



MUHAMMAD: THE MESSENGER OF GOD

- c. 570 Born
- c. 595 Married Khadijah
- c. 610 Beginning of his revelations
- 622 The "Hegira" flight to Medina
- 624 Battle of Badr
- 630 Conquest of Mecca
- 632 Died

Muhammad, who was to found one of the world's most widespread religions, was born in the Arabian town of Mecca in about 570. Mecca was one of a number of merchant communities that had sprung up along the Arabian shore of the Red Sea, on the main caravan route leading from the Persian Gulf and Yemen to Syria and the Mediterranean. Muhammad was the son of a respectable Meccan family, which most likely engaged in commerce but was not of the "inner" merchant aristocracy dominating the town. Little is known of Muhammad's early life except that he was orphaned; he was probably raised first by his grandfather and then by an uncle. It is probable that Muhammad engaged in commerce.

As in the case of every great religious leader, the figure of Muhammad has been obscured by a mass of pious tradition. We know that he married a rich widow, Khadijah, who was some years older than himself. Says the Koran, "Did not He [God] find thee needy, and suffice thee?" (93:6–8). Having been thus "sufficed," Muhammad assumed the management of a considerable estate and probably lived much like any other Meccan merchant.

When he was about forty, Muhammad received the earliest of a series of divine revelations upon which he based his religious teachings. There is no record of whether this revelation came as a result of an arduous spiritual search or as an unbidden insight. At first Muham-

mad confined his teaching to his family; then he extended it to friends. Eventually he began to preach more widely and openly, seeking converts whom he called Muslims, "submissive to God." In contrast to the polytheism then prevalent in Arabia, Muhammad recognized only one God, Allah, and spoke of himself as God's messenger or prophet. And, like the ancient Hebrew prophets, he condemned polytheism and idolatry.

His success was modest, but it was sufficient to alarm the merchant aristocracy of Mecca. In a society in which religion and politics were inseparable, the revolutionary nature of Muhammad's religious teachings implied the possibility of political unrest. And political unrest is a threat to commerce. Moreover, Mecca was not only an economic but also a religious center for the various gods of the desert people who came to trade there. In a shrine called the Kaaba were housed the sacred stones representing the primitive gods of the Arabic tribes, and this along with other shrines attracted pilgrims, and hence, business to Mecca. It is not surprising then that public opinion mobilized against this dangerous radical who, by his attack on idolatry and other beliefs, threatened both the prosperity and the religious status of his city. He had also begun to criticize the merchant leaders for their rapacity and lack of charity.

By 621 Muhammad and his followers were in dire circumstances. They were being bitterly persecuted. The chief of the Hashimite clan, to which Muhammad himself belonged and who had protected him, died, as did Muhammad's devoted wife Khadijah. He had even sent some eighty of his disciples to Abyssinia for their own protection. Then, suddenly, a change occurred. Two of the tribes of Yathrib, a city some three hundred miles to the north of Mecca, sent for Muhammad. Some of their members had heard him speak, and they now sought him as a "wise man" and mediator to bring peace among their warring clans and factions. His followers preceded him in small groups. Then Muhammad himself fled to his new home city, which he named Medinat un Nabi, "the City of the Prophet," soon shortened to Medina. This was the "Hegira," the flight, of the year 622. It was later considered to mark the beginning of Islam—appropriately enough, for it was in Medina that Islam first became a state and a culture. Ultimately it was to become a world empire and a world religion.

The Founding of Islam

IBN ISHAQ'S *SIRAT RASUL ALLAH*

Muhammad wrote nothing himself, and none of his early disciples or immediate successors left any written record of the prophet. He declared his revelations to his followers, many of whom knew them by heart. Some of the revelations were dictated or written down later, but at his death there was no one complete and authoritative text. It was only in the following generation that Muhammad's successors commanded that the revelations be collected "from palm branches and tablets of stone and the hearts of men." This was done by the chief secretary of the prophet, and by the year 651 the collection was completed. This was the Koran, "The Reading," the one sacred book of Islam.

While devout Muslims believe that every word of the Koran is the word of God, Muhammad was the prophet through whom God's word was revealed, and there are occasional references to him in it. But such scattered references do not constitute even the outline of a biography. The enormous collections of traditions (Hadith), or stories about Muhammad that began to be assembled even before his death, are almost useless as a source of reliable biographical detail. It is only in the eighth and ninth centuries, when formal biographies begin to appear, that we have sources on which to base a true biographical account. There are several of these, but the most comprehensive and reliable is the *Sirat Rasul Allah* of Ibn Ishaq—*The Book of Campaigns and (the Prophet's) Biography*.

