

# The Origins and Spread of Islam

## Section 1 – Introduction



**Muhammad** was born around 570 C.E. He taught the faith called **Islam**, which became one of the major religions of the world. In this chapter, you will learn how Islam was started by Muhammad and how it spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula and beyond, during the 600s and 700s C.E.

Muhammad's birthplace, **Makkah** (Mecca), was an ancient place of worship. According to tradition, many centuries before Muhammad was born, God tested the prophet Abraham's faith by ordering him to leave **Hagar** and their infant son Ishmael in a desolate valley. As Hagar desperately searched for water, a miracle occurred. A spring bubbled up at her son's feet. This spring became known as Zamzam. According to the **Qur'an** (kooor-AHN), Abraham built a house of worship at the site, called the Ka'bah. Over time, people settled near it.



By the time of Muhammad's birth, this settlement, Makkah, was a **prosperous** city at the crossroads of great trade routes. Many people came to worship at the Ka'bah. But instead of honoring the God of Abraham's faith (Judaism, and Christianity), the worshippers at the Ka'bah honored the many traditional gods whose shrines were there.

According to Islamic teachings, Muhammad was living in Makkah when he experienced his own call to faith. Just as Abraham did, Muhammad **proclaimed** belief in a single God. At first, the faith he taught, Islam, met with resistance in Makkah. But Muhammad and his followers, called **Muslims**, eventually gained a great number of followers. Makkah became Islam's most sacred city, and the Ka'bah became a center of Islamic worship.

In this chapter, you will explore how Muhammad started Islam. You will learn how the Islamic faith quickly spread throughout Arabia and beyond. As you will see, within a century of Muhammad's death, a vast Muslim empire stretched from North Africa to Central Asia.

## Section 2 - Arabia in the 6th Century

**Islam** has its roots in Arabia, where **Muhammad** was born. To understand Islam's beginnings, we first need to look at the time period in which Muhammad grew up.

The town of Makkah, Muhammad's birthplace, was located in a dry, rocky valley in western Arabia. Makkah did not have agriculture. Instead, it gained wealth as a center of trade. Merchants traveling along caravan routes stopped at the city's market and inns. They bought spices, sheepskins, meat, dates, and other wares from townspeople and nomads.

By the time that Muhammad was born, Makkah was a prosperous city. Merchant families brought goods into Makkah from faraway places. Merchants grew wealthy through trade with Yemen (southern Arabia), Syria, and kingdoms in Africa. Over time, a handful of families, or **clans**, had come to rule the city. These families would not share their fortune with the weaker, poorer clans who lived there.

Makkah was also a religious center. According to the Qur'an, Abraham had built the cube-shaped shrine, the Ka'bah, centuries before, to honor God. In Muhammad's day, according to Islamic teaching, most Arabs followed **polytheism**, and the Ka'bah housed hundreds of statues of different gods. Pilgrims from all over Arabia came to worship at Makkah.

Many Arabs lived a nomadic life in the desert environment. There was no central government in Arabia. Instead, Arabs pledged loyalty to their clans and to larger tribes. These tribes sometimes fought each other to capture territory, animals, goods, watering places, and even wives. When someone from one tribe was killed during a raid, his family was honor-bound to avenge that death. This led to long periods of fighting among tribes.

Although Arabs on the peninsula were not united as a nation, they shared cultural ties, especially language. Arabic poetry celebrated the history of the Arab people, the beauty of their land, and their way of life. Poets and singers from different tribes competed at gatherings held at the markets and during pilgrimages.

This was the culture into which Muhammad was born. Let's turn now to the story of how he founded one of the world's major religions.

## Section 3 - Muhammad's Early Life



As you have learned, around 570 C.E., a boy named Muhammad was born in Makkah. Muhammad's early life was ordinary. Few people who were not members of his **clan**, the Hashim, noted his birth. His father was dead, and the clan was not very wealthy. However, the Hashim had prestige, as they belonged to the leading tribe in Makkah.

Following custom, Muhammad's mother sent her baby to live with a family of nomads in the desert. There, the young boy learned about traditional Arab values, such as being kind to strangers and helping orphans, widows, and other needy members of society.



