

Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah

Read the following passage, and answer the questions. Use a separate sheet for your responses. Be prepared to participate in class discussion.

In a cave at the foot of Mount Hira near Mecca, where he had spent six months in solitary meditation, the vision came to Muhammad. The Angel Gabriel roused him from his bed with the stern command: "Proclaim!" Rubbing his eyes, the startled Muhammad gasped, "But what shall I proclaim?" Suddenly his throat tightened as though the angel were choking him. Again came the command: "Proclaim!" And again the terrified Muhammad felt the choking grip. "Proclaim!" ordered the angel for a third time. "Proclaim in the name of the Lord, the Creator who created man from a clot of blood! Proclaim! Your Lord is most gracious. It is he who has taught man by the pen that which he does not know."

This it was, according to Islamic tradition, that an unremarkable Arab trader from Mecca was inspired to preach God's word in the year A.D. 610. Compared with Jesus or the Buddha, information about the life of the man who became known as the Messenger of Allah is relatively abundant, although the facts have been embellished with pious folklore. Some have claimed that at Muhammad's birth the palace of the Persian emperor trembled, or that a mysterious light ignited at his mother's breast, shining all the way to Syria, eight hundred miles away. It was said that his body cast no shadow and that when his hair fell into a fire it would not burn. Muhammad himself disdained any miraculous claims, insisting that he was merely the all-too-human conduit through which God had revealed himself.

It is known that the Prophet was born about A.D. 570 to a member of the respected Meccan clan of Hashim. His father died shortly before Muhammad was born, and his mother when the boy was only six. Two years later, his doting grandfather Abd al-Muttalib died, leaving the orphan in the care of a poor uncle, Abu Talib. As a youth, Muhammad was set to work tending his uncle's herds; he later recalled that task as a mark of divine favor. "God sent no prophet who was not a herdsman," he told his disciples. "Moses was a herdsman. David was a herdsman. I, too, was commissioned for prophethood while I grazed my family's cattle."

As a young man, Muhammad was exposed to the currents of religious debate then swirling through the Middle East. He would listen avidly as Jews and Christians argued over their faiths. Those discussions may have fed his dissatisfaction with the traditional polytheistic religion of the Arabs, who believed in a panoply of tribal gods and jinn, headed by a deity known as Allah. Says Muhammad's French biographer, Maxime Rodinson: "Both Jews and Christians despised the Arabs, regarding them as savages who did not even possess an organized church."

At twenty-five Muhammad accepted a marriage proposal from Khadijah, a rich Meccan widow fifteen years his senior, for whom he had led a successful caravan. With his financial security assured by Khadijah's wealth and business, he began to venture into the desert, to contemplate and pray, as had other Arab holy men before him.

According to legend, Muhammad had earned a reputation as a wise and saintly man even before his first revelation from the angel on Mount Hira. Looking out from the balcony of his Mecca home one day, he saw the members of four clans arguing over which of them should be allowed to carry the Black Stone, a huge meteorite that the Arabs regarded as sacred, to its new resting place in a rebuilt shrine called the Ka'ba. Unknown to Muhammad, they had resolved to let the first man who walked into the

sanctuary decide the matter. Entering the holy place, Muhammad proposed a satisfactory compromise: placing the Black Stone on a blanket, he instructed each tribe to lift one corner. Then he personally laid the meteorite in its new niche.

At forty, Muhammad began to preach the new faith of Islam, which was gradually being revealed to him on his sojourns in the desert. Some of his religion was familiar to Arabs who knew about the monotheistic teachings of Jews and Christians. His countrymen, for example, could readily accept Muhammad's assertion that Allah, long regarded as the highest of the desert gods, was the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians. But Meccan traders felt threatened by Muhammad's growing power. Both Jews and Christians questioned his claim that he was revealing the true word of God to the Arabs, in effect joining them as "People of the Book." In 622, after being harassed by his opponents, Muhammad and his followers escaped to Medina in a migration known as the *hijra*.

To a growing body of converts, Muhammad began to elaborate on his new religion. Revelations came to him in trances; his descriptions of those encounters, memorized and recorded by his adherents, were later collected as the Koran. As his followers grew in strength and numbers, Muhammad began a series of raids on Meccan caravans, which led to several indecisive battles with their avenging war parties. In 628 the Meccans agreed to let Muhammad's followers make their pilgrimage to the Ka'ba, which the new faith continued to regard as a sacred shrine. Muslims believe it is the spot where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Ishmael at God's command. Two years later the Prophet led an army of ten thousand into his former city, taking control in a bloodless victory.

