

Islam in Brief

Islam was founded by the prophet Muhammad in Arabia in the early 7th century. This period in Arabia, before Islam's birth, is referred to as the "time of arrogance." The people of that area were largely polytheistic and idolatrous. Muhammad was concerned about the various forms of religion at that time and would often go to the hills to meditate. It was during this time that he claimed to have been visited by the angel Gabriel who brought messages from Allah.

Muhammad's first converts consisted mostly of family members in Mecca. Most of the inhabitants of Mecca rejected Muhammad's teaching, accusing him of being demon possessed. As the opposition to Muhammad's teaching intensified, he and his followers, about 50 at that time, made the move from Mecca to the city of Medina. While in Medina, Islam began to take on a more clear doctrine. Muhammad became a statesman, a legislator, and a judge. His converts grew as his influence increased, and so did large scale warfare. In just eight years, the Muslim armies succeeded in changing the Arabic nation from one of being polytheistic to one which was mainly Muslim.

Islam today is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States. By the year 2010 America's Muslim population is expected to surpass the Jewish population, making Islam the country's second-largest faith after Christianity.

There are nearly 200 mosques in the U.S., as well as numerous Islamic day schools, Sunday, and weekend schools.



Though Islam was once largely confined to Arabia and parts of Africa, it has now spread from spiritual centers such as this "forbidden city" (North Africa) even into rural America.

Biography of Muhammad

According to various Islamic sources, the story of Muhammad's life was passed on from generation to generation, through the telling of stories. His story begins with his birth around the 4th century. The son of Amina and Abdulla Muttalib, he was born in the city of Mecca, in Arabia. His father died before he was born, so at the time of his birth, his mother, Amina, sent for his grandfather. His grandfather came and took him to the Ka'bah, (worship center) where he prayed for the infant and gave him the name of Muhammad.

It was customary in those days to hire a nursing mother from the Arabian desert, to take the child and nurse him for the first two years, so the child would have the benefit of the clean, fresh air of the desert, rather than the cramped, contaminating air of the city.

A woman named Halima, from the tribe of Bani S'ad, had come to the city of Mecca in search of a child who needed a nurse. This was her means of employment, but, neither she nor the other women who had come seeking nursing babies wanted to nurse Muhammad because his father was dead, and they didn't think they would be well paid. But, suddenly, after she had refused Amina, she had an overwhelming desire for the child, so she took Muhammad to her Bedouin home. Immediately, her breasts overflowed with milk, and the udders of her female camel also were full. Everything about her seemed to flourish. The women of the tribe became envious of her, because of her great luck, and spread rumors that she had a blessed child.

When Muhammad was two years old, Halima brought him back to his mother, but begged her to let her keep him a while longer, because he had brought her so much luck; so Amina agreed.

It is taught that one day, when the child Muhammad was out alone, two angels came and seized him, opened up his chest, and took out his heart. They removed a small, black stone, cleaned the cavity, and then, put the heart back. Thus, a devil was removed from him and he was made pure.

As a small child he tended the goats with his foster brothers, and learned the pure, Arabic language of the Bedouins. When he was six, and back with his mother, she took him to Yathnib to pay a visit to her father. She also wanted to visit the grave of her husband. On her way back to Mecca, she died at a place called Abwa. An Abyssinian woman named Umm Ayman Barkah, found and brought the child to his grandfather in Mecca. He became the apple of his grandfather's eye.

At the age of eight, Muhammad's grandfather died. After that he was cared for by two uncles. Once, when he was nine, his Uncle Abu Talib planned to go with a merchant caravan to Syria. The child begged to go with him, and was allowed to go. When the caravan reached Busra in Syria, the group broke for a short stay. While there, a monk who was meditating in a nearby cave saw the child and received a revelation that the child was special. He went to the boy's uncle and told him that Muhammad had the "signs" of a future prophet, and that he should take him back right away. He also told him to guard the child carefully, especially from the Jews. So, Abu Talib returned to Mecca with the child.

Muhammad grew to be a reserved, honest, and unassuming young man. While others his age were behaving boisterously, and discovering the ways of evil, Muhammad worked hard as a shepherd of sheep and goats.

There is a story told of him when he was about 14 or 15, where a war broke out between his tribe, the Qu'raysh and another, the Hawazin. After a volley of arrows had been shot, Muhammad picked up the enemies' arrows and offered them back.