When Muhammad was about six, he returned to the city and his mother. They had little time together, because she soon died. Then Muhammad was left in the care of his grandfather, a highly regarded leader of the Hashim clan. Upon the grandfather's death, Muhammad's uncle, Abu Talib, a respected merchant, took charge of the orphan. Abu Talib also became head of the clan.

As a boy, Muhammad tended his family's flocks of sheep and goats. When he was about 12 years old, he accompanied his uncle on a trading journey. They traveled far north to Syria. On this journey, Muhammad gained his first experiences outside Arabia.

As Muhammad grew up, he took on more duties and made more trading journeys. He became a merchant who enjoyed a reputation throughout Makkah for his honesty. People called him *al-Amin*, which means "the Trustworthy."

Muhammad was still a young man when he began managing caravans for a widow named Khadijah, who ran a trading business. Muhammad earned her great profits. Impressed with his abilities and honesty, Khadijah proposed marriage. Muhammad accepted her offer, and when he was about 25, they married. Muhammad and Khadijah had several children, but only their daughter Fatima had children of her own. She continued the bloodline of Muhammad.

## Section 4 - The Call to Prophethood



For the next 15 years, Muhammad made his living as a merchant. Although he enjoyed success in business, he also cared about spiritual matters. He often spent time at prayer and meditation in the mountains around Makkah. He was concerned about the effects of wealth and the worship of idols on his city.

In about 610 C.E., Muhammad went to meditate in a cave in the mountains. There, according to Islamic teachings, Muhammad received the call to be a **prophet**, or messenger of Allah. *Allah* is the Arabic word for God. The same word for God, Allah, is used by Arab Jews and Arab Christians. Muhammad later described the remarkable events of that night. He told of being visited by the angel Gabriel who brought revelations, or revealed teachings, from God. Gabriel told Muhammad, "You are the messenger of God."

According to Islamic tradition, at first Muhammad feared that he might be going mad. But Khadijah consoled Muhammad and expressed her faith that God had chosen him as a prophet to spread his words to the people. Khadijah became the first convert to Islam.

Islam is based on **monotheism**, or the belief in a single God. This God, Muhammad taught, was the same God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Through Gabriel, God told Muhammad to teach others to practice compassion, honesty, and justice.

According to Muslim tradition, the angel Gabriel continued to reveal messages over the next 22 years. At first, Muhammad confided these messages only to family and friends, including his cousin Ali and a close friend, Abu Bakr (ah-BOOH BAHK-uhr). Gradually, a small group of followers developed at Makkah. They were called **Muslims**, which means “those who surrender to God.” For Muslims, Islam was a way of life and the basis for creating a just society. For example, at the time women had few rights. Muslims granted more rights to women and ensured their equality before God.

Though Muhammad apparently could neither read nor write, he said that the messages from Gabriel were imprinted on his mind and heart. His followers also memorized them. Eventually, some followers wrote down these words and collected them in the Qur'an (also spelled *Koran*), the holy book of Islam. The poetic beauty of this book helped lend **credibility** to Muhammad's claim that it contained the words of God. It also attracted new believers to Islam.

## **Section 5 - Muhammad's Teachings Meet with Rejection**

Around 613 C.E., Muhammad began to preach to other Makkans. He taught that people must worship the one God, that all believers in God were equal, and that the rich should share their wealth. He urged Makkans to take care of orphans and the poor and to improve the status of women.

Some members of Muhammad's clan became Muslims. People from other clans and social classes also joined him. Most Makkans, however, rejected Muhammad's teachings. Makkah's leaders did not want to share their wealth. They also feared that if Muhammad grew stronger, he would seize political power. Merchants worried that if people stopped worshipping their gods, they might stop their pilgrimages to Makkah. That would be bad for their businesses. Muhammad's monotheistic teachings also disturbed Arabs who did not want to give up their gods.

To prevent the spread of the prophet's message, some Arabs called Muhammad a liar. Some persecuted his followers. Despite this treatment, the Muslims would not give up their faith. Muhammad was also protected by Abu Talib, the head of the Hashim clan. Anyone who harmed a member of the clan would face Abu Talib's vengeance.

As the number of Muslims grew, the powerful clans of Makkah started a **boycott** to make Muhammad's followers give up Islam. For three years, the Hashim clan suffered as Makkans refused to do business with them. Although they were threatened with starvation, the boycott failed to break their will. These difficult years, however, took their toll on Abu Talib and Khadijah. In 619, these trusted family members died.

