

# CONTENTS

---

Abbreviations for Qur'an Translations	5
Introduction	7
<b>Part I: The Chasm between Us</b>	<b>11</b>
1. Who Are the Muslims?	13
2. The Rise of a World Religion	28
3. How Muslims Think	42
4. The Five Pillars of Islam	52
5. What Separates Us	63
<b>Part II: Materials for Bridge Building</b>	<b>79</b>
6. Piers of Commonality	81
7. Plank One: Intention	87
8. Plank Two: Holiness	101
9. Plank Three: Struggle	111
<b>Part III: Building a Bridge of Understanding</b>	<b>125</b>
10. Practical Advice for Bridge Builders	127
11. A Common Word between Us and You	139
Glossary	147
Notes	151

# 1

## WHO ARE THE MUSLIMS?

---

If a new family moved in next door, you would probably have lots of questions about them. Who are they? Where did they come from? Why did they choose to live here? Do they have relatives nearby? You would likely want to hear a bit of their story.

In the same way, you may have many questions about your Muslim neighbors. Who are the people called Muslims? How did this religion originate? What accounts for the different sects within Islam?

The first step in getting to know any neighbor is to learn more about that neighbor. So our first step in building a bridge of understanding to our Muslim neighbors is to hear their story, to find out who they are, and to learn how their faith has developed over the last fourteen centuries.

The historical account contained in this chapter is the story of Islam as believed by most Muslims. However, as with any story, alternative versions exist. The same is true for the story of Christianity. For example, some people love the message of Jesus but believe he was merely a human being who lived an exceptional life. They do not believe in miracles, and they say the Bible is an instructive book that does not have divine authorship. Most Christians believe something quite different, however. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who rose from the dead, and that the Bible is the

divinely inspired Word of God. Similarly, many Western scholars have taken a critical view of Islam, casting doubt on the historicity of Muhammad as well as the formation of the Qur'an. But my purpose here is not to argue history or theology. My aim is to tell the story of Islam as understood by millions of faithful Muslims around the world. When we are finished, you will understand the basic outline of Muslim history and the major branches of the Muslim family tree. In this chapter we will trace the beginnings of the Muslim story from the time of creation through the life of the prophet Muhammad.

As we move through the story, be alert for similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity. You will likely be able to note many of each. Some of the differences have become chasms that breed prejudice and suspicion. The similarities can become supports for our bridge of understanding.

For most of this chapter, I will tell the story through the eyes of a Muslim. Remember, our purpose here is not to debate the historical or theological validity of this story but simply to present it as Muslims themselves understand it.

## **The Prehistory of Islam**

There is only one God, and he has had only one message for humankind since the very beginning. The Qur'an states that there has never been a people to whom God did not send a prophet carrying his message: "And there never was a nation but a warner had passed among them" (Qur'an 35:24, al-Hilali), and "For every *Ummah* (a community or a nation), there is a Messenger" (Qur'an 10:47, al-Hilali). God's message is simple: All people must acknowledge God as the great Creator and submit to his will and his commandments. In fact, the word *islam* means "submission," and a *muslim* is one who has submitted to God. While most translators understand Qur'an 22:78 to say that God was the one who

coined the word *muslim*, some commentators understand this verse to say that Abraham coined this term.

Adam was the first one to submit to God (and, therefore, to become a Muslim). Adam was also the first in a long line of prophets bringing God's message to humanity. Belief in these prophets is a cornerstone of Islamic faith. There are three levels of messengers from God.

*Prophet (Nabi)*. A prophet is one who has received a revelation from God and is commissioned to share this revelation with people. Opinions vary as to the total number of prophets sent by God, but general thinking accepts that there were 124,000, of whom 25 are named in the Qur'an. These include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Elisha, Ezekiel, Jesus, and Muhammad.

*Apostle (Rasul)*. An apostle is one who has received not only a revelation from God but also a sacred book and a commission to teach God's law (*shari'a*). Lot, Ishmael, Jethro, Hud, Salih, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are all apostles.

*Prophets of Firm Resolve (Ulu al-'azm)*. These could be considered super prophets, those who showed great power and persistence in their mission. They are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

As the various apostles came with their revealed books and laws (*shari'a*), they replaced the previously revealed books and laws. Muhammad is called the Seal of the Prophets (see Qur'an 33:40) because, with him, the line of prophets has been sealed—or closed. He is the final prophet. Since Muhammad's God-given book has been perfectly preserved in its original state, there is no further need for a revealed book.

## **The Time of Ignorance (*Jahiliyya*)**

*Jahiliyya* means "days of ignorance." It refers to the time prior to the revelation of the Qur'an through the prophet Muhammad, when people lived in ignorance of God's laws.

