**Muhammad**

Ka ‘Bah



Prophet's Mosque



Museum



**Muhammad,** in full Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib ibn Hāshim (born 570, Mecca, Arabia [now in Saudi Arabia]—died June 8, 632, Medina), founder of the religion of [Islam](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/295507/Islam), accepted by Muslims throughout the world as the last of the [prophets of God](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/479082/prophecy).

Although his name is now invoked in reverence several billion times every day, Muhammad was the most-reviled figure in the history of the West from the 7th century until quite recent times. Because Muhammad is one of the most influential figures in history, his life, deeds, and thoughts have been debated by followers and opponents over the centuries, which makes a biography of him difficult to write. At every turn, both the Islamic understanding of Muhammad and the rationalist interpretation of him by Western scholars, which grew out of 18th- and 19th-century philosophies such as [positivism](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/471865/positivism), must be considered. Moreover, on the basis of both historical evidence and the Muslim understanding of Muhammad as the Prophet, a response must be fashioned to Christian polemical writings characterizing Muhammad as an apostate if not the [Antichrist](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/27850/Antichrist). These date back to the early Middle Ages and still influence to some degree the general Western conception of him. It is essential, therefore, both to examine the historical record—though not necessarily on the basis of secularist assumptions—and to make clear the Islamic understanding of Muhammad.

**Methodology and terminology**

**Sources for the study of the Prophet**

The sources for the study of Muhammad are multifarious and include, first and foremost, the [Qurʾān](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/487666/Quran) (or Koran), the sacred scriptures of Islam. Although the Qurʾān is considered by Muslims to be the word of God and not of Muhammad, it nevertheless reveals the most essential aspects associated with Muhammad. There are also the sayings of Muhammad himself ([Hadith](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/251132/Hadith)) and accounts of his actions ([Sunnah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/573993/Sunnah)). Furthermore, there are biographies (*[sīrah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1237759/sirah)*) of him going back to the works of Ibn Isḥāq (*c.* 704–767) in the 9th-century recensions of Ibn Hishām and Yūnus ibn Bukayr. Works of sacred history by later writers such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Thaʿālibī also contain extensive biographies of Muhammad. Then there are the accounts of the *maghāzī* (“battles”) that determined the fate of the early Islamic community. The most important of these works is the *[Kitāb al-maghāzī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/319562/Kitab-al-maghazi)* of [al-Wāqidī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/635530/al-Waqidi) (747–823). The *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* of Ibn Saʿd (died 844/845) is another important source on the life of Muhammad, his companions, and later figures in Islamic history. Finally, there are oral traditions. Although usually discounted by positivist historians, oral tradition plays a major role in the Islamic understanding of Muhammad, just as it does in the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ or the Jewish understanding of Moses and the other ancient prophets of Israel.

Beyond these there are later Western works, many of which, from the 18th century onward, distanced themselves from the polemical histories of earlier Christian authors. These more historically oriented treatments, which generally reject the prophethood of Muhammad, are coloured by the Western philosophical and theological framework of their authors. Many of these studies reflect much historical research, and most pay more attention to human, social, economic, and political factors than to religious, theological, and spiritual matters. It was not until the latter part of the 20th century that Western authors combined rigorous scholarship as understood in the modern West with empathy toward the subject at hand and, especially, awareness of the religious and spiritual realities involved in the study of the life of the founder of a major world religion.

**Names and titles of the Prophet**

The most common name of Muhammad of Islam, Muhammad (“the Glorified One”), is part of the daily call to prayer ([*adhān*](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/5796/adhan)); following the attestation to the oneness of God, the believer proclaims, “Verily, I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God” (*Ashhadu anna Muḥammadan rasūl Allāh*). When this name is uttered among Muslims, it is always followed by the phrase *ṣalla Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam* (“may God’s blessings and peace be upon him”), just as, whenever Muslims mention the name of other prophets such as [Abraham](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1544/Abraham), Moses, or Jesus, they recite the words *ʿalayhi al-salām* (“upon him be [God’s] peace”). Muhammad also became widely known in Europe by diverse forms of the name such as Mahon, Mahomés, Mahun, Mahum, and Mahumet (all French), Machmet (German), and Maúmet (Old Icelandic). Moreover, Muhammad is the most popular male name in the Islamic world either by itself or in combination with other names such as ʿAlī and Ḥusayn.

Muhammad, however, has many other names, including “sacred names,” which Muslims believe were given to him by God and by which he is called in various contexts. Traditionally, 99 names for him are commonly used in litanies and prayers. Among the most often used and also central to the understanding of his nature is Aḥmad (“the Most Glorified”), which is considered an inner and celestial name for Muhammad. Over the centuries Muslim authorities have believed that, when Christ spoke of the coming reign of the [Paraclete](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/269934/Holy-Spirit), he was referring to Aḥmad. Also of great importance are the names that identify Muhammad as the Prophet, including Nabī (“Prophet”) and Rasūl Allāh (“the Messenger of God”). Other names of the Prophet are Ṭaha (“the Pure Purifier and Guide”), Yāsīn (“the Perfect Man”), Muṣṭafā (“the One Chosen”), ʿAbd Allāh (“the Perfect Servant of God”), Ḥabīb Allāh (“the Beloved of God”), Dhikr Allāh (“the Remembrance of God”), Amīn (“the Trusted One”), Sirāj (“the Torch Lighting the True Path”), Munīr (“the Illuminator of the Universe”), Hudā (“the Guide to the Truth”), Ghiyāth (“the Helper”), and Niʿmat Allāh (“the Gift of God”). These and his many other names play a major role in daily Muslim piety and in the practice of [Sufism](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/571823/Sufism). An understanding of their meaning is essential to gaining any serious knowledge of the Islamic view of Muhammad or what some have called Islamic prophetology.

**The life of Muhammad**

**Genealogical roots and early life**

Both before the rise of Islam and during the Islamic period, Arab tribes paid great attention to [genealogy](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/228297/genealogy) and guarded their knowledge of it with meticulous care. In fact, during Islamic history a whole science of genealogy (*ʿilm al-anṣāb*) developed that is of much historical significance. In the pre-Islamic period, however, this knowledge remained unwritten, and for that very reason it has not been taken seriously by Western historians relying only on written records. For Muslims, however, the genealogy of Muhammad has always been certain. They trace his ancestry to Ismāʿīl (Ishmael) and hence to the prophet Abraham. This fact was accepted even by medieval European opponents of Islam but has been questioned by modern historians.

According to traditional Islamic sources, Muhammad was born in [Mecca](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/371782/Mecca) in “the Year of the Elephant,” which corresponds to the year ad 570, the date modern Western scholars cite as at least his approximate birth date. A single event gave the Year of the Elephant its name when [Abrahah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1540/Abraha), the king of Abyssinia, sent an overwhelming force to Mecca to destroy the [Kaʿbah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/309173/Kabah), the sanctuary Muslims believe to have been built by Adam and reconstructed by Abraham and which Abrahah viewed as a rival to his newly constructed temple in Sanaa in Yemen. According to tradition, the elephant that marched at the head of Abrahah’s army knelt as it approached Mecca, refusing to go farther. Soon the sky blackened with birds that pelted the army with pebbles, driving them off in disarray. Thus, the sanctuary that Muslims consider an earthly reflection of the celestial temple was saved, though at the time it served Arab tribes who (with the exception of the *ḥanīf*s, or primordialists) disregarded Abrahamic monotheism.

