

Islam

By James K. Walker

Founder: The Prophet Muhammad (570-632 AD)

Official Publications: The Qurʾān, which the Prophet Muhammad claimed was dictated to him by the angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) initially in the cave of Hira near Mecca in present day Saudi Arabia. This scripture is divided into 114 surahs (chapters) containing over 6,000 ayats (verses). Compiled for the most part during the two centuries following Muhammad's death, the Hadith are collections of recorded accounts of the sayings and deeds of Muhammad, called sunnah, which were also evaluated for probability of accuracy.

Key Words: Allah is the one true God of Islam. The word Islam means "submission" or "submission to God (Allah)." One who submits to Allah is called a Muslim.

Tawhid is the foundation of Islamic monotheism and maintains that Allah is a unified "one," forever separate from creation.

Shirk is the most serious sin in Islam which involves ascribing any partnerships to God, such as, "God the Father" or "God the Son" or ascribing the attributes of the one true creator God to anything physical or anything that is created.

Sharia is the legal system of Islam and is the standard for both secular and religious law.

Fatwa is an authoritative but nonbinding legal opinion given by a mufti (legal scholar).

HISTORY

Muhammad was born about 570 AD into the Hashim clan of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca on the Arabian Peninsula in present-day Saudi Arabia. It is believed that his father, Abdullah, died before he was born and his mother, Amina, died when Muhammad was only six. He was raised by his uncle, Abu Talib. At age 25, Muhammad was hired by a wealthy widow, Khadijah, to lead a caravan to Syria. He later married Khadijah and they had several sons, all of whom died in infancy, and four daughters.⁴

While there were monotheists, including Christians and Jews, living in Arabia at the time, the majority of the people were polytheistic and idolatry was rampant in Mecca. Muhammad claimed to have been sent by God to turn the people away from idolatry to worship the one true God and to turn to the correct path. There was much political opposition and persecution from the Meccan polytheists who largely rejected the prophet's message. In 622 AD, Muhammad and his small group of followers left Mecca and immigrated to Medina 210 miles to the north in a journey called the Hijra. In Medina the prophet's message was more widely accepted and Muhammad took on the role of political as well as spiritual leader. Jews who refused Muhammad's leadership were banished from Medina or in some cases sold as slaves or killed. For years, warfare escalated between the Muslims of Medina and the Meccans culminating in the final Muslim conquest of Mecca 629 AD and its mass conversion to Islam.

In 632, a few years after conquering Mecca, Muhammad died. By that time he had succeeded in uniting the majority of the Arabian Peninsula politically and spiritually under Islam. Immediately following the prophet's death, the new faith was led by a succession of four close companions and trusted advisors of Muhammad called the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Disputes over leadership eventually led to Fitna (civil wars), among the Muslims. Most accepted the leadership of all four Caliphs and became known as Sunni, meaning "the path." A minority,

however, rejected the authority of the first three Caliphs, maintaining that the fourth Caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, (Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) was actually the first Imam. This sect of Islam, the Shia,⁶ believes that Ali and his descendents alone are the only rightful successors to leadership of the Muslim people following the Prophet's death.

Despite the schism, Islam continued to spread quickly through Islamic conquests throughout present-day Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and across North Africa. Eventually the message of Islam permeated much of Europe and Asia. Despite its rapid growth, Islam continued to be plagued by internal conflicts and in-fighting, sometimes marked by open violence and assassinations. In a struggle to maintain a unified caliphate, the Umayyad dynasty was conquered by the Abbasid dynasty which was eventually displaced by the great Ottoman Empire. In 1453, Muslim Turks conquered the city of Constantinople and at its zenith in the seventeenth century, the Ottoman Empire controlled much of Western Asia, North Africa, and Southeastern Europe. Similar Islamic expansion occurred through the Mughal Dynasty in India and South Asia as well as with the Shia in Iran through the Safavid Empire in the sixteenth century.⁷

According to some estimates, by the twenty-first century, there were about 1.8 billion Muslims in the world.⁸ Approximately 90% are Sunni and 9% are Shia. The remaining 1% consists of various sects including Sufism, a mystical/experiential form of Islam and the Kharijites. Like in Christianity, there has also been groups breaking away from Islam and claiming to be the true or ultimate expression of Islam such as Ahmadiyya Islam⁹ and the Nation of Islam.¹⁰ In just 1,400 years, Islam has grown to be the second largest religion in the world.¹¹

The Qur'an

In 610 AD at the age of 40, Muhammad received his first revelation while in private meditation in a small cave in Mount Hira near Mecca. Muhammad reported that he heard the voice of the angel Jibreel (Gabriel) commanding him to "recite." The angel dictated to Muhammad the first passage (Surah 96:1-5) of what later became the Qur'an. The prophet continued to receive additional revelations for the next 23 years that were preserved mostly through oral tradition. Following Muhammad's death, Muslims recognized the need for a complete, authorized written text. This culminated with the Uthmanic Recension, an edition of the Qur'an compiled by a committee under the direction of Uthman, the third rightly-guided Caliph, who commanded all other editions and written variants destroyed¹² Only the Arabic Qur'an is considered authoritative. Any translation is not considered to be a true Qur'an and may be viewed as merely an interpretation.

