

Who was Mohammad?

The context of the formation of Islam is important to understand, because it makes it possible for its adherents to interpret Islam today either as "a war against greed, immorality and idolatry; a battle between good and evil" - or as "a war on Jews and Christians, and a battle between East and West" - depending on which historical facts you choose to emphasize. In any event, the concept of a literal, physical battle exists throughout.

The Prophet Muhammad, one of the most influential religious and military leaders in history, was born in Mecca around 570 CE. His father died before he was born, and Muhammad was put under the care of his grandfather, head of the prestigious Hashim clan. His mother died when he was six, and his grandfather when he was eight, leaving him under the care of his uncle Abu Talib, the new head of the clan. When he was 25, Muhammad married a wealthy widow 15 years his senior. He lived the next 15 years as a merchant, and came into contact with many Jewish merchants and landowners. The Prophet and his wife gave birth to six children: two sons, who died in childhood, and four daughters.

From time to time, Muhammad spent time in a cave in Mount Hira north of Mecca. Around 610 CE, he had a vision in which he heard the voice of a majestic being, later identified as the angel Gabriel, say to him, "You are the Messenger of God." Thus began a lifetime of religious revelations, which he and others collected as the Qur'an, or Koran. Muhammad regarded himself as the last prophet of the Judaic-Christian tradition. He adopted aspects of these older religions' theologies while introducing new doctrines, although the Judaism and Christianity he knew differed from the religions we know today.

The Jewish Kingdom of Arabia was caught in the middle between Rome and Persia during their frequent wars. The leadership of Himyar traditionally sided with Persia, yet Rome also tried to court the Jewish Kingdom. In 438 CE, the Roman Empress Eudocia removed the ban on Jews' praying at the Temple site, and the heads of the Jewish Community in Galilee issued a call "to the great and mighty people of the Jews" which began: "Know that the end of the exile of our people has come!" The Roman Emperor Julian, as part of his apostasy and an attempt to sway the Jewish Kingdom of Arabia away from Persia, in 464 CE announced his intention of rebuilding the Temple. All this enflamed Jewish nationalism, but the courting was short lived, and was followed by religious backlash and persecution.

Rome began to get the upper hand against Persia, partly due to sense of unity engendered by Christianity being declared and enforced as the official religion. Persia followed Rome's example, and the Mazdakites tried to create a universal faith for the Persian empire. Jews were no longer safe in either the Roman or Persian empires. Denied the opportunity for self defense, the Jewish Exilarch Mar Zutra declared a Jewish State in Babylon (Iraq). The Jewish Himyarite Kingdom in Arabia, under the Rabbinite King Dhu Nuwas, also tried to create a Jewish Kingdom from the Euphrates to the Red Sea. These short lived revolts were crushed. The persecutions increased and dreams of Jewish restoration began to take on a Messianic fervor.

When usurper Phocas murdered Roman Emperor Maurice in 608 CE, Rome was in disarray. Egypt under Heraclius revolted against Rome. Persia saw this as an opportunity to conquer Egypt. To assist in their dreams of conquest the Persians made an alliance with the Jews. In 614 CE, Jewish Exilarch Nehemiah ben Hushiel was made governor of Jerusalem. Within months he was killed by a mob and Christians revolted against Persian rule. Jews and Persians fought side by side and for nineteen days sacked the city. Not intending for it to go this far, the Persian King Khosrau ordered the Jews to leave the city, and appointed a Christian governor to appease the Romans. The Persians succeeded to conquer Egypt, but the war began to turn against them.

Abandoned by the Persians, in 619 CE, up to 20,000 unprotected Jewish troops were slaughtered outside the Golden Gate. In Arabia this was called the "year of sorrow". Shortly after this the Prophet traveled to Taif to call on the people there to hear his message. After being rejected he received a vision of Jewish Jinn (spirits), perhaps referring to the souls of the slaughtered Jewish troops, who eagerly accepted his message. In 622 CE, the Prophet was invited to Yathrib by Jews. The Prophet's arrival was announced from the rooftops by a Jew.

With the death of Nehemiah ben Hushiel, the Judaic nation tried to grapple with the meaning of these events in terms of their literary heritage. According to Jewish tradition, the Messiah of Joseph would die. So Nehemiah must have been the Messiah of Joseph. This meant that the King Messiah was sure to follow. However, before the King Messiah would appear, he would be preceded by Elijah the Prophet. Their leaders said "A Prophet is about to arise; his time draws near. We shall follow him; and then we shall slay [our enemies] with [divine] slaughter..." As the common people became aware of the Prophet, "they spoke one to another – surely know that is the same Prophet whom the Jews warn us about."

Modern research¹ has indicated that Muhammad initially took on himself many aspects

of Rabbinic Judaism, like Dhu Nuwas before him. It is known that Muhammad required that his followers keep kosher and the fast of Yom Kippur, circumcise and pray facing Jerusalem. Muhammad's militant monotheistic religion was called Islam, meaning "surrender [to God]," and its followers were Muslims, meaning "those who have surrendered." His inspired teachings would bring unity to the Arabian peninsula, an event that had sweeping consequences for the rest of the world. In the Qur'an it is recorded that the native Jewish Priests rejected his claim, and Muhammad in turn renounced them for deserting him. Later many Jewish laws were changed, Muhammad requested that his followers pray towards Mecca, and a new religion was created.