At the age of 25, Muhammad married his first wife, Khadijah. She was 15 years his elder, a widow, and a brilliant and wealthy business woman. She was honest and very well respected. Although not all lived, Muhammad had 7 children with Khadijah.

When Muhammad was 35, a reconstruction of the Ka'bah (building of worship) began. At that time, the Ka'bah was the home of all sorts of statues and idols of pagan gods. After the building had begun reconstruction, there was much fighting and arguing between the different tribes about who should place the holy, black stone in its place. There was so much fighting, that the construction stopped. Then, they decided that the first man entering the building in the morning would be the one to place the stone in its place. The first man turned out to be Muhammad. When given the favor of placing the black stone, instead of doing it by himself, he took a large, sturdy cloth, placed the stone in the middle of it, and had each of the different tribes take an end, and all put the stone in place together. Thus began his reputation for wisdom.

As the story goes, in the year 610, Muhammad received his religious call. He was about

40. When he received his first revelation, he was terrified that it had come from demons, or Jinn, as the Muslims call them. But, his wife assured him that the revelation was from God, or Allah, as that was the name that was revealed to him.

Muhammad's teachings were not well received in Mecca, so in June of 622 he journeyed to make his home in Medina. This event of his moving marked the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Eight years later Muhammad returned to Mecca in triumph for he had gained many followers and converts to Islam. He felt that the "gods" in the Ka'bah were evil, so he went to the Ka'bah and purified it by removing the various idols in the ancient, Arab shrine.

It is said that Muhammad continued to receive revelations, and by the time of his death, two years later, all of Arabia was committed to Islam.

FAQ: Questions and Answers About Islam

1. DID MUHAMMAD WRITE THE QUR'AN?

Muhammad claimed to receive the teachings of the Qur'an in revelations from Allah via the angel Gabriel, from age 40, until his death. According to tradition, the Qur'an was not put down in writing until after his death. Muhammad could neither read nor write.

2. WHAT IS THE BLACK STONE?

The story goes that a big, black stone fell from the heavens to the Arabian desert (probably a meteorite.) Because it came from the sky, the people thought it was from God, and began to believe that the place in which it fell was holy. (Later that place became known as Mecca.) After Ishmael was born to Sarah's servant, Hagar, Sarah was very jealous and hated Hagar. Sarah demanded that Abraham get rid of her. So, Abraham took Hagar and her child into the desert and left them there. Hagar walked and walked until she thought she would die of thirst. She sat down and started digging and digging for water, and miraculously found water right where the black stone had fallen. To this day it is believed that this spot is the most holy place for all Muslims. It is Mecca.

3. WHAT MAKES MECCA A HOLY PLACE?

It is the place of the miracle of the black stone, and the place of Muhammad's birth.

4. HOW OFTEN DO MUSLIMS PRAY?

Muslims pray 5 times a day, before sunrise, at noon, afternoon, sundown, and night.

5. WHAT IS RAMADAN?

Ramadan is the time when Muslims celebrate the month that Allah sent the Qur'an. It is a time for celebration, fasting and prayer. And, it is at a different time each year. It follows a Middle Eastern lunar calendar and is 10 days later each year than the year before.

6. HOW MANY WIVES DID MUHAMMAD HAVE?

Most accounts say that Muhammad had 15 wives, though a few accounts say that he had only 12. Others say Muhammad had 4 wives. His first was 40 when he was 25. His second was about 18 years old. His 3rd was a Christian. His 4th was about 10 years old when they married. It is taught that he had these various kinds of wives in order to show his followers what sorts of wives Muslim men could have. They could be older, widowed, younger, very much younger, or of different faiths. Men were allowed to marry up to as many as four wives, as long as they treated each equally and showed no favoritism. Women, on the other hand, could only marry one man. This could have been due to the fact that in those days, there was much fighting, and killing, so there were more women than men.

7. DID PEOPLE BELIEVE IN ALLAH BEFORE MUHAMMAD OR THE QUR'AN?

Yes and No. There was a "god" named Allah who was one of three chief idols of the pre-Islamic Ka'bah pantheon. Muhammad's revelation was that "Al-lah," whom he already knew, was the one true God.

8. DO AMERICAN MUSLIMS BELIEVE THAT USAMA BIN LADEN IS EVIL?

"Maybe. Maybe not. He is just a man." Some believe there is no proof that he was the master-mind behind the Twin Towers attacks. Some feel that the American news media is biased and tries to make people believe what it wants. The same goes for Saddam Hussein.