DOCTRINE

The word Islam means submission and one who submits to Allah is a Muslim. Muslims see Islam as the one true religion of God which has always existed. Thus, the first prophet of Islam was not Muhammad but the first man, Adam, who submitted to Allah and was therefore a Muslim. Muhammad is viewed as the final and greatest in a succession of prophets including the biblical figures Adam, Moses, Abraham, David, Jesus, etc. Some Muslims claim that God sanctioned 124,000 prophets from Adam to Muhammad.¹³ Muslims maintain that they believe all the prophets but that Muhammad is the final prophet, or seal of the prophets, whom Allah used to restore the true teachings of the earlier prophets which had become altered or corrupted. Muslims believe in all the earlier revelations from God's prophets particularly the Torah (first five books of the Old Testament), the Psalms of David, and the Gospel (teachings of the Jesus).¹⁴

Muslims believe in Jesus (Isa) as one of the prophets or messengers of Allah. They believe that he was born of a virgin and is the Messiah.¹⁵ However, they do not believe Jesus was God incarnate or that he was the Son of God as this would violate the Tawhid of Allah and lead to the sin of shirk.¹⁶ They also teach that Jesus was condemned to die on the cross but was never actually crucified nor did he rise bodily from the dead.¹⁷ The Qur'an places great emphasis on the final Day of Judgment and a literal Heaven and Hell. Salvation in Islam ultimately involves scales of justice where one's sins are weighed against one's good deeds.¹⁸

Central to the proper practice of Islam are the five pillars of the faith which are the duty of every faithful Muslim. There is an emphasis on performing each pillar properly with the correct form. The Five Pillars are:

Shahada (the Declaration): The first pillar is a verbal confession of faith acknowledging Allah's uniqueness and Muhammad's status as prophet. The Shahada, which is to be recited in Arabic, proclaims, "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet." Public confession of the Shahada in Arabic is the first step to becoming a Muslim. To convert to Islam,¹⁹ non-Arabic speakers are led by knowledgeable Muslims to properly repeat each Arabic word correctly.

Salat (the Prayers): Muslims are to perform the obligatory prayers during five specific time periods each day. These five prayer times may sometimes be consolidated into three sessions. When possible, the prayers should be in the company of other Muslims in the masjid (mosque). Ritual washings precede each prayer which is performed facing Mecca. The head must be covered and the prayers must be recited in Arabic. Great emphasis is placed on performing each step correctly with proper body posture when bowing.

Sawm (the Fast): During Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar calendar, Muslims are required to abstain from all food and liquids as well as sexual relations during daylight hours.²⁰ Muslims may awake early before sunrise for a meal before starting the fast and each day's fast may end after sunset with a special meal called iftar. Ramadan ends with a three-day holiday called Eid Al Fitr.

Zakat (the Alms): Each year Muslims are required to pay 2.5% of their wealth which goes to the poor and oppressed (Qur'an 9:60). Muslim communities generally apply standardized rules for determining ones worth and in Islamic countries the government may collect the alms through a zakat tax.

Hajj (the Pilgrimage): Unless prevented by poverty, it is the duty of every Muslim to make at least one spiritual journey to Mecca, Saudi Arabia during Dhu al-Hijjah, the final month of the Islamic lunar calendar. During the Hajj, Muslims perform rituals commemorating events in the life of Muhammad, Abraham, and others including a ritual of stoning the devil, drinking from the Well of Zamzam, and performing the Tawaf, marching counterclockwise seven times (circumambulating) around a black, cube-shaped structure called the Kaaba. On each lap, participants point towards, or if possible kiss a black stone located on the eastern side of the Kaaba which they believe dates back to Adam and Eve.

Jihad: While not a pillar of Islam per se; jihad is an important principle for Muslims. Many Americans were introduced to the term following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as the Muslim hijackers were said to be waging a "Holy War," called jihad. Actually, the Arabic word is better defined as "strive" and is often used to describe the internal struggle or effort one exerts in submitting to Allah.²¹ It is with this understanding that many Muslims minimize the "lesser jihad" of war against the infidels and emphasize the "greater jihad" of personal compliance and obedience to Allah. Nevertheless, the principle of jihad in connection with warfare is found in the Qur'an.²² In the famous "sword" passage, the Qur'an also commands Muslims to fight, kill or subdue the idolaters and nonbelievers saying "slay the Pagans wherever ye find them" (9:5). Jews and Christians, called the "People of the Book," are called "cursed" and specifically targeted for warfare and subjugation (9:29-30). The Qur'an also promises Paradise to faithful Muslim killed in battle of jihad (47:4-6; 48:16-17).

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Like Christianity, Islam is a monotheistic religion promoting the worship of one true God. Islam also highly honors Jesus (Isa) as one of God's holy messengers. Nevertheless, Allah of Islam is not the same God that is worshipped by Christians. No Muslim would ever confess that Allah is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ nor would they tolerate the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Likewise, the Jesus (Isa) of Islam is not the Christ of Christianity (2 Cor. 11:4). Islam denies Christ's deity, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection – essential elements of His identity according to the biblical Gospels (John 1:1-14, Phil. 2:6-11, 1 Cor. 15:3-8).

