

Muhammad was born in Mecca, Arabia, in 570, into a simple household. Since his father, Abdullah, died before his birth and his mother, Amina, died when he was only six years old, he was raised an orphan by his grandfather and then his uncle. Muhammad had always detested the cruelty, decadence and idolatry of Meccan society and, as he grew, he was labelled 'the trustworthy one' for his honesty, integrity and noble character.

And verily you (O Muhammad) are on an exalted standard of character. (Quran 68:4)

At the age of 40, whilst meditating in the mountain cave of Hira, Muhammad was suddenly visited by the Angel Gabriel. It was a terrifying experience. The angel squeezed Muhammad tightly and compelled him: 'READ!' Muhammad, unlettered, said: 'I cannot read!' Again, the angel pressed him: 'READ!', and again Muhammad appealed: 'I cannot read!' Finally, Gabriel recited:

Read! In the name of your Lord Who created; Who Created man from a clot of blood. Read! And your Lord is Most Generous; Who taught man the use of the pen, Taught man that which he knew not. (Quran 96:1-5)

And so, a little over 600 years after the ascension of Jesus, God had once again spoken to man. Muhammad had just become a Prophet. Deeply afraid, he hurried home to his wife, Khadija, who consoled and reassured him, saying: 'Allah will never disgrace you. You keep good relations, bear the burden of the weak, help the poor and the needy, entertain your guests generously and endure hardships in the path of truthfulness.' Khadija then accompanied Muhammad to see her learned Christian cousin, Waraqa. 'This (Gabriel),' said Waraqa, 'is the same one who keeps the divine secrets, whom Allah had sent to Moses... Anyone who came with something similar to what you have brought was treated with hostility, and if I should remain alive till the day when you are turned out (by the disbelievers), I would strongly support you.' (Bukhari)

For days, Muhammad was grief-stricken, terrified, unable to come to terms with what was happening to him. Then, one day, as the Prophet recalled: 'While I was walking, I heard a voice from the sky. I looked up and, surely enough, it was the same angel who had visited me in the cave of Hira. He was sitting on a chair between the earth and sky. I was afraid of him and fell to the ground (before) I went home (to Khadija) saying: "Cover me up! Cover me up!" (Then) Allah revealed to me the verses:

O you that is covered up! Arise and deliver warning. And your Lord, magnify. And your clothes, purify. And shun the idols. And do not give in order to get more. And be patient for the sake of your Lord (for what you are about to endure). (Quran 74:1-7)

With this new revelation, the doubts were dispelled. Muhammad accepted he was chosen and began calling people away from the worship of false gods to the worship of the One True God, Allah.

Say (to them, O Muhammad): 'I am but a mortal like you (people, but) it has been revealed to me that your god is One (True) God. So whoever hopes in meeting his Lord (Allah), let him work righteousness and associate none (as partner) in the worship of his Lord.' (Quran 18:110)

As a result of his call, Muhammad and those who believed in him, his disciples or 'Companions', were persecuted by the disbelieving Meccans. For the next 13 years they suffered taunts, beatings, torture, murders and social boycott. Hardest hit was Muhammad's own family. Abu Talib, the Prophet's pagan uncle and childhood guardian, pleaded with him to cease drawing the hostility of the Meccans by opposing their idols and to instead accept their offer of kingship. Seeing the great strain his protector was under, the Prophet, his eyes welling up with tears, said: 'O my uncle! If they placed the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left that I should renounce my message, I would not - until Allah made manifest His cause or I died in the attempt.' In these most trying times, the Prophet was consoled only by the revelation of the Quran.

These are Allah's Verses, We recite them to you in truth. And surely you are one of the Messengers. (Quran 2:252)

Even when his relations ran him out of Taif, pelting him with rocks till his sandals were soaked in blood, the Prophet turned his grief to prayer: 'O Allah! I complain to You of my weakness, my inability and my insignificance before the people. O Most Merciful of those who are merciful. O Lord of the weak and helpless and my Lord too. To whom have You entrusted me? An estranged relative who receives me with hostility? Or an enemy who controls my affair? As long as You are not angry with me, I do not care. Your pardon is much enough for me. I seek refuge in the light of Your Face by which all darkness is dispelled and every affair of this world and the next is set right - lest Your anger or displeasure descend upon me. For there is no power or might except with You.' (Ibn Hisham) Then, when an angel offered to crush Taif between two mountains, the forgiving Prophet refused, saying: 'Perhaps Allah will bring from their progeny those who will worship Him alone?' (Bukhari)

By the grace of Allah, you are gentle towards the people; if you had been stern and hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from round about you. (Quran 3:159)

Eventually, in 622, Allah ordered the Muslims to emigrate to the northern city of Medina. This was a turning point. A watershed in world history so monumental that it marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. For Medina had elected Muhammad its ruler and it was there where he established his Islamic state, nurturing the community under the shade of divine revelation and propagating Islam from a position of strength to many near and distant lands. Eight years later, Muhammad set out to conquer Mecca at the head of an army of ten thousand believers. As the army marched, they passed a litter of puppies. The Prophet ordered that the animals not be disturbed and posted a sentry to see his order through. Proof, if needed, that even the Prophet's military expeditions were ultimately founded on mercy. Mecca surrendered without battle.

