

The Rise of the Prophet Muhammad

The Rise of the Prophet Muhammad:

Don't Shoot the Messenger

By

Yvonne Ridley

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-2195-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2195-7

“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah.”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to open this with the simple declaration of faith which defines a Muslim: The shahadah: I bear witness there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that Muhammad, *salla Allaahu alayhi wa sallam*, is His slave and messenger.

I would like to thank Justice Taki Usmani for reading the original manuscript and advising me on the content and use of certain *hâdith*. I am blessed by his advice and wisdom and grateful for his input and kind words about the book.

An earlier version has already received recognition and a special award at The Grand Prize of The Holy Prophet (PBUH) Festival and Conference, and The Ahlulbayt World Assembly of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In addition, I would personally like to thank Ayatollah Akhtari, the Secretary of the Festival. Although we have not yet met, his words of encouragement inspired me to further expand and produce this work on The Prophet.

Special thanks also go to Muneeb Hussain, a great student of Islam in Karachi, and an aspiring scholar.

Another inspirational student of Islam is Abu Bakr of The Qur'ân Project from Birmingham; he has played a major role in giving advice and guidance.

Great thanks must go to Dr Ahmed Faris Moustapha of Medina whose wisdom and *taqwa* have been a huge influence and motivational factor in producing this book.

The book cover design is credited to Tayyabah Hewitt, an artist and designer, who is both innovative and talented beyond her years. Much appreciation also goes to the editors, proofreaders and publishers with a special mention to Caroline Moyes Matheou for her invaluable input and Sue Morecroft.

It would be remiss of me not to mention my dear husband, Samir Asli, who has also encouraged me in my work and research.

If there is any benefit in this book then it is from Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala, and if there are any mistakes then they are from myself.

My last supplication is al-hamdulil' Allaahi Rabb al alameen (All thanks and praise are due to Allah the Lord of the Universe).

Yvonne Ridley

INTRODUCTION

I WAS raised in a County Durham village in the North of England where everyone, with few exceptions, was working class and white.

When it came to religion, and that was mainly reserved for an hour on Sundays, the majority were Christians, either Roman Catholic or Protestant. There were a few Methodists, or “chapel folk” as those who came from this offshoot of Protestantism were called; but certainly nothing as exotic as Islam existed in my cloistered little world.

Few had probably heard of Islam and, in school, when we were taught about religion it only extended to Christianity and while there was mention of the Crusades it never got beyond the derring-do of God-fearing knights, drawn from across Europe, who took on the Saracens¹ in the Holy Lands.

Apart from several respectful mentions of a great and wise chivalrous leader called Salahuddin al Ayyubi, a 12th century Kurdish warrior from Tikrit, very little was known about the enemies of the Crusaders other than they were primitive and barbaric. I certainly don't recall my teacher talking about Islam or referring to Salahuddin as a Muslim.

Even as a Sunday school teacher in the 1970s, the lessons I taught were restricted to stories about the life and times of Jesus, his parables and tales of the disciples who followed him; they were of course all pictured and portrayed as white men with blond or lightly coloured hair.

These were, and still are, the popular images in stained glass windows and icons installed in churches across the UK viewed by worshippers and various congregations.

The so-called Salman Rushdie Affair largely bypassed the attention of those of us living in the North East of England. Very few Muslims had settled in the region in the 1980s, but for those living in the major communities around the North West, the Midlands and London, Rushdie's fourth novel, *The*

¹ A European term used to describe desert tribes near the Roman province of Arabia but by the 12th century it became synonymous with Muslims in Medieval Latin literature.

Satanic Verses, caused moral outrage. Massive protests and book burnings in the Muslim communities were carried out, especially after the Supreme Leader of Iran, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, issued a fatwa on 14th February, 1989. He was the only Muslim leader to take direct action by issuing a religious ruling although the fatwa against Rushdie is often credited to the whole of the Muslim world by Western media.

Today, when I return to Stanley, little has changed although there is an urban decay brought about by the collapse of the coal and steel industries and a spiralling recession which has enveloped the town. Religion plays even less of a role and some churches have closed with a few of the prettier, stone-built Victorian chapels transformed into bars, restaurants and private residences.

However, even in Stanley, due to the horrific events of 9/11, just about everyone has now heard of Islam ... but as a result they associate it only with violence, terrorism, olive-skinned people, and men with beards who are reputed to oppress and subjugate their veiled women. It's a simple but toxic narrative and there are few equipped with the knowledge or desire to challenge it and so the lies persist in the media and beyond.

