Brief Biography of Muhammed

Much of what we know about Muhammed comes from the early biography by Ibn Ishaq (which did not survive but can be reproduced from other sources) and the hadith which has its own problems in terms of historical reliability. Since they rely upon different hadith, Sunni and Shi’ite muslims disagree about some details of Muhammed’s biography. This document presents Muhammed as Sunni Muslims view his life-story.

Tradition holds that Muhammed was born in Mecca in A.D. 570. He was orphaned at an early age.

At the time of Muhammed’s birth Arabia was a polytheistic and divided tribal society.

Not much is known about Muhammed’s early life. He was cared for by members of his early family most notably an uncle who helped him learn about trading.

As a young man he was hired by a wealthy widow named Khadija whom he later married. Muhammed and Khadija were married for 25 years until her death. After Khadija died, Muhammed took several wives, the most important of whom was Aisha. The total number of Muhammed’s wives is disputed. Many were widows of his followers or the product of political alliances. Muslims also dispute the number of children Muhammed had. But all are agreed that only his daughter Fatimah survived him. Both Fatimah and Aisha were important figures in the development of Islam after Muhammed’s death.

At around the age of 40 Muhammad went to a cave and was visited by the archangel Gabriel who told him to read and recite. At first troubled by his vision Muhammed was encouraged by his wife and his wife’s cousin and came to believe that he was a prophet who would be given a revelation from Allah.

He would be given these revelations which he was told to recite to himself and to others around him until he died in 632.

Early converts included his close friends and family as well as members of his tribe. A couple of years after receiving his first revelations, Muhammed began publicly preaching and gaining converts. Many early converts were people who were marginalized by the powerful Quraysh tribe in Mecca. Muhammed was protected by his familial connections.

Mecca’s economy was closely tied to polytheistic religious rites conducted in the city. Muhammed was challenging this system and was opposed by the Quraysh tribe which was prominent in Mecca. Early converts were persecuted by the Quraysh tribe and Muhammed sent some followers to Abyssinia to proselytize and escape persecution. The Quraysh tribe put economic pressure on Muhammed’s followers and the number of converts decreased. Muhammed lost important support when his uncle and wife died.

Around 620 Muhammed experienced what became known as the Isra or “night journey.” The exact nature of the Isra is unclear whether it was physical or a vision and where exactly Muhammed went is a
matter of debate. Most sources claim he was taken to Jerusalem. This experience confirmed his calling and message to Muhammad.

Muhammed gained converts in the city of Yathrib (later renamed Medina) and his followers slowly migrated there in 622. Muhammed himself barely escaped Quraysh assassins as he fled to Medina. This escape is called the hijra and it is important because it marks the transformation of Islam from a religious community to a society.

Muhammad united the Jews, polytheists and Muslims of Medina and created a pluralistic society called the umma whose main enemy was the Quraysh of Mecca. In 624 the Muslims won the Battle of Badr against the Quraysh. The Quraysh in turn won the Battle of Uhud, but failed in their attempted siege of Medina in A.D. 627. The two sides concluded a peace treaty in 628 which allowed Muhammed to continue to preach his message and gain converts. In 630 the Meccans broke the treaty and Muhammad whose followers had grown numerically easily conquered the city. He then consolidated much of the rest of Arabia under his rule. He died in Medina in 632.

Muhammad is important to Muslims not just because he received the Qur’an but also because of what he did and said. Many Muslims consider him the perfect model for how a Muslim should live, so reconstructing exactly what he did and said is important for them.