For all the pious legends that grew up even in his lifetime, Muhammad remained a humble and, in some ways, unfulfilled man. He occasionally incurred the wrath of his wives and concubines. All of his sons died in childhood, leaving him with no male heir. In 632 he led a pilgrimage to Mecca where he declared, "I have perfected your religion and completed my favors for you." Three months later he fell ill in Medina and died. To his zealous followers went the task of spreading the word of Allah, not only throughout Arabia but far beyond it as well.¹

1. Who was Muhammad? When and where did he live?
2. What were some of the religious needs that he addressed?
3. Why did some question his new faith?
4. What is the Koran?
5. How did he spread the new faith?
6. Why is the pilgrimage to Mecca an important part of the Islamic faith?
7. How does the life of Muhammad differ from the lives of other prophets about whom you know?

Explaining Islam

Read the following explanation, and answer the questions. Use a separate sheet of paper for your responses.

Muhammad taught that there is only one God, Allah, who is the creator of all things. Allah is the same God who spoke through the prophets Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and Muslims believe that Muhammad was chosen to complete and seal the long series of revelations by Allah to various prophets.

Muhammad's revelations were recorded in a sacred book called the Koran, which contains many references to the Old and New Testaments. It talks about heaven and hell and a day of judgment. It stresses a belief in angels and spirits, especially an evil spirit. The Koran also contains laws governing the daily life of Muslims and is supplemented by a book called the Hadith, or Sunna, which treats matters not addressed in the Koran. Islamic devotion is based on five articles of faith called the Five Pillars.

The Five Pillars of Islam

1. **Recital of the words "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet."**
Muslims say this many times a day, for they believe the oneness of God must be engraved in their minds and hearts. A sincere public recital of this creed is all that is necessary to become a Muslim. The recital also reminds Muslims that Muhammad was a human prophet and must not be worshiped.
2. **Prayer**
Muslims are required to pray five times a day: dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall. On Fridays, services are held in mosques at noon. If there is no mosque available, Muslims pray wherever they happen to be, for in their faith, the whole world is a mosque or temple of prayer before God. When Muslims come together, any one of them may lead the prayer, for Islam has no organized clergy. However, all face toward Mecca as a reminder of the unity of Islam.
3. **Charity**
Muslims are required to share what they have with each other. To show appreciation for God's generosity, Muslims pay a tax each year on their possessions, and Islam tries to develop a social conscience, an obligation to help ease the suffering of others, which is outlined in the Koran and the Hadith.
4. **Fasting during Ramadan**
During the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, called Ramadan, Muhammad received his revelations. In that same month, years later, he also fled to Medina. So during Ramadan, Muslims fast daily from sunrise to sunset (this includes restrictions on earthly pleasures, as well as on eating and drinking) to remind all of the need for constant help from God.
5. **Pilgrimage to the Ka'ba, the shrine in the Great Mosque of Mecca**
Islam teaches that Muslims should visit this shrine at least once, if possible. No distinctions are made because of a person's wealth or status. All are equal before Allah, and so all pilgrims dress alike in plain white cloth when visiting the Great Mosque, symbolizing not only the equality but also the international community of Islam. The pilgrimage is also referred to as the hajj.

Those who practice the Five Pillars of Islam are striving for the highest form of Islam, called Sufism, or a personal experience of God. Sufis are traditionally missionaries of Islam, or residents of monasteries where they live lives of prayer, self-sacrifice, and meditation.

Although Muhammad taught that aggressiveness was not compatible with Islam, he and his followers for generations lived in times and areas where fighting meant survival. The concept of jihad or holy war as described in the Islamic holy books refers to many forms of striving for the faith, such as an inner struggle for purification, or spreading the message of Islamic observance and justice. War for faith is acceptable, but it was not to be practiced regularly. Only with the coming of new converts like the Seljuk Turks was this used widely against non-Arabs.

After the death of Muhammad, the question of succession caused a political division within Islam between the Hashemite clan, of which Muhammad had been a member, and the Ummiad clan. The argument resulted in the deaths of both clan leaders, Othman of the Ummiad and Ali of the Hashemite. This aroused even more fighting, and the winning clan, Ummiad under Muawiya, established itself as the ruling dynasty.

A religious split also resulted. Sunni and Shia sects emerged on the opposite sides of the question of who should lead Islam. The majority of Muslims today are Sunni, who believe the position of caliph (the successor to Muhammad) should be elective. The minority, the Shites of the Shia sect, believe that Muhammad desired his successors to be descendants of Ali, his son-in-law, who was married to his daughter Fatima. This division within Islam has never been resolved, and it remains one cause of the fighting in the Middle East in modern times.

1. What is the first pillar of Islam?
2. What are the other four pillars?
3. What is jihad?
4. Who are the Sufis?
5. Explain the division of Islam between the Sunnis and Shites.
6. According to your knowledge, which Islamic sect has been responsible for much of the hostage situations and terrorism in the modern world? Why is this the case?
7. From what you have learned, how do you believe present-day sects would justify their terrorist actions (to Muhammad)?
8. What are the two books by which Islam is governed as a faith? Which one contains Muhammad's revelations?
9. The name *Muslim* means "one who submits," and the word *Islam* means "submission." To whom do Muslims submit?
10. Why is Muhammad known by Muslims as the Seal of the Prophets?