While these losses were terrible for Muhammad, that year he reported a miraculous event. Muslim tradition tells the story of the Night Journey in which a winged horse took Muhammad to Jerusalem, the city toward which early Muslims had directed their prayers. Jerusalem was already holy to Jews and Christians. There, Muhammad met and prayed with earlier prophets, such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Then the horse guided Muhammad through the seven levels of heaven, and Muhammad met God. To this day, Jerusalem is a holy city for Muslims.

## Section 6 - From the Migration to Madinah to the End of His Life



With Abu Talib's death, Muhammad lost his protector. As Muslims came under more attacks, Muhammad sought a new home. A group of Arab pilgrims from a town called Yathrib visited Makkah and converted to Islam. They asked Muhammad to move to Yathrib to bring peace between feuding tribes. In return, they pledged to protect him.

In 622, Muhammad and his followers left Makkah on a journey known as the *hijrah* (HEEJ-rah). Yathrib was renamed Madinah (also spelled *Medina*), short for “City of the Prophet.” The year of the hijrah later became the first year of the Muslim calendar.

Over the next six years in Madinah, Muhammad developed a new Muslim community as more Arabs converted to Islam. Muslims pledged to be loyal and helpful to each other. They emphasized the brotherhood of faith over the ties of family, clan, and tribe. Even though Muhammad and the Qur'an criticized Jews and Christians on some aspects of their beliefs, Muhammad asked his followers to respect Christians and Jews. Like Muslims, these “People of the Book” believe in one God. Muhammad asked that they be treated as lawful members of society.

The Makkans, however, still felt threatened. In 624, fighting broke out between the Muslims and Makkans, and the Muslims won that battle. A few years later, the Makkans staged a [siege](#) of Madinah, but failed to capture the city.

The victory against the Makkan troops—and the ideas of charity, generosity, and forgiveness that Muhammad preached—convinced other tribes to convert to Islam. As Islam spread across Arabia, the Makkans agreed to a truce that would allow the Muslims to make their pilgrimage to Makkah. In 630, however, they broke the truce. In response, Muhammad's army marched on Makkah, and the city's leaders surrendered without a battle. Muhammad and his followers entered the city and destroyed the idols (statues of gods) at the Ka'bah. They rededicated the shrine solely to one God. Muhammad then forgave his former enemies. The war had ended.

In March 632, Muhammad led his final pilgrimage to Makkah. In the town of his birth, he delivered his Last Sermon. He reminded Muslims to treat each other well and to be faithful to their community. Shortly after his return to Madinah, Muhammad died.



## Section 7 - The Four Caliphs



By the time of Muhammad's death, most of central and southern Arabia was under the control of Muslims. Now, his followers had to choose a new leader to preserve the community. They chose Abu Bakr, Muhammad's friend and father-in-law.

Abu Bakr became the first *caliph* (KAY-lif), or Muslim ruler. He and the three leaders who followed him came to be known to a large group of Muslims as the "rightly guided" caliphs. These caliphs were said by this group of Muslims to have followed the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad. The Muslim government led by the caliphs was called the *caliphate*.

When some tribes tried to break away, Abu Bakr used military force to reunite the community. He also completed the **unification** of Arabia. Then Muslims began to carry the teachings of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

After Abu Bakr died in 634, Caliph Umar (ooh-MAR) continued to expand the Muslim empire by conquest. In addition to spreading the faith of Islam, conquest allowed Muslims to gain new lands, resources, and goods.

By 643, the Muslim empire included lands in Iraq, Persia, the eastern Mediterranean, and North Africa. Umar set up governments and tax systems

in all these provinces. Among the taxes was one levied on Jews and Christians and other non-Muslims. But Umar also let Jews and Christians practice their beliefs as they liked within their own homes and places of worship. It was unlawful for Muslims to damage Jewish or Christian holy places. In Egypt, treaties allowed for freedom of worship in exchange for the payment of tribute. Later, Muslims completed similar treaties with the Nubians, a people who lived to the south of Egypt.