Soon after this momentous event in the history of Arabia, Muhammad was born in Mecca. His father, ʿAbd Allāh, and his mother, Āminah, belonged to the family of the [Banū Hāshim](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/256540/Banu-Hashim), a branch of the powerful [Quraysh](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/487720/Quraysh), the ruling tribe of Mecca, that also guarded its most sacred shrine, the Kaʿbah. Because ʿAbd Allāh died before Muhammad’s birth, Āminah placed all her hopes in the newborn child. Without a father, Muhammad experienced many hardships even though his grandfather [ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/691/Abd-al-Muttalib) was a leader in the Meccan community. The emphasis in Islamic society on generosity to orphans is related to the childhood experiences of Muhammad as well as to his subsequent love for orphans and the Qurʾānic injunctions concerning their treatment.

In order for Muhammad to master Arabic in its pure form and become well acquainted with Arab traditions, Āminah sent him as a baby into the desert, as was the custom of all great Arab families at that time. In the desert, it was believed, one learned the qualities of self-discipline, nobility, and freedom. A sojourn in the desert also offered escape from the domination of time and the corruption of the city. Moreover, it provided the opportunity to become a better speaker through exposure to the eloquent Arabic spoken by the Bedouin. In this way the bond with the desert and its purity and sobriety was renewed for city dwellers in every generation. Āminah chose a poor woman named [Ḥalīmah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/252552/Halimah-bint-Abi-Dhuayb) from the tribe of Banū Saʿd, a branch of the Hawāzin, to suckle and nurture her son. And so the young Muhammad spent several years in the desert.

It was also at this time that, according to tradition, two angels appeared to Muhammad in the guise of men, opened his breast, and purified his heart with snow. This episode, which exemplifies the Islamic belief that God purified his prophet and protected him from sin, was also described by Muhammad: “There came unto me two men, clothed in white, with a gold basin full of snow. Then they laid upon me, and, splitting open my breast, they brought forth my heart. This likewise they split open and took from it a black clot which they cast away. Then they washed my heart and my breast with the snow” (Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life, Based on the Earliest Sources*, 1991). Muhammad then repeated the verse, found in the Hadith, “Satan toucheth every son of Adam the day his mother beareth him, save only Mary and her son.” Amazed by this event and also noticing a mole on Muhammad’s back (later identified in the traditional sources as the sign of prophecy), Ḥalīmah and her husband, Ḥārith, took the boy back to Mecca.

Muhammad’s mother died when he was six years old. Now completely orphaned, he was brought up by his grandfather [ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/691/Abd-al-Muttalib), who also died two years later. He was then placed in the care of [Abū Ṭālib](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/2346/Abu-Talib), Muhammad’s uncle and the father of ʿAlī, Muhammad’s cousin. Later in life Muhammad would repay this kindness by taking [ʿAlī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/15223/Ali) into his household and giving his daughter [Fāṭimah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/202575/Fatimah) to him in marriage.

It is believed that Muhammad grew into a young man of unusual physical beauty as well as generosity of character. His sense of fairness and justice were so revered that the people of Mecca often went to him for arbitration and knew him as al-Amīn, “the Trusted One.” His striking appearance is the subject of countless poems in various Islamic languages. Muhammad, according to ʿAlī,

*was neither tall nor lanky nor short and stocky, but of medium height. His hair was neither crispy curled nor straight but moderately wavy. He was not overweight and his face was not plump. He had a round face. His complexion was white tinged with redness. He had big black eyes with long lashes. His brows were heavy and his shoulders broad. He had soft skin, with fine hair covering the line from mid chest to navel. The palms of his hands and the soles of his feet were firmly padded. He walked with a firm gait, as if striding downhill. On his back between his shoulders lay the Seal of Prophethood [a mole], for he was the last of the prophets. (Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti,* The Name & the Named: The Divine Attributes of God*, 2000)*

Islamic sources indicate that others recognized the mole as the sign of prophethood, including the Christian monk Baḥīrā, who met Muhammad when the Prophet joined Abū Ṭālib on a caravan trip to Syria.

When he was 25 years old, Muhammad received a marriage proposal from a wealthy Meccan woman, [Khadījah bint al-Khuwaylid](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316024/Khadijah), whose affairs he was conducting. Despite the fact that she was 15 years older than he, Muhammad accepted the proposal, and he did not take another wife until after her death (though polygyny was permitted and common). She bore him two sons, both of whom died young. It is from the first son, Qāsim, that one of the names of the Prophet, Abūʾ al-Qāsim (“the Father of Qāsim”), derives. She also bore him four daughters, Zaynab, Ruqayyah, Umm Kulthūm, and [Fāṭimah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/202575/Fatimah). The youngest, Fāṭimah, who is called the second Mary, had the greatest impact on history of all his children. Shīʿite imams and sayyids or sharifs are thought to be descendants of Muhammad, from the lineage of Fāṭimah and ʿAlī. Khadījah herself is considered one of the foremost female saints in Islam and, along with Fāṭimah, plays a very important role in Islamic piety and in eschatological events connected with the souls of women.

By age 35, Muhammad had become a very respected figure in Mecca and had taken ʿAlī into his household. When he was asked, according to Islamic tradition, to arbitrate a dispute concerning which tribe should place the holy black stone in the corner of the newly built [Kaʿbah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/309173/Kabah), Muhammad resolved the conflict by putting his cloak on the ground with the stone in the middle and having a representative of each tribe lift a corner of it until the stone reached the appropriate height to be set in the wall. His reputation stemmed, in part, from his deep religiosity and attention to prayer. He often would leave the city and retire to the desert for prayer and meditation. Moreover, before the advent of his prophecy, he received visions that he described as being like “the breaking of the light of dawn.” It was during one of these periods of retreat, when he was 40 years old and meditating in a cave called al-Ḥirāʾ in the Mountain of Light (Jabal al-Nūr) near Mecca, that Muhammad experienced the presence of the [archangel](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/223206/Gabriel) [Gabriel](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/223206/Gabriel) and the process of the Qurʾānic revelation began.

### The advent of the [revelation](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/500286/revelation) and the Meccan period

In the month of [Ramadan](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/490415/Ramadan), in the year 610, Gabriel, in the form of a man, [appeared to Muhammad](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/497327/religious-experience), asked him to “recite” (iqraʾ), then overwhelmed him with a very strong embrace. Muhammad told the stranger that he was not a reciter. But the angel repeated his demand and embrace three times, before the verses of the [Qurʾān](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/487666/Quran), beginning with “Recite in the Name of thy Lord who created,” were revealed. Although the command iqraʾ is sometimes translated as “read,” “recite” is a more appropriate translation because, according to traditional Islamic sources, the Prophet was ummī (“unlettered”), meaning that his soul was unsullied by human knowledge and virginal before it received the divine Word. Many Western scholars and some modern Muslim commentators have provided other connotations for the word ummī, but “unlettered” has been the traditionally accepted meaning.

