

# The Life of Muhammad and the Birth of Islam

## Early Years

Muhammad ibn Abd Allah, commonly known as Muhammad, was born in the city of Mecca in 570 CE. At the time, Mecca was a busy marketplace crowded with residents and nomads buying and selling goods. Not a great deal is known of Muhammad's early life. Both his mother and father were dead by the time he turned six. He was first cared for by his grandfather, but when he passed away, Muhammad's uncle, Abu Talib, adopted him. Abu Talib was the head of the Hashim clan, one of many clans making up separate Arabic tribes.

It is believed that as a young adult Muhammad worked as a camel driver. He traveled the Arabian Peninsula with his uncle, making contact with various cultures and religions, including Judaism and Christianity. Because idol worship had come to dominate Mecca, this contact was important. The Ka'bah itself housed many idols, including those representing the three main goddesses.

At the age of twenty-five, Muhammad was working for a widow named Khadijah who was a wealthy merchant. Though he was much younger, she admired his intelligence and maturity so much that she proposed to him. They married, and in the fifteen years which followed, Muhammad lived in affluence. He continued traveling, encountering different faiths and customs.

But riches did not satisfy Muhammad. In Mecca, powerful merchants controlled both the flow of goods and the religious life. As the gap between the rich and the poor widened, Muhammad began to question his life and the world around him.

## Muhammad's Revelation

By the time he was forty, Muhammad had begun to spend time in solitude, preoccupied with the questions that troubled him. He spent some nights alone in a small cave near Mecca. During one such night, Muslims believe that the angel Gabriel appeared before him. Gabriel grabbed hold of Muhammad and ordered him to recite some words. He did so, and as he fled the cave in fear, he heard the angel say, "Oh, Muhammad, you are the messenger of God, and I am Gabriel."

At first, Muhammad thought he was going insane. But Khadijah, his wife, believed the vision to be true. And as similar encounters continued, Muhammad slowly began to accept his role as a prophet of God. He started to preach in Mecca, though it took him some time to overcome doubts. But after a few years, he gained conviction that he was one of a lineage of prophets that included Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. According to historians, Muhammad continued to receive revelations for the next twenty years.

Muhammad openly declared that there was only one God. He called on Meccans to reject their idols. Though monotheism was shared by Jews and Christians, its introduction into Mecca troubled the ruling class. As Muhammad's followers increased, so did the unease among his opposition.