

Early islam essay sample

[Religion](#), [Islam](#)



“ There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger.” This is the monotheistic creed of Islam which is claimed by its followers to be the original monotheistic religion. Simply translated, this creed means that Allah (God) is the only authority of Islam and He entrusted His sacred texts (Qur’an) only to Muhammad, His only messenger and prophet. Although the Qur’an was only revealed to Muhammad more than five centuries after the death of Christ, Muslims trace the beginnings of Islam to the time of Abraham. According to them, the series of revelations of the Qur’an marked only the renaissance of a religion which sank into insignificance when the people of Mecca rejected the monotheism preached by Abraham (Fisher 2005, 362)

Muhammad was believed to be a descendant of Abraham and Hagar, the Egyptian slave who mothered Abraham’s son, Ishmael. According to the Qur’an, Abraham fled to Mecca (then called the valley of Becca) with Hagar and Ishmael after his wife, Sarah, also gave birth to a baby boy (Isaac) and became extremely jealous of Hagar and Ishmael. It is written that Abraham later built the Ka’bah, Islam’s holiest sanctuary and now the destination of pilgrims during the *hajj*, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, with the assistance of his son, Ishmael. Muhammad was born in 570 CE to parents who belonged to a poor clan that descended from Ishmael (Fisher 2005, 362).

He got married at the age of twenty-five to Khadijah, a forty-year-old businesswoman who owned the caravans which he was managing at the time. His wife later became his main source of support when he was experiencing difficulties during the early years of his mission as a prophet. Muhammad recounted an incident which happened when he was forty years

old. As his story went, an angel appeared to him when he was in a cave in Mt. Hira during one of his spiritual retreats and told him to recite something. Because he was illiterate, he reportedly refused the angel three times. However, the angel insisted and when Muhammad, at last, relented, the angel gave him the words to be recited that would later become the Qur'an's first words. That was the first of a series of revelations, the exact words of which had been:

Proclaim! (or Recite!)

In the name

Of thy Lord and Cherisher,

Who created -

Created man, out of

A (mere) clot

Of congealed blood:

Proclaim! And thy Lord

Is Most Bountiful,-

He Who taught

(The use of) the Pen,-

Taught man that

Which he knew not (Fisher 2005, 365).

That first revelation undoubtedly referred to the creation. It talked about how God created man and provided for his material and intellectual needs. The first revelation was followed by more revelations which occurred intermittently. Muhammad described his experience during the revelations as follows: “ Revelation sometimes comes like the sound of a bell; that is the most painful way. When it ceases I have remembered what was said. Sometimes it is an angel who talks to me like a human, and I remember what he says. ” Initially, Muhammad only shared what was revealed to him with his wife and the few people who believed him. However, after three years had elapsed, he was instructed to start preaching to the public everything that he had received through the revelations (Fisher 2005, 365).

The early years had been difficult. Although he succeeded in winning converts to Islam, his group was persecuted by the Qurayshites (the aristocrats who were then influential in Mecca) in spite of some protection provided by his influential uncle. As a result, his group was exiled to an isolated place where they were forced to eat the leaves of trees and whatever wild foods they could gather in order to survive. The persecution persisted even after his band of Muslim converts was ultimately allowed to go back to Mecca after three years. The darkest period in Muhammad’s life was when he turned fifty. It was called the “ Year of Sorrows” primarily because his wife and his uncle who was protecting him died. The Islamic tradition explained that it was approximately during that period of hardship that the “ Night of Ascension” occurred. It was claimed to be the occasion

when Muhammad was supposed to have ascended into heaven and met the earlier prophets like Adam, Abraham, and Jesus Christ in Divine proximity, observed what hell and paradise were, and was later blessed by the Divine Presence (Fisher 2005, 366).

As a consequence of the persistent Qurayshite persecution that they experienced in Mecca, Muhammad and his Muslim followers decided to head for al-Medina (then called Yathrib) in 622 CE. Their migration, which was referred to as the *hijrah*, is now considered as the beginning of the Muslim era (Fisher 2005, 367). Muhammad tried to strengthen his Muslim band in Medina but the Qurayshites declared war against them because the people in Mecca feared that Muhammad's group would eventually launch an attack the moment they become strong enough. As a result, a war ensued between al-Medina and Mecca. Finally, in 630 CE, Muhammad and his Muslim group who was by then already very strong conquered Mecca without a fight. Muhammad re-established Mecca as the holy sanctuary of Islam, but he himself chose to live in Medina which he established as the "spiritual and political center of Islam." It was from al-Medina where he directed the campaigns to spread the Islamic faith. As a result of these campaigns, the northern part of Africa, Bahrain, Oman, and the Persian states of Yemen became Islamic states. Unfortunately, after making what turned out to be his final pilgrimage to Mecca "in the eleventh year of the Muslim era," Muhammad returned to Medina a very sick man and in 632 CE, he finally died (Fisher 2005, 368).