Ibn Ishaq was born in Medina about 707 and died in Baghdad in 773. His account of Muhammad is based on interviews with eyewitnesses and other near contemporaries, and on other largely oral records and traditions. He subjected his sources to considerable skeptical scrutiny, often saying that his informant "alleged" something to be true or that God only knows whether a particular statement is true or not. He was regarded by his Arabic contemporaries as the "best informed man" about his subject: "Knowledge will remain in Medina as long as Ibn Ishaq lives." The eminent modern western authority Alfred Guillaume agrees: "He has given us the only systematic straightforward account of the life of Muhammad which, apart from legends and stories of miracles, deserves to be accepted as history in

the full sense of the word."¹ His book was edited and preserved by another scholar, Abdul-Malik ibn Hisham, about a century later.

We pick up his account with the events leading up to Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina.

When Quraysh² became insolent towards God and rejected His gracious purpose, accused His prophet of lying, and ill treated and exiled those who served Him and proclaimed His unity, believed in His prophet, and held fast to His religion, He gave permission to His apostle to fight and to protect himself against those who wronged them and treated them badly. . . .

When God had given permission to fight and this clan of the Anṣār³ had pledged their support to him in Islam and to help him and his followers, and the Muslims who had taken refuge with them, the apostle commanded his companions, the emigrants of his people and those Muslims who were with him in Mecca, to emigrate to Medina and to link up with their brethren the Anṣār. 'God will make for you brethren and houses in which you may be safe.' So they went out in companies, and the apostle stayed in Mecca waiting for his Lord's permission to leave Mecca and migrate to Medina. . . . After his companions had left, the apostle stayed in Mecca waiting for permission to migrate. Except for Abū Bakr and 'Alī, none of his supporters were left but those under restraint and those who had been forced to apostatize. The former kept asking the apostle for permission to emigrate and he would answer, 'Don't be in a hurry; it may be that God will give you a companion.' Abū Bakr hoped that it would be Muhammad himself. . . .

Among the verses of the Quran which God sent down about that day . . . are: 'And when the unbelievers plot to shut thee up or to kill thee or to drive thee out they plot, but God plots also, and God is the best of plotters,' and 'Or they say he is a poet for whom we may expect the misfortune of fate. Say: Go on expecting for I am with you among the expectant.'

It was then that God gave permission to his prophet to migrate. Now Abū Bakr was a man of means, and at the time that he asked the apostle's permission to migrate and he replied 'Do not hurry; perhaps

¹A. Guillaume, "The Biography of the Prophet in Recent Research," *Islamic Quarterly* 1 (1954), 8.

²Quraysh (or Koreish), the name of the leading tribe in Mecca, is used to refer to the whole city's population.—ED.

³This term means "helpers" and refers to those citizens of Medina who joined his cause.—ED.

God will give you a companion,' hoping that the apostle meant himself he bought two camels and kept them tied up in his house supplying them with fodder in preparation for departure. . . .

According to what I have been told none knew when the apostle left except 'Alī and Abū Bakr and the latter's family. I have heard that the apostle told 'Alī about his departure and ordered him to stay behind in Mecca in order to return goods which men had deposited with the apostle; for anyone in Mecca who had property which he was anxious about left it with him because of his notorious honesty and trustworthiness.

When the apostle decided to go he came to Abū Bakr and the two of them left by a window in the back of the latter's house and made for a cave on Thaur, a mountain below Mecca. . . .

The apostle ordered that a mosque should be built, and he stayed with Abū Ayyūb until the mosque and his houses were completed. The apostle joined in the work to encourage the Muslims to work and the *muhājirin*⁴ and the *anṣār* laboured hard. . . .

The apostle lived in Abū Ayyūb's house until his mosque and dwelling-houses were built; then he removed to his own quarters. . . .

The apostle stayed in Medina from the month of Rabī'u'l-awwal to Ṣafar of the following year until his mosque and his quarters were built. This tribe of the Anṣār all accepted Islam and every house of the Anṣār accepted Islam except Khatma, Wāqif, Wā'il, and Umayya who were the Aus Allah, a clan of Aus who clung to their heathenism.

The apostle wrote a document⁵ concerning the emigrants and the helpers in which he made a friendly agreement with the Jews and established them in their religion and their property, and stated the reciprocal obligations, as follows: In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful. This is a document from Muhammad the prophet [governing the relations] between the believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib, and those who followed them and joined them and laboured with them. They are one community (*umma*) to the exclusion of all men. The Quraysh emigrants according to their present custom shall pay the bloodwit within their number and shall redeem their prisoners with the kindness and justice common among believers. . . .

A believer shall not take as an ally the freedman of another Mus-

⁴This is another term for his followers from Mecca.—ED.