Despite suffering years of oppression at Meccan hands, the victorious Prophet declared a general amnesty and forbade any revenge. To those whose cruelty had forced him to flee his birthplace, only for them to then incite armies to destroy him at his Medinan refuge, the Prophet's response was only to say: 'Go! You are free!' His chastisers soon became his champions.

Repel (the evil of your foe) with what is better. Then lo! the one between whom and you was enmity (will come to you) as if he were a dear friend. (Quran 41:34)

In 631, during *Hajj*, the Prophet, aware of his impending death, delivered his farewell sermon. After praising and thanking Allah, he said: 'O people! Lend me an attentive ear, for I know not whether after this year I shall be amongst you again. Therefore listen to what I say to you very carefully and take these words to those who could not be present here today. O people! Just as you regard this month, this day, this city as sacred, so regard the life and property of every Muslim. Return the goods entrusted to you to their rightful owners. Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember, you will indeed meet your Lord and He will indeed reckon your deeds. Allah has forbidden you to take usury; therefore all interest obligation shall henceforth be waived. Your capital, however, is yours to keep. You will neither inflict nor suffer inequity... Beware of Satan for the safety of your religion. He has lost all hope in his leading you astray in great things, so beware of following him in small things. O people! It is true that you have certain rights with regards to your women, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under Allah's trust and with His permission... Do treat your women well and be kind to them. For they are your partners and committed helpers... O People! Listen to me in earnest: worship Allah, perform your five daily prayers, fast the month of Ramadan, give alms and make the Hajj if you are able. All humanity is from Adam and Adam is from clay. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab; or for a white over a black, nor for a black over a white; except through piety. Know that every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim and that the Muslims are one community... Remember, one day you will appear before Allah and answer for your deeds. So beware! Do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone. O people! No prophet or apostle will come after me and no new faith will be born. Reason well therefore, O people, and understand the words that I convey to you. I leave behind me two things, if you follow them you will never go astray: the Book of Allah (the Quran) and my Sunna (example). All those who listen to me shall pass on my words to others and those to others again; and may the last ones understand my words better than those who listen to me directly. Be my witness, O Allah!, that I have conveyed Your Message to Your people.'

It is He (Allah) who has sent His Messenger with the Guidance and the Religion of Truth that He may make it victorious over all other religions. And sufficient is Allah as a witness. (Quran 48:28)

At the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, a greater part of the Arabian Peninsula had embraced Islam. Within a century, the faith had spread at phenomenal speed to Spain in the West and as Far East as China, establishing the same monotheistic religion that Muhammad's ancestor, Abraham, had espoused many centuries earlier. The reason for the success of Islam was and continues to be the simple truth of its message and the utterly impeccable character of its messenger. As Muhammad lived and died in the full light of recorded history, that character, not to mention his sayings, deeds and tacit approvals, were all meticulously noted for posterity by his Companions.* Even the Prophet's physicality, like every other aspect of his life, is known more about than that of any other historical figure.

The Prophet was of a slightly above-average height. Uncannily, in gatherings, he would appear taller than those actually taller than him. In complexion, he was white with a rosy tinge; pale, but not excessively so. His hair was jet black and wavy, but stopped short of curling, and was kept between his earlobes and shoulders. Sometimes he would part his hair at the middle. Other times, he would wear it braided. He had the physique of a powerful man. He had a broad upper-back and shoulders with an apple-shaped birthmark between his shoulder-blades: the Seal of Prophethood. He had long muscular limbs, large joints and a wide girth, giving him heavy - though silky-soft - hands and feet. His lean stomach never protruded out past the profile of his chest. He looked radiant, 'as if the sun were following its course across and shining from his face,' said one Companion. His neck was silvery white; his forehead, prominent; his pupils, large and black; his eyelashes, long and thick; his nose, high-tipped with narrow nostrils. At the time of his death, he had exactly 17 white hairs shared between his temples and the front of his thick, fist-long beard. He had hair on his forearms and shins and a line of fine hair also ran from his chest to his navel.

