

Chapter 23
The Challenge of Islam
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Chapter Summary

According to Muslim tradition, Islam came into existence with the creation of humanity by the creator God known as Allah. Following this, God revealed his will through the first man, Adam, and a long line of prophets including Abraham and Jesus. The last and final prophet was Muhammad (570–632 AD) to whom God revealed the holy Qur'an. He was a successful, middle-aged businessman when he received God's call in 610 at age forty while meditating in a cave near Mecca. The angel Gabriel appeared to him in the lunar month of Ramadan on what is known in Islam as the "night of power and excellence."

The accounts of what happened next vary. According to the majority Sunni tradition, Muhammad feared the angel was a messenger of Satan and had to be compelled to follow instructions. The minority Shia tradition claims Muhammad recognized Gabriel and willingly followed directions. Regardless, the command came for Muhammad to begin reciting what became the first revealed Sura (chapter) of the Qur'an (the recitation).

Muhammad began preaching in Mecca and received additional revelations. The essence of his message was the demand that humans abandon idolatry and return to worshiping the one true God. For Meccans, this meant renouncing their traditional gods/idols that they worshiped in a shrine known as the Kaaba. Stung by Muhammad's message, the leading families of Mecca, led by the Umayyad clan (guardians of the Kaaba) began an increasingly harsh series of persecutions against him and his followers. Muhammad's followers fled Mecca to live in caves, some going to Ethiopia and Arabia. Surprisingly, the people of Medina (north of Mecca) asked Muhammad to mediate in a blood feud and made him their ruler. He brought 200 of his supporters to Medina and brought about a revolution in morals and government. This migration is remembered as the Hajj, a pilgrimage still held annually during the last month of the Islamic year.

During this time, the five pillars of Islam were formalized: Shahada (profession of faith); Salat (prayers offered five times a day at fixed hours); Sawm (fasting during daylight in Ramadan); Zakat (giving alms to the poor); and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).

As governor of Medina, Muhammad established laws regulating the conduct of citizens. He also recognized the rights of Jews to remain separate provided they allied with Muslims. Once he'd established himself in Medina, he again turned his attention to the opposition at Mecca. Since Mecca was the commercial capital of the Arabian Peninsula, control of the city was considered essential if Arabs were to convert to Islam. Thus, Muhammad initiated a guerilla war cutting off his enemies trade routes/source of wealth. At the Battle of Badr in 624, Muhammad's forces decisively defeated a much larger army from Mecca. This battle was the first clear victory for Muhammad and interpreted as a sign of God's blessing on his divine mission. Following additional wars, Muhammad turned to diplomacy, a truce was arranged, and Muslims began visiting Mecca as pilgrims.

With Mecca under his control, Muhammad extended his authority to the whole of Arabia and many converted to Islam. At age sixty-two, he was able to lead the annual pilgrimage from Medina to Mecca. He died in June 632 after a severe illness. Apart from his example as a successful military and civic leader, Muhammad's personal conduct is of great interest to Muslims and serves to guide their daily lives.

Our knowledge of Muhammad comes not from the Qur'an but from a body of literature known as the Hadith, a collection of various sayings attributed to Muhammad after his death. Another important factor in Muslim tradition are men known as "The Companions" of the Prophet. These men appear to play a role in Islam similar to that of the disciples of the Buddha and of Jesus although their role is far, far greater in that they recorded both the Qur'an when Muhammad recited it and the Hadith telling us about the Prophet's life, sayings, and conduct. Four members of this elite group became caliphs or successors of Muhammad in the early Muslim community, known as the umma.

Most books on Islam written in English largely repeat the majority or Sunni version of Muslim history. Understandable as this may be, it poses problems in that it has led the West to accept without question a version of Muslim history considered false by the second largest community of Muslims worldwide, the Shia, whose works are seldom available in English. Razwy's *A Restatement of the History of Islam and Muslims, 570–661* presents a radically different view of early Muslim history than the usual.

The Companions of the Prophet include Abu Bakr, whom Sunnis claim was the first caliph and the first man to swear allegiance to the Prophet. The Shia reject this, claiming Muhammad's nephew, adopted son, and son-in-law, Ali, was the first male to convert. Regardless, Abu Bakr is considered a faithful follower and trustworthy interpreter of the Qur'an. He led wars against various people and under his guidance what became the official version of the Qur'an was compiled. He appointed Umar the next caliph under whom Muslim armies conquered Iraq, Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Uthman and Ali followed as caliphs, but it was under Mauwiyah that the capital of the Muslim empire was moved from Mecca to Damascus.

The first phase of Muslim history coincides with the caliphate (usually divided into periods of the "Right Guided Caliphs" (632–661), the Umayyad Empire (661–750), and the Abbasid Empire (750–1258). Following hundreds of years where various sultanates arose and numerous rival Muslim rulers vied for power, the Safavid Empire emerged in Iran until 1736, the Mogul Empire in India until 1857, and the Ottoman Empire which finally disintegrated in World War I.

From the outset, divisions appeared among Muslims. Today's main groups are:

- Sunni Islam: The largest group in Islam affirming the Prophet's divine guidance and viewing Islam's military victories as the seal of God's approval on the caliphate.
- Wahhabi: Developed as a revivalist movement among Sunnis during the eighteenth century under Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, devoted to missionary zeal and peace.

- Shia Islam: Loyal followers of Ali who usually accept the work of Abu Bakr on the Qur'an but consider much of the Hadith fabrication designed to promote Ummaya.
- Ismailis: A breakaway branch that has developed as one of the most advanced forms of Islam in terms of accommodation with the West, best known for its leader, the Aga Khan.
- Druzes: A small branch of Ismaili Islam primarily in Lebanon and parts of Israel.
- Kharijites: Arising from a schism during Uthman's time, they are a radical charismatic group similar to Christian fundamentalists, stressing puritanical morality and a literal reading of the Qur'an.
- Sufism: Mystic revivalist groups that function in both Sunni and Shia. Prayer, fasting, and meditation on scripture are key, as is personal experience including hypnotic states.