⁵This is the document known as the Constitution of Medina. It is reproduced and analyzed in W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 221 ff.—ED.

lim against him. The God-fearing believers shall be against the rebellious or him who seeks to spread injustice, or sin or enmity, or corruption between believers; the hand of every man shall be against him even if he be a son of one of them. A believer shall not slay a believer for the sake of an unbeliever, nor shall he aid an unbeliever against a believer. God's protection is one, the least of them may give protection to a stranger on their behalf. Believers are friends one to the other to the exclusion of outsiders. To the Jew who follows us belong help and equality. He shall not be wronged nor shall his enemies be aided. The peace of the believers is indivisible. No separate peace shall be made when believers are fighting in the way of God. Conditions must be fair and equitable to all. In every foray a rider must take another behind him. The believers must avenge the blood of one another shed in the way of God. The God-fearing believers enjoy the best and most upright guidance. No polytheist shall take the property or person of Quraysh under his protection nor shall he intervene against a believer. Whosoever is convicted of killing a believer without good reason shall be subject to retaliation unless the next of kin is satisfied (with blood-money), and the believers shall be against him as one man, and they are bound to take action against him.

It shall not be lawful to a believer who holds by what is in this document and believes in God and the last day to help an evil-doer or to shelter him. The curse of God and His anger on the day of resurrection will be upon him if he does, and neither repentance nor ransom will be received from him. Whenever you differ about a matter it must be referred to God and to Muhammad.

The Jews shall contribute to the cost of war so long as they are fighting alongside the believers. The Jews of the B. 'Auf are one community with the believers (the Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs), their freedmen and their persons except those who behave unjustly and sinfully, for they hurt but themselves and their families. The same applies to the Jews of the B. al-Najjār, B. al-Hārith, B. Sā'ida, B. Jusham, B. al-Aus, B. Tha'laba, and the Jafna, a clan of the Tha'laba and the B. al-Shutayba. Loyalty is a protection against treachery. The freedmen of Tha'laba are as themselves. The close friends of the Jews are as themselves. None of them shall go out to war save with the permission of Muhammad, but he shall not be prevented from taking revenge for a wound. He who slays a man without warning slays himself and his household, unless it be one who has wronged him, for God will accept that. The Jews must bear their expenses and the Muslims their expenses. Each must help the other against anyone who attacks the people of this document. They must seek mutual advice and consultation, and loyalty is a protection

against treachery. A man is not liable for his ally's misdeeds. The wronged must be helped. The Jews must pay with the believers so long as war lasts. Yathrib shall be a sanctuary for the people of this document. A stranger under protection shall be as his host doing no harm and committing no crime. A woman shall only be given protection with the consent of her family. If any dispute or controversy likely to cause trouble should arise it must be referred to God and to Muhammad the apostle of God. God accepts what is nearest to piety and goodness in this document. Quraysh and their helpers shall not be given protection. The contracting parties are bound to help one another against any attack on Yathrib. If they are called to make peace and maintain it they must do so; and if they make a similar demand on the Muslims it must be carried out except in the case of a holy war. Every one shall have his portion from the side to which he belongs, the Jews of al-Aus, their freedmen and themselves have the same standing with the people of this document in pure loyalty from the people of this document.

Loyalty is a protection against treachery: He who acquires aught acquires it for himself. God approves of this document. This deed will not protect the unjust and the sinner. The man who goes forth to fight and the man who stays at home in the city is safe unless he has been unjust and sinned. God is the protector of the good and God-fearing man and Muhammad is the apostle of God. . . .

The apostle instituted brotherhood between his fellow emigrants and the helpers, and he said according to what I have heard—and I appeal to God lest I should attribute to him words that he did not say—'Let each of you take a brother in God.' He himself took 'Alī by the hand and said, 'This is my brother.' So God's apostle, the lord of the sent ones and leader of the God-fearing, apostle of the Lord of the worlds, the peerless and unequalled, and 'Alī b. Abū Ṭālib became brothers. . . .

When the apostle was firmly settled in Medina and his brethren the emigrants were gathered to him and the affairs of the helpers were arranged Islam became firmly established. Prayer was instituted, the alms tax and fasting were prescribed, legal punishments fixed, the forbidden and the permitted prescribed, and Islam took up its abode with them. It was this clan of the helpers who 'have taken up their abode (in the city of the prophet) and in the faith.' When the apostle first came, the people gathered to him for prayer at the appointed times without being summoned. At first the apostle thought of using a trumpet like that of the Jews who used it to summon to prayer. Afterwards he disliked the idea and ordered a clapper to be made, so it was duly fashioned to be beaten when the Muslims should pray.

