



A
Concise Guide
to the Life of

MUHAMMAD

ANSWERING THIRTY
KEY QUESTIONS

Ayman S. Ibrahim

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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Chronological Events in Muhammad's Life xi

*Introduction: Why Should One Learn about Muhammad's
Life?* xiii

Part 1: Muhammad's History

1. Who Was Muhammad? 3
2. What Are the Major Muslim Sources for Muhammad's Life? 8
3. What Do Scholars Say about the Reliability and Accuracy of Early Muslim Sources? 15
4. What Is So Unique about Muhammad's Birth Year? 20
5. What Is Significant about Muhammad's Genealogy? 26
6. What Do Muslims Believe about Muhammad's Attributes? 30
7. Was Muhammad a Real Historical Figure? 35
8. What Do We Know about Mecca, Muhammad's Birthplace? 42
9. What Is the Black Stone in the Ka'ba? 48
10. What Do We Know about Muhammad's Wives and Their Roles in Islam? 52
11. Was Muhammad Always a Monotheist? 59
12. What Is Muhammad's Night Journey to Jerusalem and Heaven? 65

13. Why Did Muhammad Strike a Peace Treaty with the Jews? 71
14. Why Did Muhammad Raid the Pagans of Mecca? 78
15. Was There Ever a Truce between Muslims and Meccans? 83
16. Did Muhammad Really Fight the Jews? 87
17. Did Muhammad Launch Raids against Christians? 94
18. Who Killed Muhammad? 98
19. Did Muhammad Appoint a Successor? 104
20. What Are Some of the Early Non-Muslim Views on Muhammad? 109

Part 2: Muhammad's Message

21. What Was Muhammad's Central Message? 117
22. Who Is Muhammad's Deity, Allah? 122
23. What Is Muhammad's Message about Jesus? 128
24. Where Is Muhammad Mentioned in the Bible? 132
25. Where Are Muhammad's Sermons? 137
26. What Did Muhammad Say about Loving One's Neighbors? 141
27. How Does Muhammad's Tradition Treat Apostasy from Islam? 145
28. What Do the Hadiths Say about Jihad? 152
29. Who Are the Hadith-Rejecters among Muslims? 156
30. Why Are the Hadith-Rejecters Growing in Number? 161

Appendix A: Muslim Primary Sources in English 173

Appendix B: Helpful Websites on Islamic Primary Sources 175

Glossary 179

Sources Consulted 199

Bibliography 207

Index 217

Chronological Events in Muhammad's Life

- 555: Khadija's birth
- 570: The Year of the Elephant and the defeat of Abraha by Allah's army at Mecca
- 570: Muhammad's birth
- 576: Muhammad's mother, Amina, dies
- 581: Muhammad travels with his uncle Abu Talib to Syria and meets Bahira, a Syrian monk who foretells his prophethood
- 595: Khadija proposes to Muhammad, and they marry
- 599: Khadija delivers Muhammad's first child, a daughter, Zaynab
- 610: Muhammad receives the first revelation from Allah, through Gabriel
- 610: Waraqa, a Christian, confirms to Muhammad the divine revelation, emphasizing to him that he is the long-awaited prophet
- 610: Waraqa dies, and Muhammad's inspiration pauses
- 610: Early propagation of Islam in secret
- 610: Ali and Abu Bakr accept Islam, becoming among the earliest converts
- 613: Public proclamation of Islam begins
- 613: Meccan persecution of Muslims begins
- 616: First hijra (emigration) to Ethiopia
- 619: Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib dies
- 619: Khadija dies, and Muhammad calls this year "The Year of Sorrow"
- 619: Muhammad marries Sawda (she is almost fifty)
- 619: Muhammad is betrothed to Aisha (she is six or seven)
- 619: Satanic verses incident
- 620: Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem and his ascension to heaven
- 622: The hijra, Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina

- 622: Starting point of the Islamic Hijri lunar calendar
- 622: Muhammad consummates his marriage with Aisha (she is nine)
- 623: Muhammad launches first raid against the Meccans and their caravans
- 624: Battle of Badr, a major conflict in which Muhammad defeats the Meccans
- 624: Raid against the Jews of Qaynuqa
- 624: Muhammad orders the murder of the Jewish poet Ka'b, who insulted him
- 625: Battle of Uhud; Meccans are revenged and defeat the Muslims
- 625: Raid against the Jews of Nadir
- 626: Aisha is accused of adultery but declared innocent by Muhammad and Allah
- 627: Battle of the Trench, or of the Confederates
- 627: Raid against the Jews of Qurayza
- 628: Raid (or Treaty) of Hudaibiyya
- 628: Raids against the Jewish settlements at Khaybar and Fadak; Muslim victory
- 629: Conversion of Khalid ibn al-Walid and Amr ibn al-As, two shrewd Meccan commanders
- 629: Battle of Mu'ta, initiated by Muslims against the Byzantines and their allies from the Arab Christian Ghassanids
- 630: Conquest of Mecca; Muhammad declared victorious over most of Arabia
- 630: Battle of Hunayn, initiated by the Muslims against Arab pagans
- 630: Battle of Tabuk, initiated by Muhammad against the Byzantine Empire
- 630: Muhammad's daughter Umm Kulthum dies
- 631: Muhammad's son Ibrahim dies
- 632: Muhammad's farewell pilgrimage and farewell sermon
- 632: Ghadir Khumm, the designation of Ali as Muhammad's successor, according to Shiites
- 632: Muhammad dies
- 632: Abu Bakr appointed as Muhammad's caliph, successor
- 632: Apostasy Wars begin, lasting for two years

Introduction

Why Should One Learn about Muhammad's Life?