In any case, Muhammad fled the cave thinking that he had become possessed by the [jinn](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/304033/jinni), or demons. When he heard a voice saying, “Thou art the messenger of God and I am Gabriel,” Muhammad ran down the mountain. Gazing upward, he saw the man who had spoken to him in his real form, an angel so immense that in whatever direction the Prophet looked the celestial figure covered the sky, which had turned green, the official colour of Islam to this day. Muhammad returned home, and, when the effect of the great awe in his soul abated, he told Khadījah what had happened. She believed his account and sent for her blind cousin [Waraqah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/635703/Waraqah-ibn-Nawfal), a Christian who possessed much religious wisdom. Having heard the account, Waraqah also confirmed the fact that Muhammad had been chosen as God’s prophet, and shortly afterward Muhammad received a second revelation. As the Prophet said later, the revelation would either come through the words of the archangel or be directly revealed to him in his heart. The revelation also was accompanied by the sound of bell-like reverberations. According to Islamic tradition, this was the beginning of the process of the revelation of the Qurʾān that lasted some 23 years and ended shortly before the Prophet’s death.

Muhammad first preached his message to the members of his family, then to a few friends, and finally, three years after the advent of the revelation, to the public at large. The first to accept Muhammad’s call to become Muslims were Khadījah; [ʿAlī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/15223/Ali); Zayd ibn al-Ḥārith, who was like a son to the Prophet; and [Abū Bakr](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/2153/Abu-Bakr), a venerable member of the Meccan community who was a close friend of the Prophet. This small group was the centre from which Islam grew in ever-wider circles. Besides his family and friends, a number of prominent Meccans embraced Islam. However, most influential figures and families rejected his call, especially those prominent in trade. Even within his family there were skeptics. Although Muhammad gained the support of many of the [Banū Hāshim](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/256540/Banu-Hashim), his uncle Abū Lahab, a major leader of the [Quraysh](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/487720/Quraysh), remained adamantly opposed to Islam and Muhammad’s mission. These naysayers feared that the new religion, based on the oneness of God and unequivocally opposed to idolatry, would destroy the favoured position of the Kaʿbah as the centre of the religious cults of various Arab tribes and hence jeopardize the commerce that accompanied the pilgrimage to Mecca to worship idols kept in or on the Kaʿbah.

As Muhammad’s message spread, opposition to him grew and was led by ʿAmr ibn Hishām, dubbed Abū Jahl (“Father of Ignorance”) by the early Muslims. Abū Jahl even had some early converts tortured, which resulted in the death of one of them named Summayyah. Muhammad himself, unharmed because of the protection of his family and especially his uncle Abū Ṭālib, then gave permission to a number of early disciples to migrate temporarily to Abyssinia, where the country’s monarch, the negus, received them with kindness and generosity. They joined Muhammad later in [Medina](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/372565/Medina).

Meanwhile in Mecca, life for Muhammad and the early Muslims was becoming ever more difficult and dangerous as the result of extreme pressure exerted upon them by the Quraysh rulers of the city. Even the conversions of leaders of the Meccan community, such as [ʿUmar al-Khaṭṭāb](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/613667/Umar-I) and [ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/620653/Uthman-ibn-Affan), did not diminish the severe difficulties encountered by Muhammad in his later years in Mecca.

In 619 Muhammad was greatly saddened by the death of two people who were especially close to him, [Khadījah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316024/Khadijah) and his uncle Abū Ṭālib. Not only was Khadījah his devoted wife of 25 years and the mother of his children, but she was also his friend and counselor. Only after her death did Muhammad marry other women, mostly as a means of creating alliances with various families and tribes. The exception was the daughter of Abū Bakr, [ʿĀʾishah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/11120/Aishah), who was betrothed to the Prophet when she was very young and in whose arms he would die in Medina. Later in the year the death of [Abū Ṭālib](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/2346/Abu-Talib), Muhammad’s protector, created a much more difficult situation for him and for the young Islamic community in Mecca. These deaths, combined with Muhammad’s lack of success in propagating the message of Islam in the city of [Ṭāʾif](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/580647/Al-Taif), severely tested his determination and resolve.

As if by heavenly compensation, during this extremely difficult time Muhammad underwent the supreme spiritual experience of his life. On one of his nightly visits to the Kaʿbah, he fell asleep in the Ḥijr, an uncovered sanctuary attached to the north wall of the Kaʿbah, and experienced the Nocturnal Ascent ([Isrāʾ](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296704/Isra) or [Miʿrāj](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/384897/Miraj)), which is mentioned in the Qurʾān, numerous Hadith, and nearly every work of Islamic sacred history. It has also been described and elaborated on in countless later mystical and philosophical writings. According to traditional accounts, among which there are certain minor variations, Muhammad was taken by the archangel Gabriel on the winged steed [Burāq](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/84912/Buraq) to Jerusalem. From the rock upon which [Abraham](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1544/Abraham) offered to sacrifice his son (now the site of the [Dome of the Rock](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/168491/Dome-of-the-Rock), one of Islam’s earliest and greatest mosques), they ascended through all the higher states of being to the Divine Presence itself. At one point Gabriel explained that he could go no farther because, were he to do so, his wings would be burned; that is, Muhammad had reached a state higher than that of the archangels. Muhammad is said to have received the supreme treasury of knowledge while he stood and then prostrated himself before the divine throne. God also revealed to him the final form and number of the Islamic daily prayers. In addition, it is said that, while going through the higher states of being symbolized by the heavenly spheres, Muhammad met earlier great prophets such as Moses and Jesus.

Traditional Muslims believe that the Miʿrāj of the Prophet was not only spiritual but also corporeal in the same way that Christ’s Ascension was accomplished in both body and spirit, according to traditional Christian belief. Modern Western scholars usually consider Muhammad’s experience to be an inner vision or dream, while some modernized Muslims, responding to secularist and rationalistic objections, claim that the Miʿrāj was only spiritual. The Miʿrāj is the prototype of spiritual realization in Islam and signifies the final integration of the spiritual, psychic, and physical elements of the human state. Because of its central spiritual importance, the Miʿrāj has been the source of many major literary and metaphysical works in both prose and poetry, and figures as different as [Ibn Sīnā](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/45755/Avicenna) (Avicenna) and [Ibn al-ʿArabī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/280684/Ibn-al-Arabi) have written of its inner meaning. The idea of a journey through the levels of being, symbolized by the celestial spheres, to the presence of God, which marks the peak of the Miʿrāj, even reached Europe and, as some have argued, may have been instrumental in the structure of The Divine Comedy by [Dante](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/151164/Dante). The Miʿrāj is also one of the reasons why Muslims hold Jerusalem sacred.