Prior to Muhammad's time, Mecca was already a well-known city in Arabia. It was a center of both trade and idol worship and home to the *Ka'aba*, a cube-shaped structure with a black stone embedded in the eastern corner of its foundation. Various explanations have been offered for the origin of this sacred stone, perhaps the most interesting being that it is a meteor that fell to earth and was incorporated into this shrine, making the stone a link between the *Ka'aba* and the heavens.<sup>1</sup> The *Ka'aba* is thirty-three feet wide, forty feet long, and forty-nine feet high. It is hollow on the inside, with a door in the northeastern face. According to some Islamic traditions, Adam built this structure, and God lifted it up during the flood from which Noah was spared. By Abraham's time, the *Ka'aba* had fallen into disrepair. At some point, Abraham journeyed south to Mecca, where Ishmael and Hagar lived, and Abraham and Ishmael rebuilt the *Ka'aba* together.<sup>2</sup>

Islamic tradition suggests that people recognized that the *Ka'aba* was the shrine to Allah, whom they considered the chief god. However, people mistakenly honored a variety of other gods, represented by idols enshrined within this cubed structure. The *Ka'aba* housed 360 idols, including representations of Allah's supposed daughters, al-Lat, al-Uzza, and al-Manat.

Arabs from across the Arabian Peninsula made *hajjes*, or "pilgrimages," to the *Ka'aba* to honor these gods. Many of the practices of these early worshippers were later incorporated into the ritual of Islamic pilgrimages (see chap. 4). These include throwing pebbles on heaps of stone, circumambulating the *Ka'aba*, running between two hills in symbolic search for water (*sa'y*), kissing and stroking holy stones, and observing sacred periods of time.

Another significant aspect of the *jahiliyya*, and one that deeply impacted Muhammad's life, is the importance of poets and their words. As is common in tradition-focused cultures, language and power went together. Sometimes the heroes of the battlefield were

not the swordsmen but the poets. There are stories of vast armies that turned away in despair after a great poet shamed them. These tales are reminiscent of the way Goliath used taunts to keep the army of Israel cowering in their tents (see 1 Sam. 17:10–11) and of how Sennacherib surrounded Jerusalem, trying to discourage the Israelites with his words so they would just give up (see Isa. 36).

Muhammad later used this concept of the power of words to validate his prophethood. When he came, claiming to be a prophet of God, the Jews living in Arabia said that if he were a genuine prophet, he would be able to do miracles, as Moses and Elijah had done. In response, Muhammad pointed to the Qur'an as his miracle. He challenged his detractors to produce a *sura* (chapter) as powerful as those found in the Qur'an (Qur'an 10:38), but none could. Therefore, Muslims perceive that the Qur'an itself is the great validating miracle of the prophet Muhammad. This doctrine is known as the *i'jaz*, or “inimitability,” of the Qur'an.

Though the age of *jahiliyya* formally ended with the coming of Muhammad, the concept is reinterpreted by some modern-day Muslim reformers<sup>3</sup> who believe many of today's Muslims are living in an age of ignorance because they do not live in accordance with God's laws.

## **The Life of the Prophet Muhammad**

The emergence of Islam as a religion,<sup>4</sup> while it has roots deep in antiquity, actually begins with the appearance of Muhammad in Arabia in about the sixth century CE. The traditional date for Muhammad's birth is 570 CE, and the place is Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula.

### *Ancestry, Birth, and Early Life*

Muhammad's full name was Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah ibn 'Abdul-Muttalib. The word *ibn* means “son of,” so his name was

Muhammad, son of ‘Abdullah, son of ‘Abdul-Muttalib. Muhammad’s mother’s name was Amina. Lineage is very important for Arabs, and Muhammad’s lineage has been carefully traced.



Two names in this family tree have great significance. The first is Quraysh. In the years following Muhammad’s life, there was a strong sentiment that leadership of the Muslims should always fall to a member of the Quraysh clan. The second important name is Hashim. Over the years, many of the rulers in Muslim lands claimed legitimacy because they were descendants of Hashim. The Hashemite kingdom of Jordan is one example. ‘Abd Shams and al-‘Abbas are also of note because the first two early kingdoms of Islam were led by descendants of these men.

Arabia is a desertlike land with harsh conditions, so it was essential during Muhammad’s time that everyone, even city dwellers, learn to survive in the countryside. Children from the cities were often sent to live with rural families so they could be taught to thrive in the land of their birth. As a child, Muhammad spent a couple of years with an adoptive family in the area of Taif.