As I grew up in Cairo, Egypt, the name Muhammad quickly became familiar to me. Many of my neighbors and classmates were named Muhammad, as Muslims greatly cherish the name and what it represents. If one had the name Muhammad, we all knew he was Muslim. Because it is the name of the prophet of Islam, it is the most valued, respected, and honored name among Muslims. In most Muslim families, there is usually one member named Muhammad—the name reflects devotion to Islam and invites Allah's favor on the one who holds it. Islam's prophet was also known by other names, including Ahmad and Mustafa. These are also often used as personal names among Muslims. The point is clear: Muhammad is the most loved among Muslims, and anything referring to him is of highest value.

I have always been amazed by the astounding way Muslims respect Muhammad. Whenever they mention his name, it is always followed by an honoring phrase, “Salla allahu alayhi wa sallam,” which means, “May Allah send prayers and peace upon him.” Even Muslims who do not speak Arabic know the phrase and usually repeat it in Arabic. It means a great deal to devoted Muslims. It can be repeated numerous times in one short conversation, sermon, or speech. It does not matter how many times one repeats it, because it is expected. The ample repetition is not viewed as redundant, as it reflects devotion and respect to Muhammad.

As a Coptic Christian, I always wondered about the phrase. What does it mean for Allah to send prayers upon Muhammad? If Allah prays upon Muhammad, who listens to the prayer? I understood that Muslims treat this phrase as a salutation of honor and respect to Muhammad given by those who admire him. But I wondered whether I was supposed to use this honorific statement in front of my Muslim friends when his name was mentioned. This led to awkward moments any time the name Muhammad was mentioned in a public setting.

At an early age, I became aware of Muhammad's pivotal role in Islam. If anyone asks what is the foundation of Islam, it is not difficult to answer. The foundation is built of two parts: the Quran and Muhammad. The former is, for Muslims, Allah's perfect word, while the latter is Allah's final prophet and perfect example for humankind. But the Quran is often too sophisticated for cultural—and even many religious—Muslims to comprehend. Muhammad's sayings, on the other hand, are straightforward, clear, specific, and accessible. For almost every situation in life, Muslim clerics have at least one saying attributed to Muhammad to address it. In fact, the vast majority of Muslims, past and present, believe that the Quran cannot be understood apart from the statements of Muhammad. They interpret the Quran against the background of Muhammad's life—every verse in the Quran, we are told, should be understood against the backdrop of the biography of Muhammad. Muslims claim that no man can ever apply the Quran better than Muhammad did.

Moreover, every practicing Muslim wants to follow Allah's sharia—that is, his path, laws, and will. There is no way for a Muslim to learn this sharia apart from its two major sources: the Quran and Muhammad's example. If the Quran is the most authoritative text in Islam, the next two are Muhammad's sayings (hadiths) and Muhammad's biography (sira). This reflects Muhammad's centrality in Islam and in the lives of the adherents of this faith. If we want to understand the Muslim worldview, we should learn the importance of the Quran and Muhammad to the Muslim community. In the end, Muslims are a community of believers united around a sacred text and following it as exemplified in Muhammad's pattern of conduct. Thus, it is crucial to examine Muhammad's life, his deeds, and his teachings in order to understand Islam and our Muslim neighbors properly.

Non-Muslims are usually confused by the strong devotion Muslims have for Muhammad. Throughout history, non-Muslim writers have identified him in various ways, including trader, shepherd, king, conqueror, false prophet, lustful Arab, and so on. You can see how this deviates significantly from the traditional Muslim beliefs about him. Although a few non-Muslims have viewed him positively, as a hero, reformer, revivalist, and monotheist preacher, many have identified him as a deceiver who sought only power and wealth. Some medieval Christians viewed him as a Jewish or Christian heretic who distorted biblical accounts in order to conquer Arab tribes. Of course, this multifaceted non-Muslim portrayal has been completely dismissed by Muslims throughout history. There is no question about Muhammad among Muslims: he is the most pious man who ever lived, the final prophet to humankind, and his message is the decisive and definitive divine truth, which surpassed and superseded all previous faiths. For these reasons, Muhammad is honored, venerated, and praised above all other humans.

