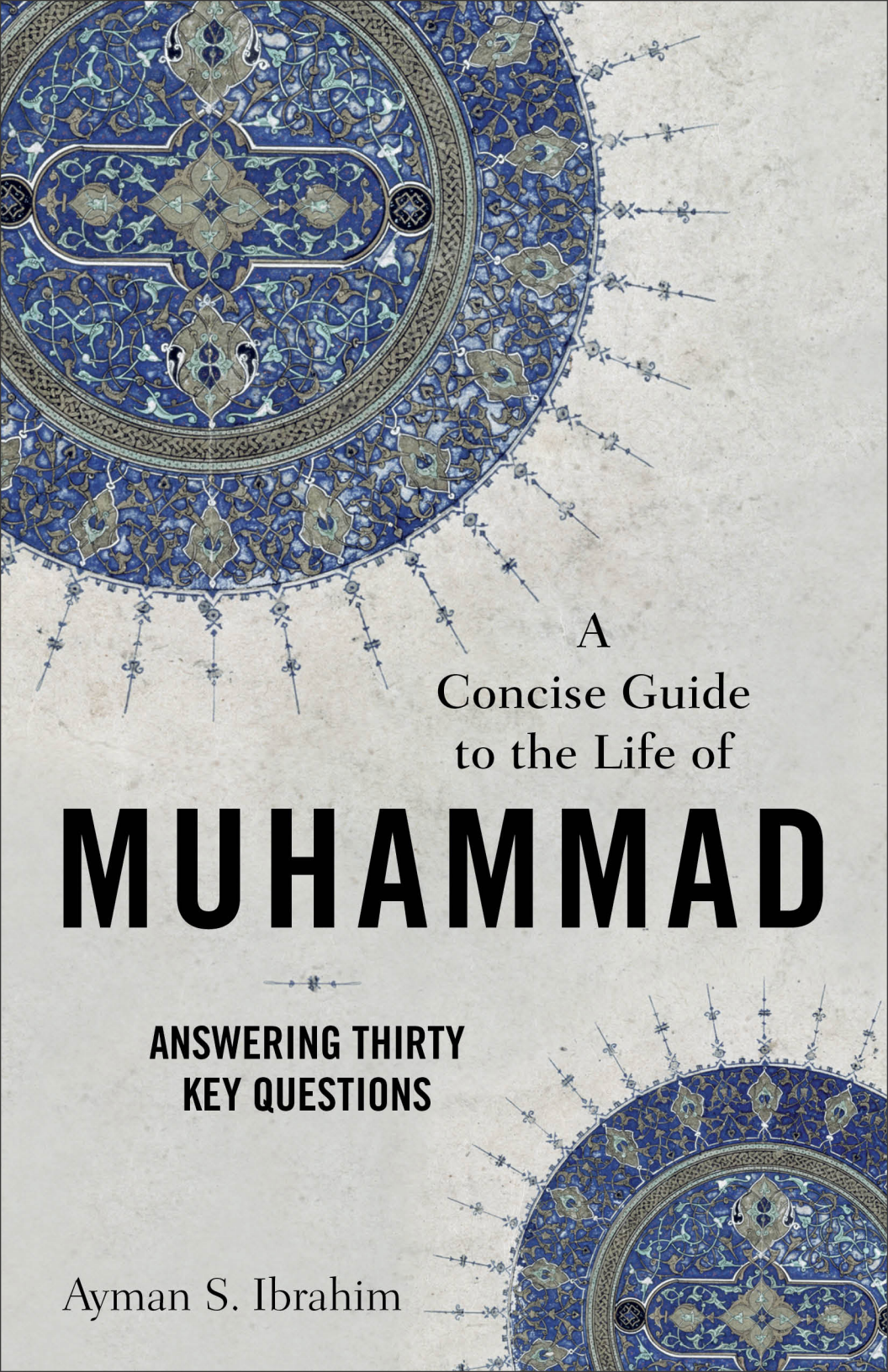




A
Concise Guide
to the Life of

MUHAMMAD

ANSWERING THIRTY
KEY QUESTIONS

Ayman S. Ibrahim

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My wife is the hero behind all this. Her love, encouragement, and constant support for me and my work allow me time and space to write. To all, with gratitude, I say *shukran!*

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

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