Muhammad's father died before he was born, and his mother died when he was just six years of age. The boy was taken in by his grandfather, 'Abdul-Muttalib, but 'Abdul-Muttalib died only two years later. So at the age of eight, Muhammad went to live with his father's brother, Abu Talib. Abu Talib was a merchant and caravan trader. Mecca was a center for trade, with two great caravans departing each year. One traveled south in the winter, to Yemen, to trade with ships coming from India. In the summer, another went north to Syria, to trade with the Byzantines. On one of these trips to Syria, when Muhammad was with the caravan, the travelers met up with a Christian monk named Bahira. Bahira noticed something different about this caravan. A cloud seemed to be following it, providing shade for the people and camels. When the caravan stopped, Bahira met all the people in the caravan, but none piqued any interest. He asked if there was anyone else in the company, and the caravanners said there was a small boy watching over the animals. When the boy Muhammad was brought forward, Bahira recognized him as a special person. He removed the boy's shirt and found a mark on his back that attested to his uniqueness. Bahira told Abu Talib that his nephew was destined for greatness but that some would try to kill the child, so Abu Talib must protect him.

At a young age, Muhammad rose to a prominent position in the caravan trade. He quickly earned a reputation as an honest merchant. A well-to-do widow named Khadija took notice of Muhammad and let it be known that if he were to propose, she would not turn him down. Before long, the two were married. Muhammad was twenty-five, and Khadija was fifteen years his senior. There is some question about Khadija's age because the couple produced seven children together—four girls and three boys. All of the boys died in infancy. By all accounts, the marriage was a very happy one.

## *Revelations*

Muhammad had always been a pensive person and frequently went to a mountain cave called Hira, near Mecca, where he meditated and fasted. In the year 610, on what is called the Night of Decree, or the Night of Power (Qur'an 97:1), Muhammad received his initial revelation, brought to him by the angel Gabriel (*Jibril*). This initial revelation is recorded in Sura 96:1–5. Muhammad was told to “Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created” (Qur'an 96:1, al-Hilali). However, the incident terrified Muhammad, and he hurried home to his wife, asking her to cover him up. He explained what he had just experienced, saying he didn't know if this was a vision from heaven or something from Satan. Khadija assured him it was from God and, for further proof, brought him to see her uncle, Waraqa ibn Naufal, who was a Christian. Waraqa ibn Naufal agreed that this surely must be a divine experience.

Over the next twenty-three years, Gabriel periodically appeared to Muhammad, revealing more and more of the Qur'an. For his part, Muhammad began preaching the message he had received. He began his ministry shortly after receiving the initial revelation. Muhammad's ministry is divided into two parts—twelve years in his native Mecca, followed by ten years in Medina. The central theme of Muhammad's preaching was that God is one, having no partners, no equals. This doctrine is called *tawhid*, or the “unicity of God.” When Muhammad broadcast this message to his fellow Meccans, he included a severe condemnation of their idol worship at the *Ka'aba*. He preached about a blissful paradise awaiting those who submit to God and live righteously and a terrible hell awaiting those who reject God.

## *Opposition in Mecca*

The people of Mecca did not respond well to Muhammad's message. Much of their livelihood was derived from the religious

pilgrims who worshipped at the *Ka'aba*. Their response to Muhammad was similar to that of Demetrius and the silversmiths to the apostle Paul in the city of Ephesus (see Acts 19). In the face of this opposition, Muhammad continued to preach, stressing the unicity of God. One by one, he began to attract converts. Many of them were from the lower stratum of Meccan society, but some were not. Khadija was one of his first and staunchest supporters. Another was his nephew, 'Ali, who lived in Muhammad's home. Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib, head of the Hashim clan, was also a strong supporter, though he never became a believer. The other Meccan clans repeatedly complained about Muhammad and begged Abu Talib to withdraw his umbrella of protection so they could silence Muhammad. Abu Talib refused.

### *The Satanic Verses and the Night Journey*

One day when Muhammad was preaching to the resistant Meccans, he told them that although there is only one supreme God, the three goddesses al-Lat, al-Uzza, and al-Manat could be prevailed upon to make intercession to God on behalf of those who prayed to them (Qur'an 53:19–20). The Meccans gladly received this news, for it signaled a major change in Muhammad's teaching. This new doctrine opened the door to the worship of other gods. Later Muhammad considered what he had said and realized the implications of this new doctrine. Before long he received a new revelation from Gabriel, nullifying this earlier statement (Qur'an 53:23). Muhammad realized that these earlier verses had been not been inspired by God but were a temptation from Satan—hence, they are referred to as the Satanic Verses.

