his claim to be "only a warner" of Judgment

to come, was building a position of authority that might one day make him politically supreme in Mecca. This fear arose from the observation that Arabs deeply respected the kind of wisdom or knowledge that Muhammad clearly had. In about 616, Abu Jahl organized a boycott of the clan of Hashim by the chief clans of Mecca, allegedly because the clan continued to protect Muhammad and did not curb his preaching; but, since few of the clan were Muslims, other issues may have been involved.

After three years the boycott lost momentum, perhaps because some of the participants found they were harming their own economic interests.

Both Muhammads wife, Khadijah, and his uncle Abu Talib died in about

619. Another uncle, Abu Lahab, succeeded as head of the clan of

Hashim. He was closer to the richest merchants, and at their

instigation, he withdrew the protection of the clan from Muhammad. This

meant that Muhammad could easily be attacked and therefore could no

longer propagate his religion in Mecca. He left for the neighboring

town of at-Ta`if, but the inhabitants were insufficiently prepared to

receive his message, and he failed to find support. Having secured the

protection of the head of another clan, he returned to Mecca. In 620, Muhammad began negotiations with clans in Medina, leading to his emigration, or hijrah, there in 622.

It is difficult to assess the nature and extent of the persecution of the Muslims in Mecca. There was little physical violence, and that was usually within the family. Muhammad suffered from minor annoyances, such as having filth deposited outside his door. The persecution is said to have led to the emigration of some of the Muslims to Ethiopia about 615, but they may have been seeking opportunities for trade or military support for Muhammad. Some remained until 628, long after Muhammad was established in Medina. Whatever the nature of the persecution, the Muslims were very bitter about it.

In the summer of 621, 12 men from Medina, visiting Mecca for the annual pilgrimage to the Kabah (still a pagan shrine), secretly professed themselves Muslims to Muhammad and went back to make propaganda for him

at Medina. At the pilgrimage in June 622 a representative party of 75

persons from Medina, including two women, not merely professed Islam, but also took an oath to defend Muhammad as they would their own kin.

These are known as the two Pledges of al-Aqaba. Muhammad now encouraged his faithful Meccan followers to make their way to Medina in small groups. The Meccans are said to have plotted to kill Muhammad before he could leave. With his chief lieutenant, he slipped away unperceived, used unfrequented paths, and reached Medina safely on September 24, 622. This is the celebrated hijrah, which may be rendered "emigration," though the basic meaning is the severing of kinship ties.

It is the traditional starting point of Islamic history. The Islamic Era (AH or Anno Hegirae) begins on the first day of the Arabic year in which the hijrah took place; July 16, 622, in the Western calendar.

Medina was different from Mecca. It was an oasis in which date palms flourished and cereals could be grown. Agriculture had been developed by several Jewish clans, who had settled among the original Arabs, and they still had the best lands. Later Arab immigrants belonging to the tribes of al-Aws and al-Khazraj, however, were in a stronger

position. The effective units among the Arabs were eight or more clans, but nearly all of these had become involved in serious feuds. Much blood had been shed in a battle in about 618, and peace was not fully restored. In inviting Muhammad to Medina, many of the Arabs there probably hoped that he would act as an arbiter among the opposing parties. Their contact with the Jews may have prepared them for a messianic religious leader, who would deliver them from oppression and establish a kingdom in which justice prevailed.

A document has been preserved known as the Constitution of Medina. In its present form, it is a combination of at least two earlier documents and was probably compiled later than 627, but its main provisions are almost certainly those originally agreed upon between Muhammad and the Muslims of Medina. In form the document creates a confederation on traditional Arab lines among nine groups; eight Arab clans and the emigrants from Mecca. Muhammad is given no special position of authority except that the preamble speaks of the agreement as made

between “ Muhammad the prophet” and the Muslims now resident in Medina,

and it is stated that serious disputes are to be referred to him. For

at least five years, Muhammad had no direct authority over members of

other clans, but, in the closing years of his life, the prestige of his

military successes gave him almost autocratic power. The revelations he

received at Medina frequently contained legal rules for the community of

Muslims, but they dealt with political questions only rarely.

The first 18 months at Medina were spent in settling down. Muhammad

was given a piece of land and had a house built, which eventually held

apartments grouped around a central courtyard for each of his wives.