The Prophet and the True Believer

SAYED AMEER ALI

From the time of Ibn Ishaq to the present, Muslim biographers have continued to write about Muhammad's life, and their accounts have tended to be uncritical and adulatory of the prophet—as are all such apologetic works. Nevertheless, these biographies form one of the strands making up the tradition of Islam. One of the most widely accepted of them is Sayed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam, with a Life of the Prophet*, rev. ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978 [1891]). Sayed Ameer Ali was an English-trained Indian lawyer and judge in Bengal, and a devout Muslim. He was a prolific writer; some of his books dealt with his profession—he was an authority on the law of evidence—but most of them dealt with Islam. In 1873 he published *Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, in 1880 *Personal Law of the Mohammedans*, in 1893 *The Ethics of Islam*, and in 1899 *A Short History of the Saracens*. But his best-known book was *The Spirit of Islam*, from which the following passage is excerpted.

The passage deals with Muhammad's consolidation of his position in Medina, his work as a political leader and administrator, and his actions as the head of his new religion. It also deals with the increasing hostility between Muhammad and the important Jewish community of Medina. The reader should note, in the account, the pervasive tone of harshness toward the Jews, their actions, and their motives; the unfailing clemency of Muhammad; and even the intervention of angelic forces on the side of Islam at the Battle of Badr.

At this time there were three distinct parties in Medina. The Muhâjirîn (the Exiles) and the Ansâr (the Helpers) formed the kernel of Islâm. Their devotion to the Prophet was unbounded. . . .

But the Jews, who may be said to have formed the third party, constituted the most serious element of danger. They had close business relations with the Koreish, and their ramifications extended into various parts hostile to the Faith. At first they were inclined to look with some favour on the preachings of Mohammed. He could not, of course, be their promised Messiah, but perhaps a weak dreamer, a humble preacher, dependent upon the hospitality of their old ene-

mies, now their patrons, the Aus and the Khazraj, might become their avenger, help them in conquering the Arabs, and found for them a new kingdom of Judah. With this aim in view, they had joined with the Medinites in a half-hearted welcome to the Prophet. And for a time they maintained a pacific attitude. But it was only for a time; for barely a month had gone by before the old spirit of rebellion, which had led them to crucify their prophets, found vent in open seditions and secret treachery. One of the first acts of Mohammed after his arrival in Medina was to weld together the heterogeneous and conflicting elements of which the city and its suburbs were composed, into an orderly confederation. With this object he had granted a charter to the people, by which the rights and obligations of the Moslems *inter se*, and of the Moslems and Jews, were clearly defined. And the Jews, borne down for the moment by the irresistible character of the movement, had gladly accepted the Pact. . . .

No kindness or generosity, however, on the part of the Prophet would satisfy the Jews; nothing could conciliate the bitter feelings with which they were animated. Enraged that they could not use him as their instrument for the conversion of Arabia to Judaism, and that his belief was so much simpler than their Talmudic legends, they soon broke off, and ranged themselves on the side of the enemies of the new Faith. And when asked which they preferred, idolatry or Islâm, they, like many Christian controversialists, declared they preferred idolatry, with all its attendant evils, to the creed of Mohammed. . . .

And now came the moment of severest trial to Islâm. Barely had the Prophet time to put the city in a state of defence and organise the Believers, before the blow descended upon him. Medina itself was honeycombed by sedition and treachery. And it became the duty of Mohammed to take serious measures to guard against that dreaded catastrophe which a rising within, or a sudden attack from without, would have entailed upon his followers. He was not simply a preacher of Islâm; he was also the guardian of the lives and liberties of his people. As a Prophet, he could afford to ignore the revilings and the gibes of his enemies; but as the head of the State, "the general in a time of almost continual warfare," when Medina was kept in a state of military defence and under a sort of military discipline, he could not overlook treachery. He was bound by his duty to his subjects to suppress a party that might have led, and almost did lead to the sack of the city by investing armies. The safety of the State required the proscription of the traitors, who were either sowing the seeds of sedition within Medina or carrying information to the common enemy. Some half a dozen were placed under the ban, outlawed, and executed. We are, however, anticipating the course of events in referring to these executions.

The Koreish army was afield before Mohammed received God's command to do battle to His enemies.

He who never in his life had wielded a weapon, to whom the sight of human suffering caused intense pain and pity, and who, against all the canons of Arab manliness, wept bitterly at the loss of his children or disciples, whose character ever remained so tender and so pathetic as to cause his enemies to call him womanish,—this man was now compelled, from the necessities of the situation, and against his own inclination, to repel the attacks of the enemy by force of arms, to organise his followers for purposes of self-defence, and often to send out expeditions to anticipate treacherous and sudden onslaughts. Hitherto, Arab warfare consisted of sudden and murderous forays, often made in the night or in the early morn; isolated combats or a general melée, when the attacked were aware of the designs of the attacking party. Mohammed, with a thorough knowledge of the habits of his people, had frequently to guard against these sudden onslaughts by sending forth reconnoitering parties.