9. DO MUSLIMS BELIEVE THAT THEIRS IS THE ONLY TRUE RELIGION?

They believe that their religion is above all others because the revelation to Muhammad was the last and final one, and therefore the most accurate.

10. WHAT DOES "ISLAM" MEAN?

It means: "Submission to the will of Allah."

11. WHAT ARE THE 5 LAWS OF ISLAM?

They are: No God but Allah, Prayer 5 times a day, Charitable gifts, Fasting in the holy month of Ramadan, & A pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are able.

12. WHAT IS ISLAM?

It is the teaching of the prophet Muhammad, and in practice is a combination of religion, culture and politics. It is the official state religion of many Muslim countries.

13. WHAT IS THE QUR'AN?

This is this authoritative scripture of Islam. It is about two thirds the size of the New Testament. Divided into 114 Surahs (chapters) it is an extensive guide for Muslim believers.

14. WHAT DOES THE QUR'AN TEACH?

It teaches that Allah is one being. It teaches Muslim followers to pray 5 times a day and to worship by reciting the Qur'an. It teaches predestination, the 5 laws to which followers should absolutely submit, gives detailed instructions on what to say in prayers, and how to live.

15. WHAT ARE THE FOUR BOOKS OF ISLAM?

They are: The Torah of Moses, The Psalms of David, The Gospel of Jesus Christ, and The Qur'an. Muslims believe that the first three are corrupted by man. Therefore, the Qur'an is God's most recent, most accurate and final word to man. Muslims also believe that many other books were given to other prophets, but have all been lost or corrupted beyond recognition.

16. WHAT DOES ALLAH MEAN?

It means: The Supreme Being. It is the name of God, derived from the Arabic Al-Ilah.

17. WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GOD AND ALLAH?

The God of the Bible is righteous. He is Father in Heaven. He evokes thoughts of love, compassion, tenderness, protectiveness and grace. God sacrificed His own Son for the eternal salvation of sinners. "For by grace are you saved." Christianity was founded by a risen Savior.

Allah is the creator and judge. He is a god of power. He demands total submission and obedience. He created both good and evil. He predestined the world. Therefore, if something bad happens, it is the will of Allah.

Allah has done nothing for man that has cost him anything. One's salvation is achieved through works. Where Christianity was founded by a risen Savior, Islam was founded by a now deceased prophet.

[Note: "Allah" is the only Arabic word for God and is used by Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs alike, which can sometimes lead to confusion when ministering to Muslims. In this booklet, "Allah" refers to the god of the Qur'an, while "God" refers to the God of the Bible. It may help you to make this distinction in your conversations, as well.]

18. IS ISLAM A PEACEFUL RELIGION?

Muhammad gained followers by using force. He had converts who were warriors and would invade villages, take physical control, and demand that the captives become Muslim. This is the way in which Islam was spread throughout Arabia. To reject Allah and Islam was to invite death.

The Qur'an states, "Fight and slay the pagans (anyone not Muslim) wherever ye find them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem of war..." Surah 9:5. "Fight those who do not believe in God and the last day... and fight the people of the book (Jews and Christians) who do not accept the religion of truth..." (Islam) Surah 9:29. "I will instill terror into the hearts of unbelievers, smite ye above their necks and smite all their finger-tips off them." Surah 8:13-17. In dozens of places in the Qur'an, Allah promises Paradise to anyone who's martyred when killing the "infidels of God." That is their only assurance of salvation. As an aside, today in Israel and other Middle Eastern countries, when a Muslim becomes a suicide bomber, his or her family is generously, financially recompensed. Yet, some can find interpretations that contradict these Surahs to show that Islam might be a peaceful religion.

19. WHAT IS "JIHAD?"

The word "*jihad*" is frequently misunderstood by both Christians and Muslims. The word means, simply, "struggle." It is sometimes referred to as the "sixth pillar" of Islam due to its importance, but this is misleading: in Islam, there are two forms of *jihad*. The Lesser *jihad* is "the *jihad* of the sword," or use of personal or military force, and is commanded and permissible only when Muslims are oppressed and prohibited from worshipping freely. Many Muslims and most non-Muslims perceive this as the only form of *jihad*, and extremist Muslim interpretations of oppression further the misunderstanding. The Greater *jihad* is "the *jihad* of the heart," a personal struggle for righteousness commanded of all Muslims at all times.

Excerpted from Islam 101 by Lorraine Orris with Ed Cottrell published by Campus Crusade for Christ.