Here lies an important reason why one should study Muhammad's life. Muslims currently make up about 20 percent of the world population; thus, it is imperative to understand and evaluate the life of the man whom they revere. This one man directly influences the lives of one-fifth of humankind and, indirectly, a significant portion of non-Muslims all around the world. If Islam and Muslims have been unknown in Western circles for a period until now, this must end. Consider this: Muslims believe that Muhammad's example has something to teach about every aspect of life, including family, education, laws, politics, economics, abortion, slavery, homosexuality, and, of course, religion. In order to understand and examine Muhammad's impact, it is crucial for non-Muslims to learn what Muhammad did and said, based on trusted Muslim sources. This is precisely the heart of this book. Because knowledge of Muhammad is fundamental to so many people, the importance of studying his life cannot be overstated. In a previous book, *A Concise Guide to the Quran*, we examined Islam's scripture. In this book, we study the life of Muhammad. While I highly recommend that readers begin with *A Concise Guide to the Quran*, as it provides foundational information on Islam's sacred text in its relationship to Muhammad, I attempt to treat this book as an independent resource.

Now, I will provide a few remarks on the style and structure of this book.

First, my target audience is primarily non-Muslims, but I write with Muslims in mind. I appreciate the richness and diversity among Muslims. In my life, I have known cultural Muslims who knew very little about their religion. I have also met with religious Muslims, some of whom were conservative whereas others were progressive. I learned that some progressives self-identify as devoted Muslims in their own way. I also know some Muslims who could be considered extremist or radical in their interpretation and application of Islam. Yet overall, cultural and conservative Muslims make up the majority of Muslims. While I acknowledge the existence of various kinds of Muslims and a variety of visions within Islam, I ask questions as an academic. The questions I ask in this book focus on episodes, events, and teachings in Muhammad's life. Although the questions are likely familiar to scholars and students of Islamic studies, some Muslims may have never discussed such issues, especially as I examine them critically.

Second, the book follows the form of questions and answers. This is meant to help the reader who has little to no familiarity with matters of Islamic studies. The book consists of two main parts: (1) Muhammad's history and (2) Muhammad's message. In the first, I highlight major events in Muhammad's life and career and provide critical observations about them. My discussion of Muhammad's life events follows a chronological order as found in the Muslim sources. My aim is to help the reader become familiar with the biography of Muhammad as Muslims wrote it. In the second part, I focus on topics related to Muhammad's teachings and statements on important subjects. Each question and answer was written to stand independently. This gives readers the option to skip around according to their interests. However, as I cover many topics related to Muhammad, there might be some overlap from one question to another. This was unavoidable because some information discussed in earlier questions needed to be incorporated in later questions. In this case, I covet your patience as I attempt to explain to those who might not have read earlier selections. Finally, there is one more observation concerning the book's structure. Some questions needed more discussion than others, which resulted in lengthier answers. Overall, every answer aims to present various Islamic perspectives, which sometimes contradict

each other. While I strive for thoroughness, these answers should not be viewed as exhaustive.

Third, in this book I aim to introduce the reader to the most trusted Muslim sources. I rely heavily on authoritative Muslim sources—the earlier the better—in presenting the information on Muhammad’s life. I hope to equip the reader to learn where to obtain reliable reports on Islam and Muhammad. I believe that a Muslim primary source takes the highest priority in telling the reader what Muslims believe and say about Muhammad. In my analysis, I avoid speculations about Muhammad, as there is much confusion about him in today’s world. Rather, I consult Muslim sources—both the Sunni and Shiite traditions—about Muhammad and seek to present them together when this is possible. While most Western studies rely on the Sunni accounts, as Sunnis are the majority among Muslims, I value the Shiite voice and consider it crucial to any serious study on Islam. Moreover, I understand that some available secondary studies, particularly in the West, present Muhammad unfavorably, focusing only on negative accounts about him. I am also aware that many recent Western studies on Muhammad seek to present his life and teachings quite favorably by emphasizing some accounts while ignoring others. I do not follow either of these two trends. In this book, I seek to be as charitable as possible, knowing what Muhammad means to Muslims and how information can be interpreted in different ways. I do not want to show Muhammad in a dark light, nor do I aim to proselytize Muslims. My goal is to present an informative book, an introduction about Muhammad’s history and teachings, to non-Muslims in the West. In the end, he is one of the most important figures in human history.

Fourth, while I rely heavily on Muslim primary sources, I also interact with recent scholarly research on Islam’s origins. There is value in asking critical questions and building on recent academic scholarship. Islamic studies as a field of research is flourishing as never before. This is almost undeniable—just consider the growing discussion about Islam in academia in the past four decades. This book is one piece in this discussion. In my answers to critical questions, I introduce the reader to recent scholarly arguments by both Muslims and non-Muslims. One should be thankful for non-Muslim scholars and their questions, and equally amazed at the diversity among Muslim scholars. Among self-identified Muslim scholars, there are both conservatives, who utilize strict

traditional interpretations, and progressives, who revise classical claims and present Islam in a nonconventional way. These are not completely distinct; it is more like a marvelous spectrum of scholars. We should acknowledge and cherish this diversity. By including these scholars in the discussion, I hope to add nuance to our conversation.