Toward the end of Muhammad's Meccan ministry, as persecution was increasing, he had a two-part experience known as the Night Journey (*Isra'*) and the Ascension (*Mi'raj*). Muslim scholars disagree on whether this was a literal event or simply a vision. In

any case, tradition declares that Muhammad made a night journey from Mecca to the Farthest (*al-Aqsa*) Mosque, in Jerusalem, which led to the construction of the al-Aqsa Mosque on the site of the Temple Mount after the city fell under Islamic rule. There, he mounted a flying horse and ascended into the heavens. He visited seven levels of heaven, each with its own guardian saint(s). The guardian of the first was Adam; the second, Jesus and John; the third, Joseph; the fourth, Enoch; the fifth, Aaron; the sixth, Moses; and the seventh, Abraham. There was still a higher level, which was the abode of God. Gabriel, who had accompanied him thus far, told Muhammad he would have to approach the final level by himself; Gabriel could go no further.

Thus tradition teaches that Muhammad met with God and, among other things, heard from him the requirement for daily prayer by Muslims. After talking with God, Muhammad descended, arriving at Moses's level. Moses asked what God required of humankind, and Muhammad replied that Muslims should pray fifty times a day. Moses assured him that was too much and told Muhammad to go back to God and bargain for a lower requirement. So Muhammad returned to God, and just as Abraham bargained for the salvation of Sodom and Gomorrah, Muhammad bargained with God to reduce the number of daily prayers. Each time Muhammad went to God, God lowered the requirements by ten, and each time Muhammad returned to Moses, Moses said it was still too much. Finally, on Muhammad's sixth visit, God reduced the number from ten to five. Moses contended that it was still too much, but Muhammad replied that he was embarrassed to ask for fewer than five. Thus the number of daily prayers was set at five.

### *Escape to Medina*

In 619 two of Muhammad's strongest supporters died within days of each other. The first was his uncle Abu Talib, who had

extended to him the clan's protection from the hostile Meccans. The second was his beloved Khadija. She had been the first to accept her husband's message and had been his confidante for many years. Muhammad took no other wives during her lifetime. According to all reports, they had a strong and mutually supportive marriage.

Abu Talib was replaced as the head of the Hashim clan by Abu Lahab, who is specifically mentioned in the Qur'an as being doomed to the fires of hell. From the beginning of Muhammad's ministry, Abu Lahab was antagonistic to him. Abu Lahab withdrew the protection of the Hashim clan from Muhammad, leaving him defenseless against his many enemies. Muhammad knew that if he stayed in Mecca, he would surely be killed.

At that same time, Muhammad received overtures from a delegation from Medina (originally known as Yathrib), a farming oasis located two hundred miles north of Mecca, to come to their city as an adjudicator between conflicting tribes. The city was home to two Arab tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, who feuded constantly.<sup>5</sup> In addition, there were three Jewish tribes that called Medina home: the Qurayza, the Qaynuqa, and the al-Nadir. So in 622, the Muslims began to leave Mecca in small groups to evade attention. Muhammad, his nephew 'Ali, and Abu Bakr were the last to leave. Abu Bakr was an early believer who would later be the first *khalif*, or "successor"<sup>6</sup> to Muhammad as leader of the Muslims.

The trek to Medina was long and dangerous. The journey is known as the *hijra*, and it marks year zero of the Muslim calendar. Muslim dates are denoted as AH, meaning *annō-hijra*.<sup>7</sup> The *hijra* is comparable to other definitive moments: Noah entering the ark of safety or the exodus of the Jews from Egypt to Palestine. For Christians, the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ are likewise defining, with AD, or *annō domini* ("in the year of our Lord"), dating time from the traditional year of Christ's birth.

### *Battles with Mecca*

About seventy-five Muslims emigrated from Mecca, and there were about that same number of Muslim converts already living in Medina. It was difficult to find a livelihood for the newcomers, so in order to bring in funds, Muhammad and his Muslims began to waylay Syria-bound caravans operated by the Meccans. In 624, to end this threat to their commercial interests, the Meccans responded by sending a thousand-man army, which met a much smaller army of Muslims at the wells of Badr. Though outnumbered, the Muslims achieved a great victory, which they perceived to be God-given. The following year, the two armies met again at the Battle of Uhud, and this time the Meccans prevailed. Muhammad himself was wounded in the fighting. Two years later the armies met again at Medina in what is known as the Battle of the Ditch, named for the moat that was dug in defense of the city. Weather and privations forced the Meccans to return home, and the Muslims again knew that God had intervened on their behalf.

