

Islam: Historical Origins

Islam began almost two thousand years after the start of Judaism and more than six hundred years after Christianity. In fact, Islam, which goes back to the seventh century, began in support of the monotheism of these two religions, and its revelations are believed to bring the earlier revelations to completion. Islam looks to the Prophet Mohammed for its foundation.

Mohammed

Mohammed was born in Mecca, possibly around 570 CE, and stories say his birth was accompanied by signs and portents indicating the birth of a great prophet. He was raised in Mecca, which was a bustling place of pilgrimage to the Kaaba, a cube-shaped building that housed the gods and goddesses of pre-Islamic Arab tribes. The Quraysh was the tribe that controlled Mecca and the Kaaba, a lucrative endeavor indeed in view of the custom of all the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula to make pilgrimages there. The concentration of wealth among a few families had broken down traditional tribal morality and led to growing numbers of poor and dispossessed persons in the tribes. The ruling families controlled the money and lent it out to the poor at high interest rates, which led to many being crushed by debt and falling into slavery.

Mohammed's position with his uncle's caravan business protected him from debt and slavery but did not give him enough financial security to marry well. He was known to be an honest, handsome man, who was reliable and truthful. As a broad-shouldered twenty-five-year-old camel driver, Mohammed caught the eye of a successful merchant, a widow fifteen years his senior, by the name of Khadija. She hired Mohammed to lead one of her caravans, and he did so well that she offered him a proposal of marriage, which he accepted.

Revelation from God

Mohammed's wealthy wife gave him financial security and new status in the community, but at the same time he felt conflicted over his complicity in the corrupt economic system in Mecca and the dominance of pagan beliefs. On one of his frequent retreats from the demands of commerce and society, Mohammed, who was now about forty years old, was meditating in a cave on Mt. Hira when an invisible presence crushed him in an embrace so strong he could not breathe. As the pressure released, he felt the words of a divine revelation stamped in his heart. Mohammed was frightened and went home and asked his wife to wrap him up and help him overcome his trembling. Khadija threw a cloak over him, embraced him, and tried to convince him that he had not gone mad. She stroked his hair and argued that God would not deceive him because he was a truthful and kind man.

Mohammed was still unsure, and after a long period of silence the presence once again returned in the same violent manner and assured him that he was a messenger from God. Mohammed arose and for the next twenty-three years recited the revelation of the messenger, which would become the Quran.

In his earliest recitations, Mohammed revealed that God was not the distant and powerful God that those in Mecca believed in, but a good, merciful, and generous God who loved creation. Early on Mohammed did not focus on there being one God, but urgently condemned the oppression of the poor and told the rich that they had a duty to care for the weak and unprotected. He warned the rich that for their greed and wickedness God would cast them into the fire.



The ruling class in Mecca ignored Mohammed's radical call for reform, and Mohammed focused on converting his family and close friends. His closest allies were his cousin, Ali, who married Mohammed's daughter, Fatima, and his two legendary grandsons by them, Hasan and Husayn. Mohammed soon began to attract followers among young men from influential families in Mecca and he and his companions now actively preached in Mecca and met little resistance because they were not yet seen as a threat by the ruling powers.

Three years after the original inspiration, Mohammed's revelation became more radical: "There is no god but God, and Mohammed is God's Messenger." He now felt a call to preach monotheism and tell his people to turn away from polytheism.

The oneness of God was not news to the town leaders for they had heard this from the Jews and Christians. What was different here is that Mohammed was claiming to be a divinely inspired prophet, preaching about the one God with an authority beyond even that of Abraham and Jesus. He was declaring that the Kaaba, where gods and goddesses were worshipped, was useless. If this were true, then Mecca would no longer be a religious or economic center.

Medina

The city leaders decided to shun Mohammed and his companions, cutting them off with a boycott that barred citizens from trading goods or food with the prophet and his followers. This lasted several months, and Mohammed was continuing the mission when tragedy struck: his beloved wife Khadija and influential protector Abu Talib both died. The prophet was now vulnerable and was publicly abused and not allowed to preach or pray in public. Eventually, after threats to his life, and with a price on his head, Mohammed and his seventy or so followers ended up in Yathrib, a foreign city 250 miles from Mecca populated by Arabs and Jews. The city leaders invited him to stay and to lead them in settling their religious and political disputes.

Mohammed and his companions established an oasis at Yathrib, now renamed Medina, built the first mosque, and began shaping a new society based on his revelation. This event marks year "1" on the Muslim calendar.

At Medina, Mohammed was free to preach his revelation, and gradually he formed a new society that went beyond tribal identity. Each member would be protected, and though justice would be imposed by retribution, forgiveness and reconciliation were stressed. The community was egalitarian, usury was forbidden, and instead of heavy taxes, a tithe was collected according to each one's means and then redistributed to the needy. Although the society remained patriarchal, many new rights were given to women. They were to be cared and provided for by men, who were thought to have greater strength. Mohammed allowed polygamy and himself had nine different wives.

Mohammed held that the Torah, the Gospels, and the Quran were to be seen in continuity with each other. For him, the Jews, Christians, and Muslims shared a single revelation from God, with the Quran being the final revelation. Surprising to many Christians, Mohammed revered Jesus as the greatest of God's messengers and included many of the gospel stories in the Quran, including the virginal conception, the miracles, Jesus' messiahship, and his coming in judgment at the end of time.