Fifth, in order to help the reader learn where to locate information about Muhammad in Muslim primary sources, I provide several tools. I present a list of Muslim primary sources already published in English translations (see appendix A). These sources are fundamental to our understanding of Islam and Muhammad. I want the reader to have access to the sources that form the bulk of the Muslim history, dogma, and identity. These sources are accessible in most major libraries in the West, and some are now available online since they were published many decades ago. In addition to the English translations of Muslim primary sources, we have a wealth of knowledge at our fingertips. Appendix B provides a list of excellent websites that direct us to more Muslim primary sources. Some of these websites include a search feature, which helps tremendously in research. Furthermore, since I discuss various events in Muhammad's life, I provide two more tools: a chronology and a glossary. The chronology highlights major events and figures in Muhammad's life, and the glossary explains important words found in the text. Both serve as informative tools on Muhammad and Islam in general.

Sixth, I made three stylistic choices to make the book easy to read for nonspecialists. While scholars render Arabic names in transliterated English forms to indicate phonetics, I do not follow this pattern. So instead of transliterations like Muḥammad and 'Uthmān, I simply use Muhammad and Uthman, except in footnotes citing Arabic sources. Similarly, I do not use Ka'ba or Ka'ba, but simply Ka'ba. This suffices to serve the goals of this book as readers at this level of study do not need to be concerned with the nuances of the meaning of these symbols. The second choice relates to the footnotes. I rely on numerous scholarly studies, but I do not use exhaustive footnotes. While some supplementary resources are provided in the notes, most of the secondary literature on the topics for each chapter can be found in the Sources Consulted section at the end of this book. The third choice relates to the dates of events. In Islamic studies, scholars use two dates to refer to an event. For example, it is understood that the Battle of Badr took place in 2/624, which makes

it AH 2, or year 2 in the Islamic Hijri calendar (lunar), and AD 624 or 624 CE in our familiar Gregorian calendar (solar). For simplicity, I primarily use the latter, although when relevant I will sometimes mention both dates. These choices, I hope, make the text more accessible and easily readable.

In this concise introduction to Muhammad's life and teachings, it is impossible to be exhaustive. This is not one of my goals. Moreover, the book reflects my thoughts and interpretations of historical accounts. I understand and expect that some will disagree with my writing. This is acceptable and commendable. It is important to encourage discussions about diverse opinions, as long as they are supported by evidence. My goal in writing this book is threefold. I want the English-speaking reader to receive a significant amount of information on Muhammad—as we find it in the Muslim sources—in a concise way. I also want to introduce my reader to the diversity of interpretations among Muslims. For instance, some Muslims insist that Muhammad performed miracles, while others deny this. Islam is not monolithic, and Muslims are not all the same in their approach to Islam and Muhammad. It is important not only to understand and value the conservative traditional interpretation of Islam but also to appreciate the various progressive arguments advanced by Muslims—especially in the West. This creates a better understanding of today's Islam. Finally, I hope that this book encourages you to do more research about Muhammad. Many topics discussed in this study can stand alone as books on their own. This book can serve as a delicious appetizer before your main course begins.

PART 1

MUHAMMAD'S HISTORY

1

Who Was Muhammad?

In world history, Muhammad is known as the founder of the religion of Islam. He reportedly lived in Arabia between 570 and 632, being born in Mecca and dying in Medina. Muslims believe he was a prophet sent by the deity to the Arabs to exhort them to abandon idolatry and to bring them to monotheism. Muslims claim that before becoming a prophet, he, like most Bedouins, traveled throughout Arabia as a trader. Islam is unique among world religions in that we know a great deal about its founder. The credibility of this information is questionable, but this is what Muslims generally believe about their prophet. Some two centuries after Muhammad's death, numerous Muslim authors began claiming precise details about Muhammad: his height, appearance, habits, wives, and even specific conversations he had behind closed doors. While most scholars are skeptical of these traditions, as they appear religiously and politically driven, Muslims tend to trust their reliability. In answering this question, we will focus on what Muslims claim about their prophet before we analyze the various traditions critically in later questions.

Muhammad was born in 570 in Mecca in the western region of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Hijaz. His mother, Amina, gave birth to him months after his father, Abdullah, died. Muhammad was from a well-known family in Mecca, Banu Hashim. The Arabic word *banu* means "sons of," while Hashim is the surname of the head of this family

or clan. In Arabia, a man is usually identified as a member of the “Banu” so-and-so in order to refer to his larger family. Banu Hashim is rendered in English as the Hashimite clan. This clan was part of the prestigious and prosperous Quraysh tribe. The Quraysh was a powerful merchant tribe that held significant power in Mecca. Not only did the Quraysh control the trade routes that allegedly passed through Mecca, but they also managed the idol worship in the Ka’ba—the holy pagan shrine that generated ample wealth as a well-known destination for idol worshippers performing rituals and pilgrimage. While Muhammad’s family and tribe are important due to their prestigious status and role in Mecca, they are less important than is indicated by the Muslim claim that Muhammad is a descendant of Ishmael, the son of Abraham. For Muslims, Muhammad not only is a descendant of Abraham through Ishmael but also serves as a clear sign of the fulfillment of the divine promise for Ishmael to have a great nation.