The Muslims often joined Muhammad at prayers in his home, which, after

his death, became the mosque of Medina. The emigrants (muhajirun, the

men from Mecca) were at first guests of brother Muslims in Medina, but

Muhammad cannot have contemplated this situation continuing

indefinitely. A few emigrants carried on trade in the local market run

by a Jewish clan. Others, with the approval of Muhammad, set out in

normal Arab fashion on razzias (ghazawat, “raids”) in the hope of intercepting Meccan caravans passing near Medina on their way to Syria.

Muhammad himself led three such razzias in 623. They all failed, probably because traitors betrayed the Muslim movements to the enemy.

At last, in January 624, a small band of men was sent eastward with sealed orders telling them to proceed to Nakhlah, near Mecca, and attack a caravan from Yemen. This they did successfully, and in doing so they violated pagan ideas of sanctity thereby making the Meccans aware of the seriousness of the threat from Muhammad.

About the same time, there was a change in Muhammads general policy in important respects. One aspect was the “break with Jews”; instead of making concessions to the Jews in the hope of gaining recognition of his prophethood, he asserted the specifically Arabian character of the Islamic religion. Hitherto the Muslims had faced Jerusalem in prayer, but a revelation now bade them face Mecca. Perhaps because of this change some Muslims of Medina were readier to support Muhammad. In

March 624 he was able to lead about 315 men on a razzia to attack a

wealthy Meccan caravan returning from Syria. The caravan, led by Abu Sufyan, the head of the Umayyah clan, eluded the Muslims by devious routes and forced marches. Abu Jahl, the head of the Makhzum clan, however, leading a supporting force of perhaps 800 men, wanted to teach Muhammad a lesson and did not withdraw. On March 15, 624, near a place called Badr, the two forces found themselves in a situation, perhaps contrived by Muhammad, from which neither could withdraw without disgrace. In the ensuing battle, at least 45 Meccans were killed, including Abu Jahl and other leading men, and nearly 70 taken prisoner while only 14 Muslims died. To Muhammad this appeared to be a divine vindication of his prophethood, and he and all the Muslims were greatly elated.

In the flush of victory, some persons in Medina who had satirized Muhammad in verse were assassinated, perhaps with his connivance. He also made a minor disturbance an excuse for expelling the Jewish clan, which ran the market. This weakened his most serious opponent there, the "hypocrite" (munafiq), or nominal Muslim, Abd Allah ibn Ubayy, who

was allied with the local Jews. The remaining waverers among the Arabs probably became Muslims about this time. Thus the victory of Badr greatly strengthened Muhammad. At the same time he was using marriage relationships to bring greater cohesion to the emigrants. Of his daughters, Fatimah was married to Ali (later fourth caliph, or leader of the Islamic community) and Umm Kulthum to Uthman (third caliph). He himself was already married to A`ishah, daughter of Abu Bakr (first caliph), and was now espoused also to Hafsa, daughter of Umar (second caliph), whose previous husband was one of the Muslims killed at Badr.

In the same year, Muhammad led larger Muslim forces on razzias against hostile nomadic tribes and had some success. Presumably, he realized that the Meccans were bound to try to avenge their defeat. Indeed, Abu Sufyan was energetically mobilizing Meccan power. On March 21, 625, he entered the oasis of Medina with 3, 000 men. One of the features of Medina was a large number of small forts that were impregnable to Arab weapons and tactics. Muhammad would have preferred the Muslims to retire to these; but those whose cereal crops were being laid waste

persuaded him to go out to fight. By a night march with 1, 000 men, he reached the hill of Uhud on the further side of the Meccan camp. On the morning of March 23, the Meccan infantry attacked and was repulsed with considerable loss. As the Muslims pursued, the Meccan cavalry launched a flank attack after the archers guarding the Muslim left had abandoned their position. The Muslims were thrown into confusion. Some made for a fort and were cut down, but Muhammad and the bulk of his force managed to gain the lower slopes of Uhud, where they were safe from the cavalry. The Meccans, because of their losses, were unable to press home their advantages and without delay set out for home, while Muhammad the next day made a show of pursuing. The battle produced neither a clear victor nor loser. In Badr and Uhud together, the Meccans had killed about as many men as they had lost; but they had boasted that they would make the Muslims pay several times over, and they had not shown the degree of superiority appropriate to their leading position in Arabia. Muhammad, though he had lost above 70 men, realized that this

was a military reverse, not a defeat, but the confidence of the Muslims and perhaps his own had been struck a serious blow. If the victory of Badr was a sign of Gods support, did Uhud indicate that he had abandoned the Muslims? Muhammads faith soon overcame any momentary doubts, and he was gradually able to restore the confidence of his followers.