Later Muslim scholars, however, rejected the connection between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and called non-Muslims unbelievers or even infidels. They also took the position that the Quran was the only true scripture.

This was the Islamic community that, in the future, would provide varying interpretations of how Islamic society should exist. Extremists, traditionalists, and radicals all have different ideas of what life in Medina was like.

The Spread of Islam

Mohammed and his followers fought a number of battles with armies from Mecca and took control of their land in Medina. Mohammed now turned his attention to Mecca and, gathering a thousand of his followers, marched on the city as pilgrims. Caught by surprise and overwhelmed by Mohammed's audacity, the city leaders agreed to make certain concessions if Mohammed agreed to visit Mecca as a tribal leader but not as the Messenger from God. Several years later, Mohammed overwhelmed Mecca with a vast army and conquered the city. He proceeded to clean out the Kaaba of its idols, which he smashed to the ground. It was now sanctified and declared the House of the One God. But then Mohammed surprised all and returned to Medina, where he established the pillars of the Muslim faith and the foundations of Muslim government. Several years after his return to Medina, Mohammed died.

The time after his death was tumultuous. In less than half a century, a Muslim split occurred that remains today. The governor of Syria usurped power from Ali, the son-in-law of Mohammed, and moved the capital from Medina to Damascus. When Ali tried to found a rival capital, he was murdered. When Ali's son, Husayn, tried to regain the leadership, he was killed, and his head was brought back on a lance and presented on a golden tray to the caliph in Damascus. The followers of Ali, the Shiah, were devastated by this and broke away from the Sunni (the majority of Muslims who follow a leading apostle of Mohammed) and still mourn the martyrdom of Mohammed's grandson, Husayn. The country of Iraq is currently beleaguered by conflict between Sunnis and Shia.

The tiny community that began in Medina soon began to expand militarily and swallowed up the Sasanian Empire (Iran) and then India, North Africa, and parts of the Byzantine Empire, and advanced into the Iberian Peninsula. Conquest was by revelation and by sword. The wandering tribes with their caravans eventually gained an empire spanning three continents.

The Quran

As the Muslim Empire spread, it became more diverse and open to interpretations of the Quran that were more opportunistic than authentic. Thousands of beliefs and practices were attributed to Mohammed that were mere fabrications. For instance, the Quran tells believers not to pass on their wealth to the feeble-minded. Later commentators changed "feeble-minded" to "women and children." One close follower of Mohammed is known to have simply made up the teaching of the prophet that if you entrust your affairs to women you will never get rich.



During Mohammed's lifetime, the Quran was not collected into a book. As the prophet poured out his revelation, it was memorized by followers and only the legal issues were written down. After the prophet's death, the message began to appear in diverse versions in Iraq, Syria, and Basra. The followers in Mecca became concerned, and in 650 the caliph authorized a single, binding text, but followers of other Quranic texts still claimed legitimacy. Traditionalists do not allow the Quran to be translated from Arabic, claiming that these are the words of God and cannot be changed. They also closely monitor interpretations. Traditionalists believe that the Quran is direct revelation from God, the actual words of God handed down through Mohammed. It reveals God's self and therefore is not only the speech of God, but actually God. Most Sunnis are traditionalists. Here there is little room for seeing the evolution of Quran through culture or for free interpretation. At best, the traditionalists allow for the literal meaning and for a hidden meaning that can be carefully discerned only by appointed experts. From this perspective, Islamic tradition is static and absolute. Many see parallels to Christianity's evangelical fundamentalists and with churches that profess doctrines that they see as unchangeable.

More liberal Muslims view the Quran as eternal but also the result of human authorship, changing cultures, and situations. Here the revelation evolves to meet modern questions. They argue that Mohammed himself amended the revelation as he went along and never authorized a codified book. Rather, he saw the Quran as a living scripture that adapts itself to new situations.

Even today the dispute goes on and some traditionalists have become rigid, often fanatical, about the meaning of the revelation and want to silence those who disagree. In 1990 a professor at Cairo University who said that the Quran is both divinely revealed and a cultural product of early Arabia was branded a heretic and forced to leave the country. In 1985 a Sudanese scholar who claimed that the Qurans from Mecca and Medina have different historical origins was executed.

More liberal Muslims allow translations and recognize private and diverse interpretations, even those over the Internet! Many Muslim women today are reading and interpreting the Quran through feminine eyes. They are able to sift out the liberating aspects of the Quran from those that come from the patriarchal norms of the past.

Islam's Five Pillars of Faith

The five pillars of faith are the solemn obligations of Muslims. The first pillar is the confession of faith: that God is one and Mohammed is his prophet. The second is prayer: Muslims are called to prayer five times a day (dawn, noon, late afternoon, sunset, and nightfall). They are called to prayer by a muezzin, who in times past would call from atop a tower. Today the call is usually made electronically. The third pillar is almsgiving to the poor. The fourth is fasting during the month of Ramadan. And the final pillar is a pilgrimage, or hajj, to Mecca during one's lifetime.

(This article is excerpted from *The Ongoing Renewal of Catholicism*, by Brennan R. Hill [Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2008]. Copyright © 2008 by Brennan R. Hill. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.)