The idea of spreading the message of Islam beyond Mecca grew in Muhammad’s mind despite the setback in Ṭāʾif. In or around 621 a delegation from Yathrib, a city north of Mecca, contacted Muhammad and, having heard of his sense of justice and power of leadership, invited him to go to their city and become their leader. At that time Yathrib suffered from constant struggle between its two leading tribes, the [ʿAws](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/46067/al-Aws) and the [Khazraj](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316571/al-Khazraj), with a sizable Jewish community constituting the third important social group of the city. After some deliberation by Muhammad, a preliminary meeting was held in Al-ʿAqabah (now in Jordan), and during the pilgrimage season of 622 a formal agreement was made with the people of Yathrib according to which Muhammad and his followers would be protected by the people of that city. Upon finalizing the agreement, Muhammad ordered his followers to leave Mecca in small groups, so as not to attract attention, and to await him in Yathrib.

Finally, he departed one evening with Abū Bakr for Yathrib, using an indirect route after commanding ʿAlī to sleep in the Prophet’s bed. The [Quraysh](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/487720/Quraysh), who had decided to get rid of the Prophet once and for all, attacked the house but found ʿAlī in his place. They then set out to find the Prophet. According to the traditional Islamic version, rejected by most modern Western historians, Muhammad and Abū Bakr hid in a cave that was then camouflaged by spiders, which spun webs over its mouth, and birds, which placed their nests in front of the cave. Once the search party arrived at the mouth of the cave, they decided not to go in because the unbroken cobwebs and undisturbed nests seemed to indicate that no one could be inside. This story, mentioned in chapter 9 of the Qurʾān, is of great symbolic importance and is also a popular part of Islamic piety and [Sufi](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/571823/Sufism) literature.

On September 25, 622, Muhammad completed the [Hijrah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/259462/Hijrah) (“migration”; Latin: [Hegira](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/26370/anno-Hegirae)) and reached Yathrib, which became known as Madīnat al-Nabī (“City of the Prophet”), or [Medina](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/372565/Medina). This momentous event led to the establishment of Islam as a religious and social order and became the starting point for the Islamic calendar. The caliph ʿUmar I was the first to use this dating system and established the first day of the lunar month of Muḥarram, which corresponds to July 16, 622, as the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

Muhammad arrived in Qubāʾ, on the outskirts of Medina, where he ordered the first mosque of Islam to be built. The people of the city came in large numbers to greet him, and each family wanted to take him to its own quarters. Therefore, he said that his camel, Qaṣwrāʾ, should be allowed to go where it willed, and where it stopped, he would stay. A mosque, known later as the Mosque of the Prophet (Masjid al-Nabī), was built in the courtyard next to the house where the camel stopped and Muhammad lived. Muhammad’s tomb is in the mosque.

### The Medinan period

When Muhammad first settled in Medina, his most trusted followers were those who had migrated from Mecca—some before him and some, including ʿAlī, shortly after. Soon, however, many Medinans embraced Islam, so the early Islamic community came to consist of the emigrants (*[al-muhājirūn](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/396213/muhajirun)*) and the Medinan helpers (al-anṣār). A few Medinan families and some prominent figures such as ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ubayy held back, but gradually all the Arabs of Medina embraced Islam. Nevertheless, tribal divisions remained, along with a continued [Jewish](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/307197/Judaism) presence that included wealthy tribes that enjoyed the support of Jewish communities farther north, especially in Khaybar. Muhammad hoped that they would embrace Islam and accept him as a prophet, but that happened in only a few cases. On the contrary, as Muhammad integrated the Medinan community—the muhājirūn and the anṣār and the [ʿAws](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/46067/al-Aws) and [Khazraj](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316571/al-Khazraj) tribes—into an Islamic society, the enmity between Medina’s Jewish community and the newly founded Islamic order grew.

During the second year of the Hijrah, Muhammad drew up the [Constitution of Medina](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/372583/Constitution-of-Medina), defining relations between the various groups in the first Islamic community. Later generations of Islamic political thinkers have paid much attention to the constitution, for Muslims believe that Muhammad created the ideal Islamic society in Medina, providing a model for all later generations. It was a society in which the integration of tribal groups and various social and economic classes was based on social justice. According to Islamic belief, that same year the direction of daily prayers, or the *[qiblah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/485731/qiblah)*, was changed by divine order from Jerusalem to Mecca, which marked the clear crystallization of Islam as a distinct monotheistic religion. Jerusalem has continued to be revered as the first direction of the prayers chosen by God for Muslims, and, according to Islamic eschatological teachings, the first qiblah will become one with the qiblah at Mecca at the end of time.

It was also in the year 622 that the message of Islam was explicitly defined as a return to the pure monotheism of Abraham, or the primordial monotheism (al-dīn al-ḥanīf). Some in the West have called the second year of the Hijrah the period of the establishment of a theocracy led by Muhammad. But what in fact occurred was the establishment of a nomocracy under Divine Law, with Muhammad as the executor. In any case, from that time until his death, Muhammad not only continued to be the channel for the revelation of the Qurʾān but also ruled the community of Muslims. He was also the judge and supreme interpreter of the law of Medinan society.

### The early battles

The enmity between the Quraysh and Muhammad remained very strong, in part because of the persecution, aggression, and confiscation of property the Muslims suffered at the hands of the Quraysh. On several occasions warriors from Medina intercepted caravans from Mecca going to or coming from Syria, but Muhammad did not want to fight a battle against the Meccans until they marched against the nascent Medinan community and threatened the very future of Islam. At this time the following Qurʾānic verse was revealed: “Permission to fight is granted to those against whom war is made, because they have been wronged, and God indeed has the power to help them. They are those who have been driven out of their homes unjustly only because they affirmed: Our Lord is God” (22:39–40). Muslims saw this verse as a declaration of war by God against the idolatrous Quraysh. In 624 an army of 1,000 assembled by the Quraysh marched against Medina and met a much smaller force of 313 Muslims at a place called [Badr](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/48575/Battle-of-Badr) on the 17th day of the month of Ramadan. Although the number of those involved was small, this event is seen by Muslims as the most momentous battle of Islamic history, and many later crucial battles were named after it. Muhammad promised all those who were killed at Badr the death of a martyr and direct entry into paradise. Although heavily outnumbered, the Muslims achieved a remarkable victory in which, however, nine of the [Companions of the Prophet](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/129572/Companions-of-the-Prophet) (al-ṣaḥābah), the close associates of Muhammad and the faithful who were associated directly with him, were killed. Muslims believe that the battle was won with the help of the angels, and to this day the whole episode remains etched deeply in the historical consciousness of Muslims. Although seemingly an insignificant foray in a faraway desert between a few fighters, the battle changed world history.