The Meccans and their allies commenced raiding up to the very vicinity of Medina, destroying the fruit-trees of the Moslems, and carrying away their flocks. A force, consisting of a thousand well-equipped men, marched under the noted Abû Jahl, "the Father of Ignorance," towards Medina to destroy the Moslems, and to protect one of their caravans bringing munitions of war. The Moslems received timely notice of the movement, and a body of three hundred disciples proceeded at once to forestall the heathens by occupying the valley of Badr, upon which Abû Jahl was moving. When Mohammed saw the infidel army arrogantly advancing into the valley, raising his hands towards heaven, like the prophets of Israel, he prayed that the little band of the Faithful might not be destroyed: "O Lord, forget not Thy promise of assistance. O Lord, if this little band were to perish, there will be none to offer unto Thee pure worship."

Three of the Koreish advanced into the open space which divided the Moslems from the idolaters, and, according to Arab usage, challenged three champions from the Moslem ranks to single combat. Hamza, Ali, and Obaidah accepted the challenge, and came out conquerors. The engagement then became general. At one time the fortunes of the field wavered, but Mohammed's appeal to his people decided the fate of the battle. "It was a stormy winter day. A piercing blast swept across the valley." It seemed as if the angels of heaven were warring for the Moslems. Indeed, to the earnest minds of Mohammed and his followers, who, like the early Christians, saw God's providence "in all the gifts of nature, in every relation of life, at each turn of their affairs, individual or public,"—to them those blasts of wind and sand, the elements warring against the enemies of God, at

that critical moment appeared veritable succour sent from heaven; as angels riding on the wings of the wind, and driving the faithless idolaters before them in confusion. The Meccans were driven back with great loss; many of their chiefs were slain; and Abû Jahl fell a victim to his unruly pride. . . .

The remarkable circumstances which led to the victory of Badr, and the results which followed from it, made a deep impression on the minds of the Moslems. They firmly believed that the angels of heaven had battled on their side against the unbelieving host. . . .

The defeat of the idolaters at Badr was felt as keenly by the Jews as by the Meccans. Immediately after this battle a distinguished member of their race, called Ka'b, the son of Ashraf, belonging to the tribe of Nazîr, publicly deplored the ill-success of the idolaters, proceeded towards Mecca. Finding the people there plunged in grief, he spared no exertion to revive their courage. . . . His acts were openly directed against the commonwealth of which he was a member. He belonged to a tribe which had entered into the Compact with the Moslems, and pledged itself for the internal as well as the external safety of the State. Another Jew of the Nazîr, Abû Râf'e Sallâm, son of Abu'l Hukaik, was equally wild and bitter against the Musulmans. He inhabited, with a fraction of his tribe, the territories of Khaibar, four or five days' journey to the north-west of Medîna. Detesting Mohammed and the Musulmans, he made use of every endeavour to excite the neighbouring Arab tribes, such as the Sulaim and the Ghatafân, against them. It was impossible for the Musulman Commonwealth to tolerate this open treachery on the part of those to whom every consideration had been shown, with the object of securing their neutrality, if not their support. The very existence of the Moslem community was at stake; and every principle of safety required that these traitorous designs should be quietly frustrated. The sentence of outlawry was executed upon them by the Medinites themselves—in one case by a member of the tribe of Aus, in the other by a Khazrajite. . . . The Jews had openly and knowingly infringed the terms of their compact. It was necessary to put a stop to this with a firm hand, or farewell to all hope of peace and security. Consequently Mohammed proceeded at once to the quarter of the Banî-Kainukâ', and required them to enter definitely into the Moslem Commonwealth by embracing Islâm, or to vacate Medîna. The reply of the Jews was couched in the most offensive terms. "O, Mohammed, do not be elated with the victory over thy people (the Koreish). Thou hast had an affair with men ignorant of the art of war. If thou art desirous of having any dealings with us, we shall show thee that we are men." They then shut themselves up in their fortress, and set Mohammed's authority at defiance. But their reduction was an absolute duty, and siege was accordingly laid to their

stronghold without loss of time. After fifteen days they surrendered. At first it was intended to inflict some severe punishment on them, but the clemency of Mohammed's nature overcame the dictates of justice, and the Banî-Kainukâ' were simply banished.

A Western Assessment of Muhammad

WILLIAM MONTGOMERY WATT

In Medina, Muhammad made himself the head of a growing politico-religious movement. In 630 he was able to conquer Mecca and to make the city of his birth the permanent center of Islam. Two years later Muhammad died. He had formed the scattered polyglot of Arab tribes into an Arab nation and armed it with a powerful new religion.

In the course of the next generation Islam exploded out of the Near East to become a world political force. Arab armies defeated the Byzantines in Syria and Asia Minor. They swept away the weak structures of Byzantine authority in North Africa and, within a century, they had established themselves facing the western Christians in Spain and along the shores of the Mediterranean. It was in the ensuing long period of confrontation that the traditional suspicion and hostility between Islam and the West developed.