All Muslims should be encouraged to read and believe the Gospel (injl) as preserved in the New Testament. In the Qur'an, all true followers of God are admonished to follow and obey the commands of Jesus (3:50-52). To follow Jesus' commands, one must study His teachings to know what they are but the commands of Jesus are not recorded in the Qur'an. The New Testament preserves the teachings and commands of Jesus in the four Gospels which contain firsthand accounts written within the lifetime of the historical events they record²³ The Qur'an itself affirms that the Bible is God's word and suggests that the message of the Qur'an should be validated by comparing it with the Gospel teachings of Jesus previously "revealed" to the Christians who are called "the people of the gospel" (Qur'an 5:46-49. See also 6:91 and 21:105). This message of Jesus is that He is the Son of God (Matt. 16:13-17). He claimed to be one with the Father and to be God (John 10:30-33). If Jesus was a prophet of God, one should believe in His prophecies, including His prophecy of His own death and resurrection for the sins of the world (Mark 8:31).

While acknowledging the theological differences, Christians should openly share their confidence in the Bible and their trust in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose again, as their savior. Concerning their Muslim friends, Christians should be alert to any opportunity to demonstrate the gospel in word and deed.

Notes

- 1 Citations herein are from the English translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary*, Lahore, 1934 and 1937.
- 2 "Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him." (Qur'an 112).
- 3 For a more thorough definition of these key words see: John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 4 Muhammad was monogamous during his first marriage but after Khadijah died he took about a dozen wives and concubines. Khadijah was fifteen years older than Muhammad and his youngest wife, Aisha, was six years old when she married the prophet. Their marriage was consummated when she was nine or ten. George W. Braswell, *Islam: Its Prophet, Peoples, Politics, and Power*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 17.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 The largest branch of Shi'a Islam is the Twelver or Imami Shi'a Muslims. The name Twelvers comes from their belief that Allah commissioned Twelve Imams after Muhammad to lead the people. The final Imam vanished from history and is considered to be in hiding until his eventual return in the last days as the Mahdi (divinely guided deliverer). Approximately 85% of Shi'a are Twelvers. See Hussein Abdulwaheed Amin, "The Origins of the Sunni/Shi'a split in Islam," *Islam for Today*, <http://www.islamfortoday.com/shia.htm>.
- 7 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968 Anchor Books Ed.), xv-xxiii.
- 8 "Contemporary figures for Islam are usually between 1 billion and 1.8 billion, [but] 1 billion... appears to be dated, however." *Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents*, http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html#Islam.
- 9 A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: Eric Pement, "The Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2010). A complete Profile Notebook (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.htm.
- 10 A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: Ron Carter, "The Nation of Islam," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2010). A complete Profile Notebook (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.htm.
- 11 For a comprehensive history of Islam see: John L. Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 12 Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 93-94.
- 13 The Qur'an mentions no specific number but states that every people group throughout world history has been given a prophet to warn them (35:24). See also, "Twenty Five Prophets Mentioned in the Holy Qur'an," *Irqa Islamic Publications* <http://www.iqra.net/articles/muslims/prophets.php>.
- 14 The Qur'an affirms the Old Testament Torah as given to Moses (Qur'an 6:91), the Psalms of David (Qur'an 21:105) and the New Testament "gospel" (Qur'an 5:46-49).
- 15 Qur'an 3:44-47; 19:20.
- 16 Oxford Dictionary of Islam, 293, 317.
- 17 The Qur'an is vague about what actually happened at the crucifixion saying only that they thought they had crucified Isa but "for of a surety they killed him not" (Qur'an 4:157-58). Later Muslim scholars speculated that someone else was substituted on the cross in place of Jesus - either Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21), Judas Iscariot, or one of the other disciples.
- 18 *Answering Islam*, 110-31.
- 19 Muslims believe that everyone is born Muslim until they are later led astray by wrong beliefs or other religions. Thus, Muslims often view conversion to Islam as a return or reversion to one's original faith. See also "How to Convert to Islam and Become a Muslim," <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/204/>.
- 20 Exceptions can be made for women who are pregnant, infants, and travelers.
- 21 "From the Arabic root meaning 'to strive,' 'to exert' 'to fight'; exact meaning depends on the context. May express a struggle against one's evil inclinations, an exertion to convert unbelievers, or a struggle for the moral betterment of the Islamic community." *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 159-60.
- 22 Qur'an 2:216; 8:38-39; 8:65-67; 9:123; and 47:4.
- 23 Even liberal New Testament scholars such as Bishop John Robinson concede that the gospel record was written sometime between 40 and 60 AD - well within the lifetime of the Apostles. Many Muslims, however, reject the four New Testament Gospels in favor of the Gospel of Barnabas, which is actually a sixteenth century forgery as some Muslim scholars are now acknowledging. *Answering Islam*, 217-20; 303-07.

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