The Prophet would walk briskly with a forward-leaning gait, moving with strength of purpose and lifting each foot clearly off the ground. His pace was such that fit men would tire trying to keep up. When he turned, he would turn his whole body, giving full attention to the one addressing him and showing complete concern to what was being said. When he pointed, he would use an open hand so as not to offend. Likewise, when he criticised a person's behaviour, rather than name and shame, he would simply say: 'Why do people do so and so?' He would laugh only to the extent that the gap between his front teeth would become visible. He would become angry only to the extent that his face would turn red and the vein between his fine, bow-shaped eyebrows would bulge. He once said: 'I am the master of the descendants of Adam and I do not say so out of pride.' (Tirmidhi) That freedom from pride was obvious even to children who would playfully lead the Prophet through the streets of Medina whilst grasping his finger. Indeed he had said: 'He who does not show mercy to our young, nor honour our old, is not from us.'

* These records of the *Sunna* are the *hadith* narrations collected by Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, Ibn Maja, Nisai and so on.

(Allah has sent you) a Messenger who recites to you the Clear Signs of Allah that He may take out those who believe and work righteousness from the (many) darkness' to the (one true) light. (Quran 65:11)

The Prophet said: 'I have been favoured over all other Prophets with six: I have been given the conciseness of (weighty) speech, fear is instilled in the hearts of my enemy, the spoils of war have been made lawful for me, the whole earth has been made a place of prayer and a means of purification, I have been sent to the whole of mankind, and I am the last of the Prophets.' (Muslim)

Ali, cousin and son-in-law to the Prophet, said of Muhammad:

'He was the Last of the Prophets, the most giving of hearts, the most truthful, the best of them in temperament and the most sociable. Whoever unexpectedly saw him would stand in awe of him, and whoever accompanied him and got to know him would love him. Those describing him would say: "I have never seen anyone before or after him who was comparable to him."'

The Prophet's beloved wife, Aa'isha, said of her selfless husband:

'He always joined in the housework and would at times mend his clothes, repair his shoes and sweep the floor. He would milk, tether and feed his animals and do household chores.' (Bukhari) She also described his character as: 'The Quran (exemplified).'

Indeed in the Messenger of Allah you have an excellent example to follow for whoever hopes in Allah and the Last Day and remembers Allah much. (Quran 33:21)

Though the Quran *is* the lasting and greatest of the Prophet's miracles due to its inimitability, its prophecies and its science then-unknown, Muhammad was granted many others. Like his night 'flight' to Jerusalem and ascension to Heaven where he met past Prophets and spoke directly with Allah. Also, his sweat was a sweet fragrance; his spittle, a medicine. Water flowed from his fingers and quenched the thirsty, whilst his meals glorified Allah. With eyes front, he could see those praying behind him, and perceive and overpower demons beside him. A palm tree once wept for him. A wolf once spoke of him. The earth expelled an apostate's corpse for him. The moon, Allah split in two for him. So supremely triumphant was his life, so successful was his prophethood, so completely did he fulfil his mission, so faithfully did he serve His Lord God; so was **Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah.**

And have We not raised high your fame?! (Quran 94:4)

'I have studied him - that wonderful man - and in my opinion far from being an anti-Christ, he must be called the saviour of humanity. I believe that if a man like him were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world, he would succeed in solving its problems in a way that would bring it the much needed peace and happiness: I have prophesied about the faith of Muhammad that it would be acceptable to the Europe of tomorrow as it is beginning to be acceptable to the Europe of today.' (Sir George Bernard Shaw, *The Genuine Islam*, 1936)

And We have not sent you (O Muhammad) except as a mercy to the worlds. (Quran 21:107)

MUHAMMAD



'My parable with the other Prophets is like a man who built a house, perfect except for one missing brick. People would go around the house, staring in awe of its perfection, saying: "Had it not been for this space!" I am that brick. I am the last of the Prophets.'

'If greatness of purpose, smallness of means and astounding results are the three criteria of human genius, who could dare to compare any great man in modern history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man Muhammad moved not only armies, legislations, empires, peoples and dynasties, but millions of men (and women); and more than that the altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and the souls. On the basis of a Book, every letter of which has become law, he created a spiritual nationality which blended together peoples of every tongue and of every race... The idea of the unity of God, proclaimed amidst the exhaustion of fabulous theologies, was in itself such a miracle that upon its utterance from his lips it destroyed all the ancient superstitions... Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational beliefs, of a cult without images: the founder of 20 terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad. As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he?' (Lamartine, *Historie de la Turquie*, 1854)

Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet whom they find written in the Torah and the Gospel with them: he enjoins upon them all that is virtuous and forbids them all that is evil; he allows for them all that is good and prohibits for them all that is foul; and he releases them from their burdens and from the shackles that were upon them. So it is those who believe in him, honour him, assist him and follow the light which is sent down with him, it is they who will be successful. (Quran 7:157)