If the Muslim biographical tradition of Muhammad has been adulatory and uncritical, the western tradition has been equally unrestrained in its hostility toward him, beginning with the accounts of the twelfth century that picture him as Mahound "the great enemy," "the prince of darkness." Although it moderated somewhat over time, the fundamental hostility of this western view persisted well into the nineteenth century. Indeed, it has only been in the last generation that western scholars have seriously turned to the task of creating a reliable and sympathetic picture of the prophet of Islam.

One of the leading figures in this revisionist revolution has been William Montgomery Watt, from whose most important book, *Muhammad at Medina*, the following passage is taken. Watt is Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Edinburgh and past chairman of the Association of British Orientalists. It has been his life's work "to reach an objective view of Muhammad's char-

acter," as a precondition for meaningful understanding between the Muslim world and our own.

Several accounts have been preserved of the appearance of Muḥammad, and, as they largely agree, they are perhaps near the truth, though there is a tendency in some of them to paint a picture of the ideal man. According to these accounts Muḥammad was of average height or a little above the average. His chest and shoulders were broad, and altogether he was of a sturdy build. His arms, or perhaps rather forearms, were long, and his hands and feet rough. His forehead was large and prominent, and he had a hooked nose and large black eyes with a touch of brown. The hair of his head was long and thick, straight or slightly curled. His beard also was thick, and he had a thin line of fine hair on his neck and chest. His cheeks were spare, his mouth large, and he had a pleasant smile. In complexion he was fair. He always walked as if he were rushing downhill, and others had difficulty in keeping up with him. When he turned in any direction, he did so with his whole body.

He was given to sadness, and there were long periods of silence when he was deep in thought; yet he never rested but was always busy with something. He never spoke unnecessarily. What he said was always to the point and sufficient to make his meaning clear, but there was no padding. From first to last he spoke rapidly. Over his feelings he had a firm control. When he was annoyed he would turn aside; when he was pleased, he lowered his eyes. His time was carefully apportioned according to the various demands on him. In his dealings with people he was above all tactful. He could be severe at times, but in the main he was not rough but gentle. His laugh was mostly a smile.

There are many stories illustrating his gentleness and tenderness of feeling. Even if some of them are not true, the probability is that the general picture is sound. There seems to be no reason, for instance, for doubting the truth of the story of how he broke the news of the death of Ja'far b. Abī Tālib to his widow Asmā' bint 'Umays; the story is said to have been told by Asmā' herself to her grand-daughter. She had been busy one morning with her household duties, which had included tanning forty hides and kneading dough, when Muḥammad called. She collected her children—she had three sons by Ja'far—washed their faces and anointed them. When Muḥammad entered, he asked for the sons of Ja'far. She brought them, and Muḥammad put his arms round them and smelt them (as a mother would a baby). Then his eyes filled with tears and he burst out weeping. 'Have you

heard something about Ja'far?', she asked, and he told her that he had been killed. Later he instructed some of his people to prepare food for Ja'far's household, 'for they are too busy today to think about themselves'. About the same time the little daughter of Zayd b. Hārithah (who had been killed along with Ja'far) came to him in tears to be comforted, and he wept along with her; afterwards, when questioned about this, he said it was because of the great love between Zayd and himself. The memory of his first wife Khadijah could also soften his heart. After Badr the husband of his daughter Zaynab was among the prisoners taken by the Muslims, and Zaynab sent a necklace of Khadijah's to Muhammad for a ransom, but he was so moved at the sight of it that he set the man free without payment.

Muhammad seems to have felt especial tenderness towards children, and to have got on well with them. Perhaps it was an expression of the yearning of a man who had seen all his sons die in infancy. Much of his paternal affection went to his adopted son Zayd, who has just been mentioned. . . .

He was able to enter into the spirit of childish games and had many friends among children. 'Ā'ishah was still a child when he married her, and she continued to play with her toys. He would ask her what they were. 'Solomon's horses', she replied, and Muhammad smiled. . . . His kindness extended even to animals, and this is something remarkable for Muhammad's century and part of the world. As his men marched towards Mecca just before the conquest they passed a bitch with puppies, and Muhammad not merely gave orders that they were not to be disturbed, but posted a man to see that the orders were carried out. . . .

These are interesting sidelights on the personality of Muhammad, and fill out the picture of him we form from his conduct of public affairs. He gained men's respect and confidence by the religious basis of his activity and by such qualities as courage, resoluteness, impartiality, firmness inclining to severity but tempered by generosity. In addition to these, however, he had a charm of manner which won their affection and secured their devotion.