In his youth and early adulthood, Muhammad worked as a shepherd and merchant. Muslims say he was known for his honesty and trustworthiness, to the extent that he was called al-Sadiq al-Amin, meaning “the honest and the faithful.” In his early twenties he worked for a wealthy and noble widow, Khadija, who needed someone to manage her reputable business, especially to lead her merchandise caravans between Mecca and Syria. Her wealth not only was obtained through her trade caravans but also came from an inheritance passed along from her previous two husbands, with whom she had several children. Because of Muhammad’s truthfulness, according to Muslim sources, she asked to marry him. They married when Muhammad was twenty-five and she was forty. Some suggest that Khadija was Christian because of her close connection to her cousin, Waraqa, who was a Christian priest with exceptional knowledge of Scripture. Muhammad and Khadija had four daughters as well as one or two sons who did not live long.

Muhammad was not satisfied with idolatry in Mecca. He did not subscribe to the pagan worship and its immoral lifestyle popular during his day. Muslim sources claim that Muhammad would isolate himself in a cave in Mount Hira and worship the true deity. When Muhammad was forty, during one of his visits to the cave, the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Muhammad was terrified and tried to climb the mountain to throw himself to his death. Gabriel rescued him and affirmed that Allah

appointed him to be his messenger to the Arabs.¹ With his heart beating rapidly in fear, Muhammad ran to Khadija and asked her to cover him until his fear was gone. She took him to her Christian cousin, Waraqa, who was an expert in Hebrew and the Christian gospel. Muhammad described to Waraqa what he had seen. Waraqa assured Muhammad that what he saw in the cave was the angel Gabriel, who was also sent by Allah to Moses of the Israelites. Waraqa prophesied that the Meccans would be hostile toward Muhammad and those who believed his message and that they would be expelled from Mecca. Muslims believe that this was a confirmation of Muhammad's prophetic mission, designating him as the Prophet of the Arabs. From then on, Muhammad allegedly received divine inspirations from Allah through Gabriel. When a word came down, Muhammad would immediately proclaim it to the Meccans, who abused, persecuted, and mocked him.

For thirteen years, Muhammad continued to live in Mecca and persistently sought to proclaim what Gabriel told him. This is what became the message of Islam. The term *Islam* refers to devotion and submission to Allah. The followers of its message are "Muslims," which reflects their submission to Allah. The proclamations came to be known as the Quran. Muhammad's years in Mecca were colored by hostility and persecution toward his message and his young and newly believing community. Very few Meccans believed Muhammad's message. Due to this harassment and abuse, Muslims claim, Allah instructed Muhammad to emigrate from Mecca to Medina, which was a small oasis about 250 miles northwest of Mecca. This move was later called the hijra, meaning "emigration," and became significant for Muslims and the solidification of their new community of believers under Muhammad's leadership.

For ten years, Muhammad lived with his community in Medina and continued to teach them the basics of Islam. Here, Muhammad became known as a commander and statesman. Muslim sources portray him as a skillful warrior and a clever leader who mastered the creation of tribal alliances and also knew when to break political treaties. He knew when

1. Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 106; and Sahih al-Bukhari, vol. 1, book 1, hadith 3 (hereafter Bukhari, 1.1.3). Unless otherwise indicated, all hadith references in this book are from <https://sunnah.com>, which includes original Arabic texts and English translations of the hadith collections that are, according to Sunni Islam, the most trusted.

to fight his enemies and when to withdraw. From Medina, Muhammad and his companions launched raids and expeditions to consolidate their political power in Arabia. Some raids targeted the Meccan pagans, whereas others dealt with Arab and Jewish tribes and settlements throughout Arabia. As time passed, Muhammad grew in power and military prowess. His enemies grew weaker, while he grew stronger. Eight years into his time in Medina, Muhammad successfully led a campaign of about ten thousand of his believing warriors to conquer Mecca, his homeland, from which he was earlier forced to emigrate. After his successful raid against Mecca, he became the sole leader of West Arabia. Some of his enemies called him the King of Arabia.² Muslims believe that this turning point marked Islam's victory since all Arabs submitted to Muhammad and his religious message. Before his death in 632, he organized military expeditions against Mu'ta and Tabuk—two strategic locations on the frontier of the Christian Byzantine Empire—but these campaigns were less successful.

Muhammad died in 632 in Medina. He was poisoned, according to the most trusted Sunni and Shiite traditions—although they differ regarding who actually poisoned him. Sunni traditions accuse a Jewish woman of poisoning Muhammad because he killed her husband, father, and uncle; Shiite reports point to Muhammad's close companions and his young wife Aisha as conspirators who murdered Muhammad to gain power. The choice of the Sunnis to blame the Jewish woman may reflect a recurring pattern in Muslim tradition of accusing the Jews of a crime to cover up the ambiguity of a specific historical incident. The Shiite preference to accuse Muhammad's companions and his wife is also understandable because it follows the major Shiite claims that Muhammad was betrayed by his own people, who stole power from the rightful heir, Ali. Since martyrdom is valued and revered in religious terms, both Sunni and Shiite Muslims still insist on depicting Muhammad as a martyr who gave his life for the sake of Islam.³ It should also be noted that the Sunnis' favored tradition indicates that before Muhammad finally felt a deadly pain—described in the sources as the cutting of his aorta—the poison remained in his blood for three or four years, and then he died.

2. Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 515; and Tabari, *History*, 8:122.

3. Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 210, 516; and Shoemaker, *Death of a Prophet*, 301–2.

This claim is usually dismissed by secular scholarship, which rejects the unreasonable time interval. The favored narratives of the Shiites, on the other hand, portray a conspiracy to poison Muhammad immediately prior to his painful death.⁴

After Muhammad's death, Abu Bakr's succession as the first caliph in Islam was controversial. Shiite Muslims believe that Ali should have been the immediate successor to lead the Muslim community politically and religiously. They reject Abu Bakr and his elevation, describing it as a coup. According to Muslim sources, many abandoned Islam after Muhammad's death and refused to submit to Abu Bakr. Consequently, he launched the so-called Apostasy Wars to fight the apostates and the Arab tribes who abandoned Islam. Since wars lead to wars, the Apostasy Wars served as the launching pad for more conquests, which reached beyond Arabia. Within a few decades, the Arab Muslim warriors had conquered major lands in today's Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. During the first century of Islam, the Muslim empire stretched from Central Asia to the Iberian Peninsula.

This is a summary of Muhammad's life and career. However, it is important to note that the accuracy and reliability of its details are questionable. While it is the traditional story accepted by Muslims, most of the information provided above has been contested by many thinkers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Before we examine the major problems in the Muslim sources, we should first identify literature that claims to provide the story of Muhammad's life. What are the major Muslim sources? Where can one begin to study Muhammad's life? We discuss these matters in the next question.

4. Bukhari, 5.59.713; and Sunan Abi Dawud, book 40, hadith 4499 (hereafter Sunan Abi Dawud, 40.4499).

2

What Are the Major Muslim Sources for Muhammad's Life?

Most of what we know about Muhammad comes from Muslim sources written over a century after his death. Not one Muslim source can be traced to his generation, nor do we have any eyewitness testimonies from his time. Some Muslim reports were recorded several decades after Muhammad's death, but none are extant. They were either lost or destroyed by later political leaders who sought to advance their views against those of their rivals. Nonetheless, in the second century of Islam (over one hundred years after Muhammad's death), Muslims were the rulers in a vast region of conquered lands where most of the population was still non-Muslim. Muslim rulers—also known as caliphs—realized the need to establish a distinct religious identity unique to Islam. They sought to present Islam to non-Muslims, especially Christians and Jews who had already established solid traditions and had used their religious texts for centuries. Because Christians and Jews had Jesus and Moses, respectively, Muslims felt the need to introduce Islam's prophet to Muslims and non-Muslims in their growing territory. This triggered the writing of numerous works in the second century of Islam.

Under the instruction of powerful caliphs, Muslim writers began to document what they claimed to be statements said by and reported

about Muhammad. The statements were projected back in time, more than a century earlier, and were collected in volumes called the hadith traditions. A *hadith* (saying or statement) is a Muslim tradition about Muhammad, describing something he supposedly said or did. Sometimes it is called a prophetic hadith. The volumes became known as hadith collections. Of course, these hadith traditions aligned with the desires of the political power of the day and sought to advance political claims or settle religious disputes: the Abbasid caliph, for instance, wanted the hadith traditions about Muhammad to advance Abbasid claims of legitimacy against their Umayyad rivals. Similarly, there were huge religious disagreements among various Muslim groups. Sunni Muslims adopted, supported, and trusted different hadith collections than their Shiite counterparts. Every Muslim group claimed numerous hadiths to support their religious opinions. For example, Shiites believe that Ali was the rightful successor of Muhammad, while the Sunnis favor Abu Bakr. To support their sectarian claim, a devoted Sunni needs a hadith claiming that Abu Bakr—not Ali—is the most important and close companion to Muhammad, while a Shiite enthusiast wants the exact opposite. Both hadiths circulated among Muslims. One Sunni hadith states that Muhammad said, “If I were to take a Khalil [dearest friend, close companion], I would have taken Abu Bakr.”¹ Conversely, in a Shiite hadith we are told that Muhammad said, “Anyone who has me as his *mawla* (close and loyal friend), has Ali as his *mawla*. May Allah love those who love him and be the enemy of those who hate him.”² These two hadiths offer opposite notions and aim to serve sectarian claims.

Competing hadith statements emerged in the second century of Islam and continued to grow in number over time. By attributing statements to Muhammad, the Muslim writers sought to legitimize them, thus creating a specific memory of Muhammad among Muslims. These were the earliest statements to describe aspects of Muhammad's life. Unsurprisingly, these hadiths provide astonishing details about Muhammad, as if they were documented during his lifetime instead of a century or two later.

