

The life of Mohammad- the prophet of Islam

By Vivienne Stacey

Before looking at the main events of Mohammad's life we should remember the backward and idolatrous state of Arabia before the start of Mohammad's mission. Animism, idolatry female infanticide and oppression of women were widespread. Muslims referred to it as the age of ignorance or the Jahiliyya.. The country was populated with nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes and settled city dwellers in towns like Mecca and Medina. Mecca was both a commercial and pilgrimage centre. Among the numerous deities worshipped at Mecca were the three goddesses –Manat, Al Lat and Al Uzza. There were many tribal feuds and the country lacked unity. Arabia was influenced by the power struggle between the Byzantine and Persian Empires.

There were some Jewish communities in and around Mecca.. In the Hijaz around Mecca there were several nomadic Christian tribes. In the area of Yemen, in the south, there had been Christians since the 4th century. In Mecca itself the Christians were mostly foreigners. Mohammad may have met Syrian monks in the desert. The Christianity which Mohammad saw was basically a foreign religion and the New Testament was not translated into Arabic until after his death. Also the Christian Church was deeply divided over doctrinal disputes. Ever since the great Church Councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451) the churches in the East had been arguing about the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ. Also the Monophysites emphasized Christ's divinity while giving the impression that he was not fully human. The Nestorians had problems accepting the full manhood and divinity of Christ could be combined in one person. While the Gnostics considered matter evil and denied the incarnation, so Mohammad may not have heard the true version of the Christian faith from those he met. Besides these problems with heresy Christianity was associated with political power and colonial expansion under the Byzantine Emperors who stood firmly for the Orthodox faith and fiercely repressed deviations from the religion of the state.

Chronology: The life of Mohammad

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| AD 570 | Birth.. Tribe of Quraish in the line of Abraham through Ishmael. His father Abdullah died a few months before his birth |
| AD 576 | Mother died. Looked after by his grandfather for two years, until he died. Then his uncle Abu Talib cared for him |
| AD 582 | Began to accompany trading caravans into Syria. His earliest contacts with Jews and Christians in Mecca were thus reinforced |
| AD 593 | Trading missions to Syria in the service of a wealthy widow called Khadija |

- AD 595 Married Khadija thus gaining security and status. Mohammad was practically illiterate. He began contemplation; contacts with Hanifs (ascetics and monotheists).
- AD 610 At 40 he received his first “revelation” on Mount Hira. Convinced he was being called by God to a special mission. Visited in the cave by the angel Gabriel with the message ...recite Q 96: 1-5. First converts Khadija, Zaid , Ali- family members; Abu Bakr – friend Umar
- AD 612-622 Preached in Mecca mainly on belief in Allah and the last day e.g.: 74 1-7
- AD 616 Persecution by Quraish at height of its power. Many of Mohammad’s followers fled from Mecca and found refuge in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinya
- AD 617 Boycott of the Muslims by the Meccans
- AD 621 Abu Talib dies. Khadija dies. Mohammad contracts other marriages. Contents of the surahs is ,mainly condemnation of idolatry and judgment for unbelief. Mohammad gained some followers from Medina. The people of Medina invited him with his followers to come to Medina to be their leader
- AD 622 The Hijra, flight to Medina (Yithrib). Muslim calendar dates from this point. Mohammad no longer the leader of a small persecuted band, but a man of substance and importance. Mohammad’s authority: surahs on spiritual leader of the new faith- revelation; legislator for the community- marriage, duties etc; military leader- war, booty etc.
- AD 622-630 Main opposition from the Meccans. Other tribes to be subjugated. Forays against those who opposed him. Raids on passing caravans
- AD 624 Battle of Badr v Meccans; Mohammad won
- AD 625 Battle of Uhud v Meccans; Mohammad lost (Jews deserted him)
- AD 627 Battle of Ahzab; defended Medina against attack
- AD 629 Massacred Jews who opposed his teaching (there are surahs for all events).
- AD 628 Truce of Hudaibiya with Meccans – Q: 48:2
- AD 629 “Invitation” to rulers to accept Islam. Chief of Bahrain accepted; Emperor of Iran refused; Byzantine Emperor refused; Emperor of Abyssinia accepted
- AD 630 Mohammad took Mecca- Meccans had broken treaty by attacking a tribe with whom Mohammad was in league, Mohammad smashed the idols in the Ka’aba (Q: 17:82).
- AD 630 Battle of Hunain. Mohammad won and distributed booty amongst Meccans. Mohammad returned to Medina- delegations came from all over Arabia announcing acceptance of Islam

- AD 631 Mohammad went on pilgrimage to Mecca (Q: 5:4). Delivered
"Farewell Address". Returned to Medina
- AD 632 Fell ill (Q: 110:2-4). Died in Medina and buried there.

Problems:

1. Nature of Mohammad's call
2. Was he really "a prophet"?
3. Could the Qur'an be eternal in view of the subject matter (e.g. battles, Jews, Meccans, wives) and in view of abrogation?
4. Was he a pragmatist? egotist? statesman? tyrant? Reformer with strong personality and concrete message? "false prophet" of Revelation? strategist?
5. Mohammad veneration

Note: Undoubtedly Mohammad was an outstanding leader who has earned his place in world history. His courageous proclamation of the one God in an idolatrous society and his concern to improve the security of women and to prevent female infanticide show him as a religious and moral reformer.