Of all the world's great men none has been so much maligned as Muhammad. It is easy to see how this has come about. For centuries Islam was the great enemy of Christendom, for Christendom was in direct contact with no other organized states comparable in power to the Muslims. . . . The aim of the present discussion is to work towards a more objective attitude with regard to the moral criticisms inherited from medieval times. The main points are three. Muhammad has been alleged to be insincere, to be sensual, and to be treacherous.

The allegation of insincerity or imposture was vigorously attacked by Thomas Carlyle over a hundred years ago, has been increasingly opposed by scholarly opinion since then, and yet is still sometimes made.

The extreme form of the view was that Muḥammad did not believe in his revelations and did not in any sense receive them from 'outside himself', but deliberately composed them, and then published them in such a way as to deceive people into following him, so gaining power to satisfy his ambition and his lust. Such a view is incredible. Above all it gives no satisfying explanation of Muḥammad's readiness to endure hardship in his Meccan days, of the respect in which he was held by men of high intelligence and upright character, and of his success in founding a world religion which has produced men of undoubted saintliness. These matters can only be satisfactorily explained and understood on the assumption that Muḥammad was sincere, that is, that he genuinely believed that what we now know as the Qur'ān was not the product of his own mind, but came to him from God and was true. . . .

When we come to the other two allegations, however, namely, that Muḥammad was morally defective in that he was treacherous and sensual, the discussion has to embrace not merely factual points, but also the question of the standard by which the acts have to be judged. . . .

The allegation of treachery may be taken to cover a number of criticisms made by European writers. It applies most clearly to such acts as the breaking of his agreements with the Jews and his one-sided denunciation of the treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah with the Meccans. It may also, however, be taken to include the infringement either of the sacred month or of the sacred territory on the expedition to Nakhlah when the first Mēccan blood was shed, the mass execution of the Jewish clan of Qurayzah, and the orders or encouragement given to his followers to remove dangerous opponents by assassination. . . .

Now the Islamic community or *ummah* was thought of as a tribe. Towards tribes with which it had agreements, it had duties and obligations, and these were scrupulously observed according to the standards of the day; Muḥammad even paid blood-money to a man who was really but not technically responsible for the death of several Muslims. Where a tribe was at war with the Muslims, however, or had no agreement, they had no obligations towards it even of what we would call common decency. If contemporaries showed some surprise at the execution of all the males of Qurayzah, it was because Muḥammad was not afraid of any consequences of such an act; the behaviour of Qurayzah during the siege of Medina was regarded as having cancelled their agreement with Muḥammad. Similarly, the terms of the treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah had been broken by the Meccans before Muḥammad denounced it, and the individuals who were assassinated had forfeited any claim to friendly treatment by Muḥammad through their propaganda against him. So far were the Muslims who killed

them from feeling any qualms that one of them, describing the return from the deed, wrote that they returned with the head of their victim 'five honourable men, steady and true, and God was the sixth with us'. This is so much in keeping with the spirit of pre-Islamic times that it is almost certainly authentic; but, even if not, it shows the attitude of the early Muslims. . . .

Again, the common European and Christian criticism that Muḥammad was a sensualist or, in the blunter language of the seventeenth century, an 'old lecher', fades away when examined in the light of the standards of Muḥammad's time. There was a strain in early Muslim thought which tended to magnify the common—or perhaps we should say 'superhuman'—humanity of their prophet. There is even a tradition to the effect that his virility was such that he was able to satisfy all his wives in a single night. This looks like an invention, for the usual account is that he gave his wives a night each in turn, but it shows the outlook of some at least of his followers.⁶ The early Muslims looked askance at celibacy and checked any movements towards it, and even rigorous ascetics in Islam have commonly been married. . . .

In general, then, there was nothing in Muḥammad's marital relationships which his contemporaries regarded as incompatible with his prophethood. They did not consider him a voluptuary any more than they considered him a scoundrel. The sources record criticisms of him, but these are based on no moral criterion, but on a conservatism which was akin to superstition. Though later Muslims might produce colourful stories of Muḥammad's susceptibility to feminine charm, and though there is no reason to suppose that he disregarded the factor of physical attraction, it is practically certain that he had his feelings towards the fair sex well under control, and that he did not enter into marriages except when they were politically and socially desirable.

It is possible, too, to go further and, while restricting oneself to the standpoint of Muḥammad's time, to turn the alleged instances of treachery and sensuality into matter for praise. In his day and generation Muḥammad was a social reformer, indeed a reformer even in the sphere of morals. He created a new system of social security and a new family structure, both of which were a vast improvement on what went before. In this way he adapted for settled communities all that was best in the morality of the nomad, and established a religious and social framework for the life of a sixth of the human race today. That is not the work of a traitor or a lecher. . . .

⁶Muhammad had eleven wives in all.—ED.

