

world, and some Muslim countries devote a broadcasting channel for long hours daily exclusively to the recitation and study of the Qur'an. Muslims swear on the Qur'an for solemn oaths in the lawcourts and in everyday life.

### *The Life of Muhammad and the Historical Background*

Muhammad was born in Mecca in about the year 570 CE. The religion of most people in Mecca and Arabia at the beginning of Muhammad's lifetime was polytheism. Christianity was found in places, notably in Yemen, and among the Arab tribes in the north under Byzantine rule; Judaism too was practised in Yemen, and in and around Yathrib, later renamed Madina (Medina), but the vast majority of the population of Arabia were polytheists. They believed in a chief god *Allah*, but saw other deities as mediators between them and him: the Qur'an mentions in particular the worship of idols, angels, the sun, and the moon as 'lesser' gods. The Hajj pilgrimage to the Ka'ba in Mecca, built, the Qur'an tells us, by Abraham for the worship of the one God, was practised but that too had become corrupted with polytheism. Mecca was thus an important centre for religion, and for trade, with the caravans that travelled via Mecca between Yemen in the south and Syria in the north providing an important source of income. There was no central government. The harsh desert conditions brought competition for scarce resources, and enforced solidarity within each tribe, but there was frequent fighting between tribes. Injustices were practised against the weaker classes, particularly women, children, slaves, and the poor.

Few hard facts are known about Muhammad's childhood. It is known that his father Abdullah died before he was born and his mother Amina when he was 6 years old; that his grandfather Abdul Muttalib then looked after him until, two years later, he too died. At the age of 8, Muhammad entered the guardianship of his uncle Abu Talib, who took him on a trade journey to the north when he was 12 years old. In his twenties, Muhammad was employed as a trader by a wealthy and well-respected widow fifteen years his senior named Khadija. Impressed by his honesty and good character, she proposed marriage to him. They were married for over twenty-five years until Khadija's death when Muhammad was some 49 years old. Khadija

was a great support to her husband. After his marriage, Muhammad lived in Mecca, where he was a respected businessman and peacemaker.

Muhammad was in the habit of taking regular periods of retreat and reflection in the Cave of Hira outside Mecca. This is where the first revelation of the Qur'an came to him in 610 CE, when he was 40 years old. This initiated his prophethood. The Prophet was instructed to spread the teachings of the revelations he received to his larger family and beyond. However, although a few believed in him, the majority, especially the powerful, resented his calling them to abandon their gods. After all, many polytheist tribes came to Mecca on the pilgrimage, and the leaders feared that the new religion would threaten their own prestige and economic prosperity. They also felt it would disturb the social order, as it was quite outspoken in its preaching of equality between all people and its condemnation of the injustices done to the weaker members of the society.

The hostility of the Meccans soon graduated from gentle ridicule to open conflict and the persecution of Muhammad's followers, many of whom Muhammad sent, from the fifth year of his preaching, to seek refuge with the Christian king of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The remaining Muslims continued to be pressurized by the Meccans, who instituted a total boycott against the Prophet's clan, refusing to allow any social or economic dealings with them. In the middle of this hardship, Muhammad's wife, Khadija, and his uncle, Abu Talib, died, so depriving the Prophet of their great support. This year became known as the Year of Grief. However, events were soon to take a change for the better. The Prophet experienced the event known as the Night Journey and Ascension to Heaven, during which Muhammad was accompanied by Gabriel from the sanctuary of Mecca first to Jerusalem and then to Heaven. Soon afterwards, some people from Yathrib, a town some 400 km north of Mecca, met Muhammad when they came to make the pilgrimage and some of these accepted his faith; the following year more returned from Yathrib, pledged to support him, and invited him and his community to seek sanctuary in Yathrib. The Muslims began to migrate there, soon followed by the Prophet himself, narrowly escaping an attempt to assassinate him. This move to Yathrib, known as the Migration (Hijra), was later adopted as the start of the Muslim

calendar. Upon arrival in Yathrib, Muhammad built the first mosque in Islam, and he spent most of his time there, teaching and remoulding the characters of the new Muslims from unruly tribesmen into a brotherhood of believers. Guided by the Qur'an, he acted as teacher, judge, arbitrator, adviser, consoler, and father-figure to the new community. One of the reasons the people of Yathrib invited the Prophet to migrate there was the hope that he would be a good arbitrator between their warring tribes, as indeed proved to be the case.