1. Bukhari, 5.57.8; 1.8.456; see also Sahih Muslim, book 4, hadith 1083 (hereafter Sahih Muslim, 4.1083).

2. Moosa, *Extremist Shiites*, 96. See also Musnad Ahmad, book 5, hadith 77 (hereafter Musnad Ahmad, 5.77); and Jami' at-Tirmidhi, book 49, hadith 4078 (hereafter Jami' at-Tirmidhi, 49.4078).

We know his favorite food, his habits in his home with his wives, his words to his slaves in private, his height, his skin color, and many other details. Of course there are many contradictions in these hadiths, but the details are astonishing. While Muslims generally trust these hadiths as truthful historical accounts by or about Muhammad, many scholars doubt their reliability. Critical thinkers are hesitant to accept them as descriptions of what actually occurred in Muhammad's time. Scholars view these hadiths as descriptive of the time of their writing, not Muhammad's time. For them, the hadith statements represent the desires of the writers and what they sought to communicate about Muhammad rather than true history. However, to most Muslims the hadiths are second in authority after the Quran. When Muslims seek to follow Muhammad's example, they often refer to a hadith, usually from a collection of "sound hadiths" that is taught and revered by Muslim clerics. Most Muslims view the hadith statements as true historical narratives about Muhammad and his time.

The emergence and growth of hadith writing among Muslims opened a wide gate for other writings that described Muhammad's life. One of these was labeled "maghazi," which refers to accounts about Muhammad's raids and expeditions. The word *maghazi* means "campaigns" or "incursions." It is a famous genre among Muslims, particularly as historical literature. Many short works about Muhammad's maghazi sought to paint a picture of his successful military activities. Over time, these books became voluminous and more sophisticated. These maghazi works rely heavily on hadiths attributed to Muhammad's time. A maghazi work would consist of consecutive hadiths, allegedly describing situations or statements that occurred in various battles and incursions led by Muhammad or commissioned against his enemies. None of the maghazi works originate in Muhammad's time; all were compiled by hadith scholars who lived at least a century after Muhammad. Surprisingly, these maghazi books describe Muhammad's life as a series of successful raids and expeditions. For Muslims, the maghazi was Muhammad's life in its entirety, not only his military campaigns. Early Muslims wanted to represent Muhammad as a true leader and commander in battle for the sake of Islam. The term *maghazi* was not offensive in reference to Muhammad's life and career, as early Muslims did not believe it described their prophet unfavorably. Rather, it was

used as a true description of Muhammad's mission. Thus, in addition to hadiths, Muslims use maghazi works to obtain knowledge of the life and deeds of Muhammad, especially his raids and expeditions.

The maghazi works soon developed into a larger literature called the *sira*.³ The Arabic word *sira*, which literally means “behavior, life, and conduct,” later came to mean “biography”—in particular, that of Muhammad. Muslims refer to Muhammad's biography as his *sira*. Therefore, what began as merely works with an emphasis on his maghazi developed over time to describe in more detail his *sira*—that is, words, practices, actions, and all his major life events. Still, the authors of the *sira* relied heavily on hadiths attributed to Muhammad and his companions, who lived centuries earlier. The early Muslim writers served as hadith scholars who generated numerous traditions. The *sira* works became the earliest Muslim literature to provide detailed narratives of Muhammad's life. The earliest *sira* of Muhammad was written under the instruction of the powerful Caliph Mansur, who died in 775 (Muhammad died in 632). We know that Mansur wanted Muhammad's biography to be written in such a way as to legitimize Mansur's claim to power by portraying Mansur's ancestors as great supporters of Muhammad. Scholars often point to the obvious bias in the accounts of the *sira*, which aimed at supporting the political power—the Abbasid Caliphate—and their religious causes over their rivals.

If the emergence of hadith accounts triggered the writings of Muhammad's maghazi and his *sira*, the growth of documenting historical accounts did not stop there. Relying on the foundational texts of Muhammad's maghazi and *sira*, Muslims began to focus on producing more writings that detailed and described the history of Muhammad. Two more collections or literatures emerged: the *futuh* and the *tarikh*. The term *futuh* means “conquests,” while *tarikh* refers to “history.” The *futuh* literature examines Muhammad's military activities—and his successors' conquests—in more detail, expanding what the maghazi works began, while the *tarikh* works aim at providing Islam's history as a part of major world events. Many *futuh* and *tarikh* collections emerged in the third and fourth centuries of Islam. Though they were written by Muslims who lived well after Muhammad's death, these works allege to

3. On this development, see Duri, *Rise of Historical Writing*, 12–75; and Horowitz, *Earliest Biographies*.

document Muhammad's life meticulously. While scholars doubt various claims in these works, Muslims in general trust the material as truthful and accurate.