While his birth signaled the rebirth of Islam and his life rejuvenated their religion, his death in 632 CE in Medina rocked the Muslim world. It caused a serious split among the followers of Islam. The Shi'a and Sunni Muslims became irreconcilably separated because of the issue of succession. Many surviving Muslims believed that although Muhammad was able to leave explicit instructions telling his followers what to do after his death, they contended that he failed to clearly name his successor. Hence, it was their contention that the problem of succession should be settled to the satisfaction of the majority in order to prevent widespread dissension which could prove harmful to the Muslim world. The problem was discussed briefly and a decision was reached to settle the issue of succession by election. The choice for caliph for Muhammad's successor centered on two persons: Abu Bakr, who was the candidate of the majority, and Ali, who represented the minority faction (Fisher 2005, 369).

Abu Bakr, who was a close friend of Muhammad, was known by another name: El Siddik or Al-Siddiq, which means "The Upright." Although he was technically a member of the aristocrats because of his wealthy parentage and his being a successful businessman, he was among the first Muslim converts because of his longtime friendship with Muhammad whom he readily accepted as a prophet. After his conversion to Islam, he was one of those who were personally chosen by Muhammad to go with him to Medina for the *hijrah*. Muhammad later married his daughter Aishah. Abu Bakr was asked by Muhammad "to offer up a prayer for the people" shortly before the latter's death. When Muhammad was already dead, this request was interpreted by Abu Bakr's followers to be an anointment for succession. It

was for this reason that they insisted on electing Abu Bakr to be the first caliph. During his term as caliph, Abu Bakr made sure that the sayings of Muhammad be made a part of the Qur'an and continued the campaign to spread Islam through conquests.

In fact, the entire central Arabia was brought under the control of Islam under the reign of Abu Bakr as caliph. His best remembered saying was: "Our abode in this world is transitory, our life therein is but a loan, our breaths are numbered and our indolence is manifest." The cause of his death on August 23, 634 was never known, with some Muslims citing natural causes while others suspecting poisoning (Snell 2008). Abu Bakr was succeeded by Umar, then Uthman became the third caliph. Both were close friends and frequent companions of Abu Bakr (Fisher 2005, 378). Uthman, the third caliph, came from the "Umayyad house" which was a major Qurayshite clan. His term started the Umayyad dynasty in the Muslim world (UMAYYADS, the first Muslim dynasty [661-750]).

The election of Abu Bakr was contested by the members of the minority group who insisted that it was not true that Muhammad failed to name his successor. They declared that several weeks before he died, Muhammad held the hand of his son-in-law, Ali, and uttered the following words: "Whoever I protect, 'Ali is also his protector. O God, be a friend to whoever is his friend and an enemy to whoever is his enemy." According to the minority, Muhammad's gesture amounted to an anointment of Ali as his successor (Fisher 2005, 380). Ali was the son-in-law of Muhammad because he was the husband of Fatima, Muhammad's daughter.

Aside from being a son-in-law, however, Ali was also a cousin of Muhammad. He and those allied with him expected him to succeed Muhammad as leader of the Muslim community because he was the closest surviving blood relative. Unfortunately, after Abu Bakr was elected, Ali was bypassed as caliph several times because of the tradition that the ruling caliph should appoint his successor - a tradition which was started by Abu Bakr.

Nevertheless, his turn to become caliph finally came in 656 CE.

Unfortunately, the division between his faction and Abu Bakr's faction, which already appeared irreconcilable at the time, prevented him from exercising complete control over the Muslim community. He was eventually assassinated in 661 by an alleged "Khawarij" or a "seceder" (Just 2007).

After Ali was assassinated, he was succeeded by another member of the Umayyad house. Muawiya b. Abi Sufyan, then governor of Syria who refused to recognize Ali's election to the caliphate, became the fifth caliph. Before he died, he appointed his son, Yazid, to succeed him and become the sixth caliph (UMAYYADS, the first Muslim dynasty [661-750]). Yazid's appointment, however, was challenged by Ali's son, Husayn ibn'Ali. Husayn, who was already an Imam of the Shi'a faction and who had kept a low profile in spite of the assassination of his father in 661 CE, raised his objection to the appointment of Yazid because, according to him, it would "institutionalize the rule of the Umayyad dynasty." He led a rebellion, but was ultimately killed in a battle in Karbala against a more superior force which was loyal to Yazid. They were, in fact, slaughtered, and the head of Husayn was brought to Damascus. It is believed that Husayn's dead body was buried somewhere in Karbala, so a shrine was later built there to honor him. Since then,

Husayn's mausoleum has been widely visited by Muslim pilgrims. They have made it a center of "prayers, devotions, and rituals" which mark the first ten days of "Muharram" which commemorates the death of Husayn (Imam Husayn Ibn'Ali 2008).

The assassination of Ali and the subsequent killing of his son, Hussayn, eventually caused a permanent split in the Muslim world. The majority faction officially became the Sunnis and the minority faction became the Shi'a Muslims. The Sunnis are traditionalists who are loyal to the caliphs. According to them, the reign of the first four caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali) represented the "golden age" of Islam. The Sunnis maintain their belief that Muhammad died without appointing his successor. The Shi'a Muslims, on the other hand, believe that Ali was the rightful successor to Muhammad. Their loyalty is to their Imams, the first three of whom were Ali, Hasan (Ali's older son), and Husayn (Fisher 2005, 380).

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