Circumstances of place and time favoured Muḥammad. Various forces combined to set the stage for his life-work and for the subsequent expansion of Islam. . . . There was nothing inevitable or automatic about the spread of the Arabs and the growth of the Islamic community. But for a remarkable combination of qualities in Muḥammad it is improbable that the expansion would have taken place, and these vast forces might easily have spent themselves in raids on Syria and 'Irāq without any lasting consequences. In particular we may distinguish three great gifts Muḥammad had, each of which was indispensable to the total achievement.

First there is what may be called his gift as a seer. Through him—or, on the orthodox Muslim view, through the revelations made to him—the Arab world was given an ideological framework within which the resolution of its social tensions became possible. The provision of such a framework involved both insight into the fundamental causes of the social malaise of the time, and the genius to express this insight in a form which would stir the hearer to the depths of his being. The European reader may be 'put off' by the Qur'ān, but it was admirably suited to the needs and conditions of the day.

Secondly, there is Muḥammad's wisdom as a statesman. The conceptual structure found in the Qur'ān was merely a framework. The framework had to support a building of concrete policies and concrete institutions. . . . His wisdom in these matters is shown by the rapid expansion of his small state to a world-empire and by the adaptation of his social institutions to many different environments and their continuance for thirteen centuries.

Thirdly, there is his skill and tact as an administrator and his wisdom in the choice of men to whom to delegate administrative details. Sound institutions and a sound policy will not go far if the execution of affairs is faulty and fumbling. When Muḥammad died, the state he had founded was a 'going concern', able to withstand the shock of his removal and, once it had recovered from this shock, to expand at prodigious speed.

Review and Study Questions

1. What sort of man was Muḥammad? Compare him with (a) the Buddha and (b) Confucius.
2. What was the role of the Jews of Medina in the early history of Islam?
3. What was the nature of the community Muḥammad established?

Suggestions for Further Reading

The contemporary and near-contemporary sources for the life of Muhammad present all the difficulties already referred to and more. While limited as a biographic source, the Koran ought to be sampled by interested students. Of the several available English translations, the best and the one that comes closest to conveying the impression made on Muslims by the original is *The Koran Interpreted*, a translation by Arthur J. Arberry (New York: Macmillan, 1955), although the standard edition is probably still *The Koran*, tr. J. M. Rodwell (London and New York: J. M. Dent and E. P. Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1909). Another alternative edition is *The Qur'an*, tr. Richard Bell (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937-39). A useful work is W. Montgomery Watt, *Companion to the Qur'an* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967).

Alfred Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam* (New York: Books for Libraries—Arno Press, 1980) is devoted to the Hadith, the traditional sayings and anecdotes about Muhammad, and includes a substantial selection from them. Of the early biographies of Muhammad, students may read further from Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah* in *The Life of Muhammad, A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, intro. A. Guillaume (Lahore, Karachi, Dacca: Oxford University Press Pakistan Branch, 1970 [1955]), excerpted for this chapter. Another early work is al-Waqidi's *Maghazi*, ed. J. M. B. Jones, dealing extensively with Muhammad's military campaigns and his relations with the people of Medina and the surrounding tribes. A good critique of the early historical sources is A. Guillaume, "The Biography of the Prophet in Recent Research," *Islamic Quarterly* 1 (1954), 5-11.

Of the traditional Muslim biographies of Muhammad, in addition to Sayed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam, with a Life of the Prophet*, rev. ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978 [1891]), a simple and straightforward example is Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, *Muhammad: Seal of the Prophets* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), whose aim is to help "a seeker after truth to determine whether he was truly the divine instrument chosen for the regeneration of mankind through the ages." A somewhat more sophisticated example is Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *The Life of Mohammed*, best sampled in the extensive excerpts in a critical work, Antonie Wessels, *A Modern Arabic Biography of Muhammad, A Critical Study of Muhammad Husayn Haykal's Hayat Muhammad* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

Among the best modern western critical biographies of Muhammad is W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), excerpted for this chapter. It needs to be read, however, along with his earlier companion volume, *Muhammad*

at Mecca (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953). The material in both these books is condensed in a smaller volume by Watt, *Muhammad Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed*, tr. Anne Carter (New York: Pantheon, 1971) is an excellent work by an able French scholar who, however, is more interested in the ideology of Islam than in its prophet. Two interesting works, both by British military men who spent their lives in the Near East and both popular laymen's biographies, are R. V. C. Bodley, *The Messenger: The Life of Mohammed* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1946) and John Bagot Glubb, *The Life and Times of Muhammad* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970).

Among the many general works on the history and culture of the Islamic world, two in particular are recommended: Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs, From the Earliest Times to the Present*, 5th ed. rev. (London: Macmillan, 1953) and Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, 3rd ed. (London: Hutchinson, 1964). Recommended also is *The Cambridge History of Islam*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), especially vols. I and IA.