Based on the discussion above, we can learn details about Muhammad's life—according to the Muslim standpoint—from the hadith, maghazi, sira, futuh, and tarikh works. Though they were written late and include tendentious material, these are the documents that claim to tell about Islam's prophet and his teachings and deeds. The question remains: How can one access these works? They are mainly available in Arabic, which creates difficulty for Western readers who want to learn about Islam and Muhammad from original and Muslim primary sources. The good news is that English translations of these works are growing in number, and the internet offers access to many of them, at least in part. Concerning the hadith collections, the vast majority of Muslims believe that the most trusted hadiths are those by Imam Bukhari (d. 870) and Imam Muslim (d. 875). Both collections, and many others, are available in English on the valuable website sunnah.com, where each Arabic hadith is given next to its English translation. The translations are accurate for the most part. An excellent feature of this website is the option to search the various hadith collections using English words.

Concerning the maghazi collections, while there is no website that exclusively provides maghazi texts in English, a wonderful translation of the earliest available maghazi work, titled *The Expeditions*, was recently accomplished by Sean Anthony from Ohio State University (New York University Press, 2014). Anthony provides both the original Arabic text and a readable English translation; however, the original text's nonchronological ordering of Muhammad's raids may prove unhelpful to some researchers. Anthony is aware of this potential problem and offers a chronological outline of major events in Muhammad's life and a map of the Arabian Peninsula during Muhammad's time—these can prove helpful for beginners in Islamic history. The translator also provides a glossary and an appendix. These explain the historical importance of some of the names mentioned in the maghazi and assist the reader with explanations of key names, locations, and information related to Muhammad's life and raids. The Library of Arabic Literature's website provides a free pdf copy of the original Arabic text. In his English translation, Anthony calls Muhammad's maghazi a description of “how his

faith community imagined him centuries after his death.”⁴ This indicates the hesitancy of scholars to consider the accounts written centuries after Muhammad's death to be a true documentation of his life.

Concerning the *sira* literature, we have access to an English translation of the earliest—and thus most important—biography of Muhammad. The *sira* was originally written by Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), a famous scholar of hadiths, about 120 years after Muhammad's death. Ibn Ishaq was instructed to write the biography by the powerful Abbasid caliph Mansur. This biography was lost, but a disciple of Ibn Ishaq named Ibn Hisham (d. 833) allegedly found a copy, arranged and edited its contents, and removed some of its accounts in what many consider a deliberate act of censorship. This text, which became known as the official *sira* of Muhammad, was translated by British scholar Alfred Guillaume (1888–1965) and originally published by Oxford University Press in 1955. In the translation, Guillaume refers to Ibn Hisham's troubling admission regarding editing Ibn Ishaq's copy: Ibn Hisham stated that he omitted from the biography “things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people.”⁵ While no one knows what Ibn Hisham actually omitted from the original *sira*, Muslims, past and present, value his edition and celebrate it as the official account of Muhammad's life. Guillaume's translation is a great success, as it allows many in the English-speaking world to access what Muslims consider to be a true account of Muhammad's biography.

Concerning the *futuh* literature, the English-speaking world is quite fortunate to have an accessible translation of one of the most important works in this genre, *Futuh al-buldan* (The conquests of the lands). The work is written by the renowned ninth-century Muslim Persian historian Ahmad al-Baladhuri (d. 892), who was well connected with several caliphs in his day and wrote most of his works with their approval. The *Futuh al-buldan* includes a well-arranged set of consecutive traditions on the various conquests launched by Muhammad and his successors, classified by lands, including Arabia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Africa, and Persia. Francis Clark Murgotten and Philip Khuri Hitti translated this work as *The Origins of the Islamic State* (Columbia University, 1916–24).

4. Ibn Rashid and al-Sanani, *Expeditions*, xv.

5. Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 691.

As for the *tarikh* works, we have access to the English translation of one of the most comprehensive historical Muslim works from the tenth century. It is the *Tarikh* of Tabari (d. 923). Tabari was a renowned Persian scholar of hadiths who received special fame for his thoroughness. Muslims believe that he traveled throughout the Muslim lands to collect his traditions. The work is massive because Tabari included various versions of the same narrative, thus establishing various perspectives on specific historical events, usually without offering his opinion. This work serves as a chronological history of Islam up until a few years before Tabari's death. Tabari also placed the history of Islam within world history, as the first few volumes of the work include general history, such as accounts of the creation, the flood, the prophets, and Israel. The *Tarikh* of Tabari was translated into English as *The History of al-Ṭabarī* and published by the State University of New York Press (1985–1999) in forty volumes with an index added in 2007.

When today's Muslims want to study Muhammad's life, career, and teachings, they consult major Muslim primary sources, including the hadith, maghazi, sira, futuh, and *tarikh* works. For them, these provide the true outline and content of Muhammad's biography. While these sources were originally all in Arabic, today's English-speaking reader can access good translations of many of them. There is nothing like studying original material. While it is usually easier to absorb information about Muhammad from secondary sources—books discussing him or interpreting aspects of his life—the value of examining Muslim primary sources is unmatched. This provides a deeper understanding of Muhammad's life—an understanding not colored by ideas advanced by other writers, whether popular or scholarly. So here is how to begin learning about Muhammad: read the early Muslim sources written about him. Though they were produced centuries after his death, they still represent what Muslims believe about him and his life. But can we trust the material in these sources as reliable and accurate? We will answer this question next.