For two years after Uhud, both sides prepared for a decisive encounter. In the razzias Muhammad led or sanctioned, he seems to have aimed at extending his own alliances and at preventing others from joining the Meccans. In at least two cases, a small party of Muslims was tricked or ambushed, and most of their lives were lost. In April 627, Abu Sufyan led a great confederacy of 10, 000 men against Medina.

On this occasion Muhammad had ordered the crops to be harvested and a trench to be dug to defend the main part of the oasis from the Meccan cavalry. For a fortnight the confederates besieged the Muslims.

Attempts to cross the trench failed, and fodder for the horses was scarce, while Muhammads agents among the attackers fomented potential

dissensions. Then, after a night of wind and rain the great army melted away. The Meccans had exerted their utmost might and had failed to dislodge Muhammad, whose position was now greatly strengthened.

For more than two years now there had been opposition to Muhammad in Medina, chiefly from Abd Allah ibn Ubayy and other so-called hypocrites who had abandoned Muhammad at Uhud and who together had fostered disaffection. Shortly before the siege Muhammad had a showdown with Abd Allah ibn Ubayy, who had joined in spreading slanders about Muhammads wife A`ishah. This confrontation revealed that Abd Allah had little support in Medina, and he became reconciled to Muhammad.

After the siege of Medina, Muhammad attacked the Jewish clan of Qurayzah, which had probably been intriguing against him. When they surrendered, the men were all executed and the women and children sold as slaves.

Muhammads farsightedness as a statesman is manifest in the policies he next adopted. He might have continued to crush the Meccans, and he indeed put economic pressure on them; but his main aim was to gain their

willing adherence to Islam. He had already realized that, insofar as the Arabs became Muslims, it would be necessary to direct outward the energies expended on razzias against one another. There could be no question of Muslims raiding Muslims. It is noteworthy that his largest razzias, apart from the expeditions against the Meccans, were along the route to Syria followed by the Arab armies after his death. He doubtless realized that the administrative skill of the Meccan merchants would be required for any expansion of his embryonic state.

In a dream, Muhammad saw himself performing the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, and in March 628 he set out to do so, driving sacrificial animals. He was disappointed because no more than 1, 600 men would accompany him. The Meccans were determined to prevent the Muslims from entering their town, so Muhammad halted at al-Hudaybiyah, on the edge of the sacred territory of Mecca. After some critical days, the Meccans made a treaty with Muhammad. Hostilities were to cease, and the Muslims were to be allowed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca in 629. The orderly withdrawal showed how completely Muhammad controlled his followers.

Partly to reward this orderly conduct, Muhammad two months later led the same force against the Jewish oasis of Khaybar, north of Medina. After a siege, it submitted, but the Jews were allowed to remain on condition of sending half of the date harvest to Medina. Throughout 628 and 629, Muhammads power was growing. The success led more men to become Muslims, for the religious attraction of Islam was apparently supplemented by material motives.

Meanwhile, Mecca was in decline. Several leading men had emigrated to Medina and become Muslims. New leaders had taken over from Abu Sufyan but had accomplished little, although the treaty with Muhammad had removed his pressure on their caravans. Shortly after the treaty, Muhammad had married Umm Habibah, a daughter of Abu Sufyan, and a widow

whose Muslim husband had died in Ethiopia. This led to an understanding with Abu Sufyan, who began to work for the peaceful surrender of Mecca.

It was probably when he was in Mecca for the pilgrimage in March 629 that Muhammad became reconciled with another uncle, al-Abbas, and

married his uncles sister-in-law Maymunah.

An attack by Meccan allies in about November 629 upon allies of

Muhammad led to the Muhammads denunciation of the treaty of

al-Hudaybiyah. After secret preparations he marched on Mecca in January

630 with 10, 000 men. Abu Sufyan and other leading Meccans went out to

meet him and formally submitted, so Muhammad promised a general

amnesty. When he entered Mecca there was virtually no resistance. Two

Muslims and 28 of the enemy were killed. A number of people were

specifically excluded from the amnesty, but some were later pardoned.

Thus Muhammad, who had left Mecca as a persecuted prophet, not merely

entered it again in triumph but also gained the allegiance of most of

the Meccans. Though he did not insist on their becoming Muslims, many

soon did so.

Muhammad spent 15 to 20 days in Mecca settling various matters of

administration. Idols were destroyed in the Kabah and in some small

shrines in the neighborhood. To relieve the poorest among his

followers, he demanded loans from some of the wealthy Meccans. When he

marched east to meet a new threat, 2, 000 Meccans went with him.