The Quraysh, however, did not give up their quest to destroy the nascent Islamic community. With that goal in mind, in 624–625 they dispatched an army of 3,000 men under the leader of Mecca, [Abū Sufyān](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/2338/Abu-Sufyan). Muhammad led his forces to the side of a mountain near Medina called Uḥud, and battle ensued. The Muslims had some success early in the engagement, but [Khālid ibn al-Walīd](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316106/Khalid-ibn-al-Walid), a leading Meccan general and later one of the outstanding military figures of early Islamic history, charged Muhammad’s left flank after the Muslims on guard deserted their posts to join in the looting of the Quraysh camp. Many of Muhammad’s followers then fled, thinking that the Prophet had fallen. In fact, although wounded, he was led to safety through a ravine. Meanwhile, the Quraysh did not pursue their victory. A number of eminent Muslims, including Muhammad’s valiant uncle Ḥamzah, however, lost their lives in the struggle. The Jews of Medina, who allegedly plotted with the Quraysh, rejoiced in Muhammad’s defeat, and one of their tribes, the Banū Naḍīr, was therefore seized and banished by Muhammad to Khaybar.

The [Jews](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/307197/Judaism) of Medina then urged the Quraysh to take over Medina in 626–627. To this end the Quraysh helped raise an army of 10,000 men, which marched on Medina. [Salmān al-Fārsī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/519481/Salman-al-Farisi), the first Persian convert to Islam whom Muhammad had adopted as a member of his household, suggested that the Muslims dig a ditch around the city to protect it, a technique known to the Persians but not to the Arabs at that time. The Meccan army arrived and, unable to cross the ditch, laid siege to the city but without success. The invading army gradually began to disperse, leaving the Muslims victorious in the [Battle of the Ditch](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/166271/Battle-of-the-Ditch) (al-Khandaq).

When it was discovered that members of the Jewish tribe [Qurayẓah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/487728/Banu-Qurayzah) had been complicit with the enemy during the Battle of the Ditch, Muhammad turned against them. The Qurayẓah men were separated from the tribe’s women and children and ordered by the Muslim general Saʿd ibn Muʿādh to be put to death; the women and children were to be enslaved. This tragic episode cast a shadow upon the relations between the two communities for many centuries, even though the Jews, a “People of the Book” (that is, like Christians and Zoroastrians, as well as Muslims, possessors of a divinely revealed scripture), generally enjoyed the protection of their lives, property, and religion under Islamic rule and fared better in the Muslim world than in the West. Moreover, Muslims believe that the Prophet did not order the execution of the Jews of Medina, but many Western historians believe that he must have been, at the very least, informed of it.



The Islamic community had become more solidly established by 628, and in that year Muhammad decided to make the ʿumrah (“lesser pilgrimage”) to the Kaʿbah. He set out for Mecca with a large entourage and many animals meant for sacrifice, but an armed Meccan contingent blocked his way. Because he had intended to perform a religious rite, he did not want to battle the Meccans at that time. So he camped at a site known as [Al-Ḥudaybiyah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/274655/Pact-of-Al-Hudaybiyah) and sent ʿUthmān to Mecca to negotiate a peaceful visit. When ʿUthmān was delayed, Muhammad assembled his followers and had them make a pact of allegiance (al-bayʿah) to follow him under all conditions unto death, an act of great significance for later Islamic history and Sufi belief and practice. ʿUthmān finally returned with Quraysh leaders who proposed as a compromise that Muhammad return to Medina but make a peaceful pilgrimage to Mecca the next year. In addition, a 10-year truce was signed with the Meccans.

In 628–629 Muhammad’s first conquest was made when the Muslims captured [Khaybar](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1238085/Battle-of-Khaybar) in a battle in which the valour of ʿAlī played an important role. The Jews and Christians of Khaybar were allowed to live in peace, protected by the Muslims, but they were required to pay a religious tax called the *[jizʿyah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/304125/jizya)*. This became the model for the later treatment of People of the Book in Islamic history.

It was also at this time that Muhammad, according to Islamic sources, sent letters inviting various leaders to accept Islam, including Muqawqis, the governor of Alexandria; the negus of Abyssinia; [Heraclius](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/262495/Heraclius), the emperor of Byzantium; and Khosrow II, the king of Persia. There are several letters kept in various libraries today that some claim to be Muhammad’s original invitations, although many Western scholars have doubted their authenticity. Few, however, doubt that he sent the letters, although a number of Western scholars believe that they were addressed to the surrogates of these rulers. In any case, he emphasized in these letters that there should be no compulsion for People of the Book—Jews, Christians, or [Zoroastrians](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/658081/Zoroastrianism)—to accept Islam.

In 628–629 Muhammad finally made a pilgrimage to Mecca and reconciled members of his family and also of many of his followers. It was also during this pilgrimage that a number of eminent Meccans—including two later major military and political figures, [Khālid ibn Walīd](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316106/Khalid-ibn-al-Walid) and [ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/21799/Amr-ibn-al-As)—accepted Islam and that Muhammad’s uncle [al-ʿAbbās](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/440/al-Abbas), then the head of the Banū Hāshim family, is said to have secretly become a Muslim.

Meanwhile, Islam continued to spread throughout Arabia, although military expeditions to the north were not successful. In one battle at Muʾtah in Byzantine territory, Zayd ibn Ḥārith, the adopted son of the Prophet, and Jaʿfar ibn Abī Ṭālib, the brother of ʿAlī, were killed. Still, many northern tribes embraced Islam.

In 628–629 the [Quraysh](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/487720/Quraysh) broke the pact agreed upon at [Al-Ḥudaybiyah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/274655/Pact-of-Al-Hudaybiyah), freeing Muhammad to march on Mecca, which he did with a large group of the anṣār, the muhājirūn, and Bedouins. The Quraysh pleaded for amnesty, which was granted. After many years of hardship and exile, Muhammad entered Mecca triumphantly and directed his followers not to take revenge for the persecution many of them had endured. He went directly to the [Kaʿbah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/309173/Kabah), where he ordered ʿAlī and [Bilāl](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/65194/Bilal-ibn-Rabah), the Abyssinian caller to prayer (al-muʾadhdhin), to remove all the idols and restore the original purity of the Kaʿbah, which Muslims believe was built by Abraham as the house of the one God. All the Meccans then embraced Islam.

The Islamization of Arabia, however, was not as yet complete. The Hawāzin tribe rose against Muhammad, and the city of Ṭāʾif, which had treated him so harshly during his Meccan years, still followed idolatrous practices. Muhammad’s army defeated the Hawāzin but could not capture Ṭāʾif, which surrendered of its own volition a year later.

In 630–631 embassies from all over the Arabian Peninsula arrived in Medina to accept Islam, and by that time most of Arabia, save for the north, had united under the religion’s banner. Muhammad, therefore, marched with a large army north to Tabūk but did not engage the enemy. Nevertheless, the Jews and Christians of the region submitted to his authority, whereupon Muhammad again guaranteed their personal safety and freedom to practice their religion as he did for the Zoroastrians of eastern Arabia. At that time too the pagan Arab tribes in the north, as well as in other regions, embraced Islam. By 631 Muhammad had brought to a close “the age of ignorance” (al-jāhiliyyah), as Muslims called the pre-Islamic epoch in Arabia. He united the Arabs for the first time in history under the banner of Islam and broke the hold of tribal bonds as the ultimate links between an Arab and the society around him. Although tribal relations were not fully destroyed, they were now transcended by a more powerful bond based on religion.