When Muhammad came to Medina, he assumed the Jews there, being fellow monotheists, would recognize him as a prophet in the Jewish tradition and support him. The fact that they did not accept his status as a prophet meant that he quickly perceived them as an existential threat to his leadership. Muhammad's response to this threat is symbolized by his instruction to his followers to change the direction of their prayers from Jerusalem to Mecca. Muhammad began to suspect that the Jewish tribes were supporting his enemies in Mecca. As a result, he punished one of the Jewish tribes following each of his battles. After the Battle of Badr, the Banu Qaynuqa were expelled from Medina. They were merchants and craftsmen and were allowed to leave Medina with their wealth but forfeited their property. Following the Battle of Uhud, the Banu Nadir were expelled. They derived their wealth from palm groves and had to surrender ownership of their groves

and leave empty-handed. As the siege of Medina took place during the Battle of the Ditch, Muhammad became convinced that the third Jewish clan, the Banu Qurayza, were conspiring to sneak the Meccans into the city. After the battle, Muhammad called upon Sa'd ibn Mu'adh, an elder of a tribe that had long been allied with the Banu Qurayza, to pass a verdict upon the behavior of the Banu Qurayza. Sa'd ordered the Qurayza to forfeit not only their wealth and property but also their lives and freedom. One by one the men of the tribe were beheaded, and the women and children sold as slaves.<sup>8</sup>

### *Muhammad's Wives*

During this period, Muhammad began to accumulate wives. Though he had been monogamous during his marriage to Khadija, he began to marry again in 620. The exact number of his wives and concubines is disputed, but there were at least twelve and perhaps twice that number. Many of these wives were widows of Muslim fighters who had no one to take care of them. By marrying them, Muhammad agreed to support them.

Two of the wives in particular have caused much criticism among Westerners. The first is Zaynab bint Jahsh, who was married to Muhammad's adopted son, Zayd bin Haritha. Reportedly, it was not a happy marriage. Muhammad was attracted to her, and Zayd offered to divorce her so Muhammad could marry her, but this was culturally unacceptable. However, Muhammad received a revelation from God specifically allowing him to marry her (Qur'an 33:37–38).

The other problematic marriage was to 'A'isha, the daughter of Muhammad's good friend Abu Bakr. 'A'isha was six years old at the time of her marriage to Muhammad. Tradition says the marriage was not consummated until she was nine. 'A'isha became

Muhammad's favorite wife and is the namesake of many Muslim women today.

### *Final Years*

After the Meccan wars, Muhammad continued to gain followers, which further isolated his enemies in the Quraysh clan. In 630, Muhammad and a huge group of Muslims descended on Mecca with the intent of performing the great annual *hajj* to the holy city. By this time the Meccans were so isolated that they opened the city gates to Muhammad, who came in as conqueror to the city from which he had fled in fear just eight years earlier. Over the next couple of years Muhammad gained control of the entire Arabian Peninsula through wars and treaties.

In 632, Muhammad performed the *hajj* to Mecca for the last time. During this trip the final verse of the Qur'an was revealed to him: "This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion" (Qur'an 5:3, Yusuf Ali). Standing on the plain of Arafat, Muhammad delivered his final and most famous address to the Muslims, challenging them to always remember that they are brothers. He abolished usury and blood feuds among his people, proclaimed the rights of women and slaves, and closed his sermon with this proclamation: "Verily, I have concluded my mission! I have left among you a plain command, the Book of God, and manifest ordinances. If you hold fast to them, none of you shall go astray."<sup>9</sup>

Muhammad must have realized he was ill, for his final message had a valedictory tone. By the time he returned to Medina, he was feverish and confined to bed. Muhammad died about noon on June 8, 632, at age sixty-three. According to the Muslim calendar, he died on the same month and day as he was born.

## **An Ancient Faith**

Thus Muslims perceive their tradition to be an ancient faith. From the beginning, God has revealed himself in various ways through prophets, apostles, and prophets of resolve—including Adam, Noah, Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Each prophetic revelation supersedes the previous one, and Muhammad’s revelations, recorded in the Qur’an, take precedence over all. Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets, the last and greatest of God’s messengers. With the life of Muhammad, God’s revelation to humankind was closed, and Islam became something more than the doctrines of monotheism and submission to the laws of God: it became a religion.

When Muhammad left his home city of Mecca in 622, he was in fear for his life. He and his tiny handful of followers, numbering just 150, took refuge in the city of Medina. Within ten years, however, Muhammad had become the undisputed ruler of the Arabian Peninsula, and his followers numbered in the tens of thousands. Today, Islam is the second largest of the world’s religions, claiming more than 1.5 billion adherents. In the next chapter, we will trace the growth of Islam as a world religion from the time of Muhammad to today, including a look at the major sects within Islam.