At Medina, Muhammad overthrew the ruling Jewish elite, confiscated Jewish land, built a theocratic state, and led raids on trading caravans from Mecca. Attempts by Meccan armies to defeat the Muslim forces failed. The local Jewish Priests sided with the enemy and Arab hostility against the Jews began to show itself. The Jewish Priestly tribes of Bani Nadhir and Qainuqa' were expelled. At the instigation of an increasing number of Christian converts to Islam, an Islamic army exterminated the Jewish community of Quraiza. As a result of the Prophet Muhammad's resentment, the Qur'an itself contains many of hostile denunciations of Jews and bitter attacks upon the Jewish tradition, which undoubtedly have colored the beliefs of religious Muslims down to the present.

Muhammad later become more conciliatory to Mecca, and in 629 he was allowed to lead a pilgrimage there in exchange for a peace treaty. Shortly after, Muhammad denounced the treaty. In January 630, he returned to his birthplace with 10,000 men, and the Meccans were forced to swear allegiance to its Muslim conquerors and accept the new religion. He was now the strongest man in Arabia. During the next few years, most of the peninsula's disparate Arab tribes were conquered, and came to him to ask for alliance and to convert to his religion. By his death, on June 8, 632, Muhammad was the effectively ruler of most of Arabia, and his rapidly growing empire was poised for expansion into Christian Syria and Persia (Iraq & Iran).

Omar, the caliph who succeeded Muhammad, was said to have delineated in his Charter of Omar the twelve laws under which a dhimmi, or non-Muslim, was allowed to exist as a "nonbeliever" among "believers." The Charter codified the conditions of life for Jews under Islam -- a life which was forfeited if the dhimmi broke this law. Among the restrictions of the Charter: Jews were forbidden to touch the Qur'an; forced to wear a distinctive (sometimes dark blue or black) habit with sash; compelled to wear a yellow piece of cloth as a badge (blue for Christians); not allowed to perform their religious practices in public; not allowed to own a horse, because horses were deemed noble; not permitted to drink wine in public; and required to bury their dead without letting their

grief be heard by the Muslims.

Within 20 years, the exhausted Roman (Byzantine) and Persian empires had fallen to the prophet's successors, and during the next two centuries vast Arab conquests and forced conversions continued. The Islamic empire grew into one of the largest the world has ever seen, stretching from India, across the Middle East and Africa, and up through Western Europe's Iberian peninsula in what is now Spain.

According to Bernard Lewis, "the extermination of the Jewish Priests of Quraiza was followed by an attack on the Jewish oasis of Khaibar." Messengers of Muhammad were sent to the Jews who had escaped to the safety and comfort of Khaibar, "inviting" Usayr (Asher), the Jewish "war chief," to visit Medina to negotiate a peace treaty. Usayr set off with thirty companions and a Muslim escort. Suspecting no foul play, the Priests went unarmed. On the way, the Muslims turned upon the defenseless delegation, killing all but one who managed to escape; "War is deception," according to an oft-quoted saying of the Prophet.

The late historian Itzhak Ben-Zvi, said "... the extermination of the two Arabian-Jewish tribes by the mass massacre of their men, women and children, was a tragedy for which no parallel can be found in Jewish history until our own day [century]...." The slaughter of Arabian Jews and the expropriation of their property became Allah's will. This became framed as policy in the the Qur'an, "... some you slew and others you took captive. He [Allah] made you masters of their [the Jews'] land, their houses and their goods, and of yet another land [Khaibar] on which you had never set foot before. Truly, Allah has power over all things." Surah 33, v. 26-32, Dawood translation.

Guillaume reports that the anti-Jewish attack at Khaibar was fiercely fought off, but "though the inhabitants fought more bravely here than elsewhere, outnumbered and caught off their guard, they were defeated." Those who somehow survived constituted the formula for Islam's future successes. Some of the Jews, "non-Muslims" or infidels, "retained their land," at least until Muslims could be recruited in sufficient numbers to replace the Jews. Meanwhile, the Arabian Jews paid a fifty-percent "tribute," or tax, for the "protection" of the new plunderers. As Bernard Lewis writes, "The Muslim victory in Khaibar marked the first contact between the Muslim state and a conquered non-Muslim people and formed the basis for later dealings of the same type."

After his farewell pilgrimage Muhammad fell ill and suffered for several days with head pain and weakness. He died on Monday, June 8, 632, in Medina, at the age of 63. With his head resting on Aisha's (one of his wives) lap he murmured his final words soon after asking her to dispose of his last worldly goods, which were seven coins:

Rather, God on High and paradise.
—Muhammad

He is buried where he died, which was in Aisha's house and is now housed within the Mosque of the Prophet in the city of Medina.

The spread of Islam continued after the fragmentation of the Arab empire, and many societies in Africa and Asia adopted Muhammad's religion. Today, Islam is the world's second-largest religion.

As can be seen from this short biography Mohammad was a student of Judeo Christian religion who tried to proclaim himself a prophet and when rejected by religious leaders he became enraged and formed his own cult. This rejection is the reason the writings of this false prophet turned from a focus on teachings similar to the Torah and Bible to teachings of hatred toward Jews and Christians in his later writings leading to the current form of Islam as a religion of hatred and violence.