Finally, in 632, Muhammad made the first Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca (*[al-ḥajj](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/252050/hajj)*), which remains the model to this day for the millions of Muslims who make the hajj each year. This event marked the peak of Muhammad’s earthly life. At that time he delivered his celebrated farewell sermon, and the last verse of the Qurʾān was revealed, completing the sacred text: “This day have I perfected for you your religion and fulfilled My favour unto you, and it hath been My good pleasure to choose Islam for you as your religion” (5:3). On the way back from Mecca, he and his entourage stopped at a pond called Ghadīr Khumm where, according to both Sunni and Shīʿite sources, he appointed [ʿAlī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/15223/Ali) as the executor of his last will and as his walī, a term that means “friend” or “saint” and also describes a person who possesses authority. This major event is seen by Sunni Muslims as signifying a personal and family matter, while Shīʿites believe that at this time ʿAlī received the formal investiture to succeed the Prophet.

<img alt="Prophet’s Mosque [Credit: AP]" src="http://media-2.web.britannica.com/eb-media/86/77986-003-A1454D0C.jpg" width="100" height="70">Late in the spring of 632 Muhammad, who had been considering another expedition to the north, suddenly fell ill and, according to tradition, died three days later on June 8, 632. His legacy included the establishment of a new order that would transform and affect much of the world from the Atlantic to the China Sea, from France to India. According to Islamic norms that he established, his body was washed by his family, especially by ʿAlī, and buried in his house adjacent to the mosque of Medina. His tomb remains the holiest place in Islam after the Kaʿbah; it is visited by millions of pilgrims annually.

## Muhammad and the [Qurʾān](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/487666/Quran)

Those who do not consider Muhammad a prophet believe that the Qurʾān contains his words as compiled by his companions. For Muslims of all schools of law and theology, the Qurʾān is considered to be the word of God received by the Prophet and uttered verbatim by him to those around him. Moreover, there is a subtle and profound relationship between Muhammad and the Qurʾān. First, there are direct references in the Qurʾān to Muhammad, his nature, and his function. Notably, the Qurʾān asserts that he was a man and not a divine being, that he was the “seal of prophets” (*[khātam al-anbiyāʾ](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/316515/khatm-al-anbiya)*), that he was endowed with the most exalted character, and that God had placed him as the “goodly model” (uswah ḥasanah) for Muslims to follow. The Qurʾān is, in fact, the richest source for the understanding of Muhammad’s nature and mission.

Second, Muhammad was the person who best comprehended the meaning of the Qurʾān and was its first interpreter and commentator. Over the centuries all traditional Muslims have understood the Qurʾān through Muhammad’s interpretation, and whenever they recite the Qurʾān or seek to put its teachings into practice, they experience his presence. Islamic sages over the ages, in fact, have insisted that God granted to the Prophet alone the understanding of all levels of the Qurʾān’s meaning that humans could grasp and that those who later came to know something of the inner meaning of the Qurʾān were heirs to the knowledge given to Muhammad by God.

There is also something of the soul of Muhammad in the Qurʾān, which was, according to traditional beliefs, originally a sonorous revelation imprinted upon his heart and only later written down. If the text of the Qurʾān is comparable to words heard by the ear, the soul of the Prophet is like the air that carries the sound and allows it to be heard by humanity. According to a famous saying of the Prophet (known as ḥadīth al-thaqalayn), Muhammad said that, when he departed from the world, he would leave behind two precious gifts (thaqalayn): the Qurʾān and his family. Moreover, his wife ʿĀʾishah once asked Muhammad how he should be remembered after his death, and he replied, “By reciting the Qurʾān.” There is also a very subtle relationship between the Qurʾān and the Prophet that causes Muslims to feel his grace (barakah) whenever they read the Qurʾān, which they nevertheless understand to be the word of God and not of Muhammad or any other human being.

## The Sunnah and Hadith

The deeds of the Prophet, called the [Sunnah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/573993/Sunnah)—which technically also embraces his sayings, or [Hadith](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/251132/Hadith)—are, after the Qurʾān, the most important source of everything Islamic from law to art, as well as from economics to metaphysics, and are the model of behaviour that all pious Muslims seek to emulate. At the heart of the Sunnah is what may be called the quintessential Sunnah, which concerns the spiritual life. The Sunnah also covers a broad array of activities and beliefs, ranging from entering a mosque, practicing private hygiene, and dealing with family to the most sublime mystical questions involving the love between humans and God. In addition, it addresses everyday activities, including the greeting that Muhammad taught Muslims to offer each other—al-salāmu ʿalaykum (“may peace be upon you”)—a greeting still used in tens of languages from Jakarta to London and from Rio de Janeiro to San Francisco. Intimate matters of personal life as well as the social and economic life of Muslims have been governed over the ages by the Sunnah. Even the details of all the major rites of the religion—that is, the daily prayers, the fasting, the annual pilgrimage, etc.—are based on the prophetic Sunnah. The Qurʾān commands believers to perform the canonical prayers, to fast, and to perform the pilgrimage, but it was the Prophet who taught them how to perform these acts along with other religious rituals such as marriage and burial of the dead.

During the Prophet’s life and shortly thereafter, his sayings were written down on media such as parchment, papyrus, and shoulder bones of camels. They were also preserved orally by a people whose long poetic tradition had been carried on solely by word of mouth in the period preceding the rise of Islam. In the 8th and 9th centuries, however, scholars began to collect the sayings of the Prophet after devising rigorous criteria for examining the authenticity of the chain of transmission (*[isnād](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296158/isnad)*). The result of this herculean task was the Sunni compilation of six collections of sayings known as the Ṣiḥāḥ (plural of Ṣaḥīḥ; “correct”), the most famous of which was compiled by [al-Bukhārī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/83951/al-Bukhari). In the 10th century the [Shīʿites](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/540503/Shiite) brought together their own collection in four volumes known as The Four Books (Al-Kutub al-arbaʿah), of which the most famous was by al-Kulaynī, but some Shīʿite authorities believe that Shīʿism also has six canonical collections of Hadith. Most of the sayings in the Sunni and Shīʿite collections are the same, but the chain of transmission differs between them. [Sunni Muslims](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/573993/Sunnah) believe that many of the sayings were transmitted by [Ibn al-ʿAbbās](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/722/Abd-Allah-ibn-al-Abbas) and ʿĀʾishah, but Shīʿites accept only members of the household of the Prophet (ahl al-bayt) as legitimate transmitters. There are also a number of prophetic sayings known as al-aḥādīth al-qudsiyyah (“sacred sayings”) in which God speaks in the first person through Muhammad. In general, these sayings are of an esoteric character and have been of great importance in the development of Sufism.