Upon Umar's death in 644, Uthman became the third caliph. Uthman was a member of the Umayyad (ooh-MY-ed) clan. He helped unite Muslims when he oversaw the creation of an official edition of the Qur'an. But he also awarded high posts to relatives. People in the provinces complained that he ruled unfairly. Discontent spread, and rebels killed Uthman in 656.

Ali ibn Abi Talib (AH-lee i-ben ah-bee TAH-lib), Muhammad's cousin and his daughter Fatima's husband, agreed to become the fourth caliph. Some important Muslims challenged his rule, which led to civil war. Ali sent forces against them, fought two major battles, and won one. But when he ended the other through negotiation, he lost supporters. In 661, one of these former supporters murdered Ali.

## Section 8 - The Umayyad Dynasty



Soon after Ali's death, Mu'awiyah (mooh-AH-wee-YAH), the leader of the Umayyads, claimed the caliphate. Most Muslims, called the Sunnis (SOOH-nee-z), came to accept him. But a minority of Muslims, known as the Shi'ah (SHEE-ah), or "party" of Ali, refused to do so. They believed that only people directly descended from Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali should be caliph. The schism between the Sunnis and Shi'ah lasts to this day.

Mu'awiyah put down a revolt by Ali's supporters. He held on to the caliphate. He also founded the Umayyad dynasty. In 661, the Umayyads moved their capital to Damascus, Syria. From there, the caliphs ruled the huge Muslim empire for close to 100 years.

Slowly, the lands of the Muslim empire took on more elements of Arab culture. Muslims introduced the Arabic language. Along with Islam, acceptance of Arabic helped unite the diverse people of the empire. In addition, Arabs took over as top officials. People bought goods with new Arab coins. While it was not policy to force conversion to Islam, some non-Muslims began to embrace the new faith for a variety of reasons. These included personal belief in the message of Islam and social pressure to join the people of the ruling group.



The Muslim empire continued to expand. The Umayyad caliphs sent armies into central Asia and northwestern India. In 711, Muslim armies began their conquests of present-day Spain. However, at the Battle of Tours in 732, forces under the Frankish king Charles Martel turned the Muslims back in France. This battle marked the farthest extent of Muslim advances into Europe, outside of Spain.

Muslims held on to land in Spain, where Islamic states lasted for almost 800 years. Muslims in Spain built some of the greatest cities of medieval Europe. Their capital city, Cordoba, became a center of learning where Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars shared ideas. Through their work, Muslim culture made important advances in arts, science, technology, and literature.

## Summary

In this chapter, you learned about the life of Muhammad and the early spread of Islam. Muhammad and his followers unified Arabia and created a great empire.

**Arabia in the 6th Century** When Muhammad was born, Arabia was not a united country. Arabs did, however, share ties through trade, as well as the Arabic language and culture.

**The Life of the Prophet Muhammad** Born in Makkah, Muhammad became the prophet of Islam after he received revelations from the angel Gabriel, which were recorded in the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. However, many in Makkah opposed Islam. In the year 622, Muhammad and his followers moved to Madinah, where they established a Muslim community. By the time Muhammad died in 632, people throughout Arabia had accepted the teachings of Islam and the Qur'an as the words of God.

**The Four Caliphs and the Umayyad Dynasty** The caliphs who followed Muhammad greatly expanded the lands under Islamic rule, despite struggles over leadership and civil war. In 661, the Umayyad caliphs moved their capital to Syria. By the mid-700s, the Muslim empire included Spain, North Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia and India. Along with the Arabic language, the acceptance of Islam helped unify this vast empire.

## Vocabulary:

**Islam**: the religious faith of Muslims founded by the prophet Muhammad

**Muslim**: a follower of the Islamic faith

**Muhammad**: a man born around 570 C.E. who taught the faith of Islam

**Prophet**: a person who speaks or interprets the words of God

**Makkah (Mecca)**: city in Saudi Arabia, birthplace of Muhammad and a holy city for Muslims

**Hagar**: Sarah's (Abraham's wife) servant. Abraham's second wife, mother of Ishmael

**Qur'an**: Islam's sacred book, believed to be word of God spoken to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel

**Five Pillars of Islam**: the most basic acts of worship for Muslims: declaration of faith, prayer, charity, fasting, and making a pilgrimage to Makkah

**Monotheism**: the belief in a single God

**Clan**: a large group of family members or friends

**Boycott**: a refusal to do business with an organization or group