Settled in Yathrib, Muhammad made a pact of mutual solidarity between the immigrants (*muhajirun*) and the Muslims of Yathrib, known as the *ansar*—helpers. This alliance, based not on tribal but on religious solidarity, was a departure from previous social norms. Muhammad also made a larger pact between all the tribes of Yathrib, that they would all support one another in defending the city against attack. Each tribe would be equal under this arrangement, including the Jews, and free to practise their own religions.

Islam spread quickly in Yathrib, which became known as *Madinat al-Nabi* (the City of the Prophet) or simply *Medina* (city). This was the period in which the revelations began to contain legislation on all aspects of individual and communal life, as for the first time the Muslims had their own state. In the second year at Medina (AH 2) a Qur'anic revelation came allowing the Muslims to defend themselves militarily (22: 38–41) and a number of battles against the Meccan disbelievers and their allies took place near Medina, starting with Badr shortly after this revelation, Uhud the following year, and the Battle of the Trench in AH 5. The Qur'an comments on these events.

In AH 6 the Meccans prevented the Muslims from undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca. Negotiations followed, where the Muslims accepted that they would return to Medina for the time being but come back the following year to finish the pilgrimage. A truce was agreed for ten years. However, in AH 8 a Meccan ally broke the truce. The Muslims advanced to attack Mecca, but its leaders accepted Islam and surrendered without a fight. From this point onwards, delegations started coming from all areas of Arabia to meet the Prophet and make peace with him.

In AH 10 the Prophet made his last pilgrimage to Mecca and gave a farewell speech on the Mount of Mercy, declaring equality and

solidarity between all Muslims. By this time the whole Arabian peninsula had accepted Islam and all the warring tribes were united in one state under one head. Soon after his return to Medina in the year 632 CE (AH 10), the Prophet received the last revelation of the Qur'an and, shortly thereafter, died. His role as leader of the Islamic state was taken over by Abu Bakr (632–4 CE), followed by 'Umar (634–44) and 'Uthman (644–56), who oversaw the phenomenal spread of Islam beyond Arabia. They were followed by 'Ali (656–61). These four leaders are called the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

After 'Ali, the first political dynasty of Islam, the Umayyads (661–750), came into power. There had, however, been some friction within the Muslim community on the question of succession to the Prophet after his death: the Shi'is, or supporters of 'Ali, felt that 'Ali and not Abu Bakr was the appropriate person to take on the mantle of head of the community. They believed that the leadership should then follow the line of descendants of the Prophet, through the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law 'Ali. After 'Ali's death, they adopted his sons Hasan and then Husayn as their leader or imam. After the latter's death in the Battle of Karbala in Iraq (680 CE/AH 61), Husayn took on a special significance for the Shi'i community: he is mourned every year on the Day of 'Ashura. Some Shi'i believe that the Prophet's line ended with the seventh imam Isma'il (d. 762 CE/AH 145); others believe that the line continued as far as a twelfth imam in the ninth century.

The Islamic state stretched by the end of its first century from Spain, across North Africa, to Sind in north-west India. In later centuries it expanded further still to include large parts of East and West Africa, India, Central and South-East Asia, and parts of China and southern Europe. Muslim migrants like the Turks and Tartars also spread into parts of northern Europe, such as Kazan and Poland. After the Second World War there was another major influx of Muslims into all areas of the world, including Europe, America, and Australia, and many people from these continents converted to the new faith. The total population of Muslims is now estimated at more than one billion (of which the great majority are Sunni), about one-fifth of the entire population of the world,<sup>1</sup> and Islam is said to be the fastest-growing religion in the world.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.iiie.net/Intl/PopStats.html>.