## The ethical and spiritual character of Muhammad

Muslims believe that Muhammad was the most perfect of God’s creatures, and, although not divine, he was, according to a famous Arabic poem, not just a man among men but like a ruby among ordinary stones. In the same way that in Christianity all virtues are associated with Jesus Christ, in Islam they are associated with the Prophet. The ethical teachings of Islam are rooted in the Qurʾān, but the model of perfect ethical character, which is called Muhammadan character by Muslims, has always been that of the Prophet. The virtues that characterize him are humility and poverty, magnanimity and nobility, and sincerity and truthfulness. Like Jesus Christ, Muhammad loved spiritual poverty and was also close to the economically poor, living very simply even after he had become “the ruler of a whole world.” He was also always severe with himself and emphasized that, if exertion in the path of God (*[al-jihād](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/303857/jihad)*; commonly translated as “holy war”) can sometimes mean fighting to preserve one’s life and religion, the greater jihad is to fight against the dispersing tendencies of the concupiscent soul.

These virtues have served as models and sources of inspiration for all Muslims and have been applied on many levels from the most outward to the most inward. The great classical texts of Islamic ethics, such as those of al-Qushayrī and [al-Ghazzālī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/232533/al-Ghazali), which are still widely read, are expositions of ethical and spiritual virtues that all Muslims believe the Prophet possessed on the highest level. Along with these works, there is a genre of prophetic biography based on Muhammad’s inner reality and ethical character rather than the external episodes of his life. These biographies parallel a certain type of “lives of Christ,” which were written in the West in such a way as to make possible the imitatio Christi (“imitation of Christ”).

## Muhammad and [Islamic law](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/538793/Shariah) and theology

All schools of Islamic law ([Sharīʿah](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/538793/Shariah)), both Sunni and Shīʿite, agree that the Sunnah and Hadith of the Prophet serve as the most important source of Islamic law after the Qurʾān. In Islam even a prophet is not by himself a legislator; instead, God is ultimately the only legislator (al-Shāriʿ). Muslims believe, however, that, as God’s prophet, Muhammad knew the divine will as it was meant to be codified in Islamic law. His actions and juridical decisions therefore played an indispensable role in the later codification of the Sharīʿah by various legal schools. Muslims believe that Muhammad brought not only the word of God in the form of the Qurʾān to the world but also a divine law specific to Islam, a law whose roots are contained completely in the Qurʾān but whose crystallization was not possible without the words and deeds of the Prophet.

Theology, sometimes called *[kalām](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/310008/kalam)*, as a discipline does not play the same central role in Islam as it does in Christianity. Nevertheless, this discipline, usually translated in Western sources as scholastic theology—popularly held to have been founded by ʿAlī—has its roots through ʿAlī in some of Muhammad’s teachings. At the same time, all schools of kalām address the question of revelation and the relation of the words of the Prophet to religious truth on the one hand and rational discourse on those truths on the other. Moreover, if theology is understood to be general religious thought, then Muhammad’s teachings are even more central. There has never been a Muslim religious thinker who has not been deeply influenced by the words of the Prophet, whose presence is felt in all forms of religious teachings throughout the Islamic world. Islamic religious thought, therefore, is inconceivable without the Prophet, just as Christian theology is inconceivable without Jesus.

## Muhammad and [Sufism](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/571823/Sufism)

The Sufis have always believed that the reality that constitutes Sufism issued from the inner meaning of the Qurʾān and the inner nature of the Prophet. According to Sufism, Muhammad is at the origin of the silsilah, or the chain of spiritual descent of every Sufi order, and Sufis believe that he was both the perfect prophet and the perfect saint (walī). Upon his death, the prophetic function came to an end, but the saintly power (walāyah/wilāyah) continued and was transmitted through ʿAlī and others to later generations so that the journey along the spiritual path could be made. Sufis, as well as Shīʿites, believe that there is a prophetic light called the Muhammadan Light (al-nūr al-muḥammadī), which, originating from the Prophet, will continue to shine through the later saints and, for the Shīʿites, the [imams](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/283354/imam) until the end of the world. Sufis also identify the inner reality of the Prophet, or the Muhammadan Reality (al-ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyyah), with God’s first creation, which became finally manifested on earth in his last prophet, who once said, “I was a prophet when Adam was between water and clay.” The love of the Prophet plays an especially central role in Sufism, and litanies consisting of his names and qualities form an integral part of Sufi practice. Indeed, the Muhammadan grace (al-barakāt al-muḥammadiyyah) is said to be nowhere stronger than in the spiritual practices of the Sufis when they celebrate the divine names and seek to remember God with the help of the Prophet. Sufis take great pride in calling themselves “the poor” (al-fuqarāʾ) because Muhammad said, “Poverty is my pride.” The Miʿrāj, or Nocturnal Ascent, of the Prophet is the prototype of all spiritual wayfaring in Islam, and no group in Islamic society has been as conscientious as the Sufis in emulating the Prophet as the perfect saint and what later Sufis were to call the Perfect or Universal Man (al-insān al-kāmil).

## Muhammad in [Islamic art](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/295642/Islamic-arts) and literature



In contrast to Christianity and Buddhism, whose major sacred art is iconic, Islamic art is strictly [aniconic](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/25453/aniconism), and Muslims are not permitted to make images of God or of the Prophet. There is therefore no iconic representation of the Prophet in Islamic art, but that does not mean that he is not present in other ways in that art. Many forms of Islamic art celebrate Muhammad’s name and presence. There are calligraphic representations of his various names, especially Muhammad, found everywhere in the Islamic world and preserved in many mosques, especially those of the [Ottoman Empire](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/434996/Ottoman-Empire) in which they held a prominent position. There are also many Persian, Turkish, and Mogul miniatures in which his figure is represented in a stylized fashion, though his face is usually hidden or effaced. Miniatures of the Miʿrāj represent some of the greatest masterpieces of this genre of painting.

It is, however, in music and poetry that Muhammad is especially celebrated. Some of the most beautiful Islamic poetry is devoted to the love of the Prophet, and Islamic poetry in Arabic, Persian, Swahili, Turkish, and other languages often deals with his life, character, and spiritual presence. Perhaps the most famous of these is *[The Mantle](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/465876/The-Poem-of-the-Scarf)* (Al-Burdah) by the 13th-century Egyptian Sufi [al-Būṣīrī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/86303/al-Busiri), which is sung every Friday after congregational prayers in al-Būṣīrī’s mausoleum in Alexandria and is heard throughout the Arab world on various occasions. Moreover, there are many forms of music, from elegies to Sufi music of celebration, directly concerned with the virtues and character of the Prophet. For example, *[qawwālī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/485661/qawwali)* music and chanting, which is very popular on the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, returns over and over to the theme of the Prophet. The same can be said of *[ilāhī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1238195/ilahi)*, or Sufi songs, in Turkey. Music devoted to the Prophet, however, is not confined to Sufi circles but is found everywhere among the Islamic population at large. Furthermore, there is an Arabic song celebrating Muhammad’s entry into Medina that is known to practically every Arab child and that has become popular even among young Muslims in Europe and the United States. Almost all forms of art permitted by Islam have been used over the ages and throughout the Islamic world to celebrate the presence of the Prophet as a living reality in everyday Islamic life.

## Muhammad and Islamic piety

One cannot understand Islamic piety without comprehending the role of Muhammad in it. His birthday is celebrated throughout the Islamic world during the month of Rabīʿal-Awwal, not in the same way that Christians celebrate Christmas but as a major feast. Only in [Wahhābī](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/634039/Wahhabi)-dominated Saudi Arabia are these celebrations not encouraged publicly; there they are somewhat subdued. In the rest of the Islamic world, the miracles associated with his life, such as the “cleaving of the moon” (shaqq al-qamar), the Qurʾānic revelation through an unlettered (ummī) person, his Nocturnal Journey, and other events, are celebrated in numerous ways. Ordinary Muslims as well as the highly educated repeat the Qurʾānic dictum that Muhammad was sent as “mercy unto all the worlds” (raḥmatan līʾ al-ʿālamīn). People ask for his shifāʿah, or intercession on the Day of Judgment, hoping to assemble that day under the green “flag of praise” (liwāʾ al-ḥamd) carried by him. Muslims experience the Prophet as a living reality and believe that he has an ongoing relation not only with human beings but also with animals and plants. His relics are held sacred, and major edifices such as the Jāmiʿ Mosque of Delhi, India, have been constructed around them. His own tomb is, after the Kaʿbah in Mecca, the most important site of Islamic pilgrimage, and all other pilgrimage sites—from Moulay Idrīs in Morocco to the Shiʿite places of pilgrimage in Iran and Iraq to the tomb of Muʿīn al-Dīn Chishtī in Ajmer in India—are considered “extensions” of his mausoleum in Medina.

The benediction upon the Prophet punctuates daily Muslim life, and traditional Islamic life reminds one at every turn of his ubiquitous presence. He even plays a major role in dreams. There are many prayers recited in order to be able to have a dream of the Prophet, who promised that the Devil could never appear in a dream in the form of Muhammad. Not only for saints and mystics but also for many ordinary pious people, a simple dream of the Prophet has been able to transform a whole human life. One might say that the reality of the Prophet penetrates the life of Muslims on every level, from the external existence of the individual and of Islamic society as a whole to the life of the psyche and the soul and finally to the life of the spirit.

## The image of Muhammad in the West

In contrast to the Islamic understanding of Muhammad, the Western image of him remained highly negative for over a millennium and has only recently begun to change. From the time when a polemical work by John of Damascus was translated from Greek into Latin, some knowledge of Muhammad’s life was available in the West but was nearly always used abusively. Another influential work of the earlier Middle Ages was the Epistolae Saraceni (“Letters of a Saracen”) by an Oriental Christian and translated from Arabic into Latin. Besides Byzantine sources, the West gained some knowledge of Muhammad from the [Mozarabs](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/395436/Mozarab) of Spain, including figures such as Eulogius of Cordova in the 9th century and Petrus Alfonsi, a Jew who converted to Christianity, in the 11th century. After the 9th century highly negative biographies of Muhammad appeared in Latin. In the 12th century [Peter the Venerable](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/453863/Peter-the-Venerable) ordered the Qurʾān to be translated into Latin and information about Muhammad to be collected so that the teachings of Islam could be refuted by Christian thinkers.

During the 13th century European medieval knowledge of the life of Muhammad was “completed” in a series of works by scholars such as Pedro Pascual, Ricoldo de Monte Croce, and [Ramon Llull](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/345233/Ramon-Llull). In these works, however, Muhammad was depicted as an imposter and Islam as a Christian heresy, and in some of them Muhammad was portrayed as the Antichrist. That he was considered unlettered by Muslims, that he married a wealthy widow, that he ruled over a human community and was therefore involved in several wars, and that in his later life he had several wives were all facts interpreted in the worst light possible. That he died like “an ordinary person” was contrasted with the supernatural end to Christ’s earthly life.

This highly negative image of Muhammad as a heretic, false prophet, renegade cardinal, or founder of a religion that promotes violence found its way into many other works of European literature over the centuries, such as the [chansons de geste](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/105812/chanson-de-geste), [William Langland](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/329711/William-Langland)’s Piers Plowman, and [John Lydgate](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/352629/John-Lydgate)’s The Fall of the Princes. Even Dante, who knew much about Islamic esoteric teachings, was forced to place the Prophet along with ʿAlī in the inferno in the 28th canto of the Inferno of his [Divine Comedy](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/166565/The-Divine-Comedy). From the 13th century onward, romantic representations of Muhammad’s life also appeared, as in Alexandre du Pont’s Roman de Mahom; and the Miʿrāj was translated by a certain Abraham, the court physician of [Alfonso X](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/14725/Alfonso-X) of Castile and Leon and his son, as Escala de Mahoma (“The Ladder of Muhammad”) and was definitely known by Dante in some version.

In the early modern period, the medieval image of Muhammad continued to be promoted by a variety of Western writers. The general hostility toward Islam formed part of [Martin Luther](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/351950/Martin-Luther)’s polemic against the Roman Catholic church, and the image of Muhammad as the Antichrist appeared in Alexander Ross’s introduction to his translation of the Qurʾān in 1649. Apocalyptic interpretations of Muhammad continued into the 19th century in America, notably in George Bush’s Life of Mohammed (1830).

The first fairly positive biography of Muhammad not based on Christian “ideology” of the medieval period was Boulainvilliers’s La Vie de Mahomet (“The Life of Muhammad”), published in London in 1730. The philosopher [Voltaire](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/632488/Voltaire) had a fairly positive view of him as well. In 1742 Voltaire’s tragedy La Fanatisme; ou, Mohamet le prophète (“Fanaticism; or, Muhammad the Prophet”) was performed in Paris, and [Goethe](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/237027/Johann-Wolfgang-von-Goethe) translated it into German in 1799. This most revered of German writers was deeply attracted to Islam and planned to write a drama on this theme but completed only the famous poem Mahomets-Gesang (“Mahomet’s Singing”). In the 19th century Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall was among those who wrote dramas and novels about Muhammad. At the same time, [Thomas Carlyle](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/96126/Thomas-Carlyle) broke new ground in On Heroes, in which he provided a positive evaluation of the Prophet. Images of Muhammad were also used by [Victor Hugo](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/274974/Victor-Hugo) in his The Legend of the Centuries (La Légende des siècles) at a moment when Western Orientalism was turning to biographies about Muhammad based on modern historical and analytic methods.

## Assessment

During the 23-year period of his prophethood, Muhammad accomplished what by any account must be considered among the most significant achievements of human history. First, he transmitted both the text of the Qurʾān and his own understanding of the Divine Word, which is the foundation of all later Qurʾānic commentaries. Second, he established a body of Sunnah and Hadith that are, after the Qurʾān, the most important sources for all things Islamic. Third, he laid the foundation for a new religious and spiritual community, taught many disciples, and created the means for the continuity and transmission of the Islamic tradition. Finally, he formed a new society, unifying Arabia in a sociopolitical structure based on the Qurʾān and establishing an empire of faith in the hearts and minds of his followers, who then took his message to the farthest confines of the Earth. It can therefore be argued that Muhammad’s mark on history was as profound and enduring as anything recorded in the pages of human history.

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