Like many Western female converts to Islam, I was prompted to pick up a copy of the Holy Qur'ān after 9/11 to try and discover why 19 Arab men would hijack four planes and go to war with America. While I still have yet to find the theological answer to that question, what I did discover was lots of similarities between Christianity and Islam and so I began to read more literature to supplement my new-found knowledge. And it was only then that I fully began to realise the significance and importance of The Prophet Muhammad.

Most people living in the boondocks of Stanley had never heard of him and, until I began my own journey on the road to Islam towards the end of 2001, I was also oblivious to his existence. But, again, thanks to negative international headlines brought about by the publication of crude cartoons in a Danish newspaper,² just about everyone today is aware that a man called Muhammad introduced Islam to the world.

² The Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* sparked a storm of global controversy when it published a series of cartoons depicting The Prophet Muhammad on 30th September 2005. It led to worldwide protests in Muslim countries causing a number of deaths.

Personally, the more I read about his history the more fascinated I became. Here was a man so perfect in nature, good character and deeds, a man who revered women for their strengths and their weaknesses, and who viewed us not as weird creatures from another planet but as equals in spirituality, worth and education. And on top of all of that he had a sense of humour, going about his business usually with a smile on his face.

Being a journalist, and therefore having the desire to be impartial and the instinct to question the validity of everything I read about him, I decided to seek out an alternative view.

It was obvious Muslims adored him, with some putting him on a pedestal which elevated him almost beyond the status of an ordinary human being.

It is often said you can discover a great deal about a person by the friends he keeps, but I also believe that if you really want to know someone then listen to what their enemies have to say.

And so, for the purposes of this book, I decided to seek out his detractors and critics in the West and the views of those from other faiths and none who've chosen to write their own accounts and analysis of his life.

Some of their comments are difficult to read because of their toxic nature, while others are snide and sneering, but what I did discover is that all, without exception, were in awe of the breath-taking achievements of one man who emerged from the obscurity of the Middle East desert lands to become the most recognised human being in the world today.

My findings are written for those with a mild curiosity about Islam and for those who are new to the faith, but are too overwhelmed by heavyweight tomes written by scholars in a style and language which are not easy to understand.

I also hope it will be enjoyed by those Muslims around the world who want to reacquaint themselves with their religion which has become, at times, blighted and distorted by culture.

Yvonne Ridley

CHAPTER ONE

THE CRITICS AND THE CONSPIRACY THEORISTS

WESTERN prejudice against Islam is nothing new and so we should not be too surprised that in the early years of the 21st century some leading intellectuals and newspaper columnists still display alarming ignorance towards this great faith, and an especially long-distance relationship with the truth when writing with specific reference to The Prophet Muhammad.

Much of the venom stems from the events of 9/11 when 19 Arab hijackers brought death, chaos and turmoil, to America, unleashing what was to become known as the War on Terror. It was a day that changed the world in so many ways and turned intensive media attention onto Islam, its followers and especially the life of The Prophet Muhammad.

Members of the intelligentsia from previous centuries who have cast a critical eye towards him at least sought to undertake a certain amount of basic research into the life of one of the most remarkable men ever to have lived. Sadly that same academic scrutiny is found lacking in the 21st century with few exceptions. Some of the anti-Muhammad polemics of today resemble the primitive rants emitted by some of the more ignorant religious bodies from the Eastern Christian world in the early 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th centuries.

The ranters of the 21st century can be found in London's Hyde Park at Speakers' Corner where various individuals will shout from a stepladder or an upturned wooden crate that The Prophet Muhammad is a child molester, a sexual predator, a man of many wives who therefore must have had an insatiable sexual appetite and some even accuse him of being the anti-Christ.

Their rhetoric, as alarming and ignorant as it is, bears little difference from the rhetoric of those in the 7th century who wanted to convince Christians of the evils of Islam.

Like their counterparts of today in Hyde Park, the early critics had little understanding of Islam and, perhaps more importantly, they did not want to understand Islam. Their stories were outrageous and baseless, born more out of a fear of the unknown than knowledge. One medieval storyteller claimed the reason Muslims refused to eat pork or drink alcohol arose after The Prophet had been trampled to death by a herd of pigs while he was in a drunken state. The stories were varied and most were devoid of truth but instead of contradicting them, medieval scholars fuelled the discussion by saying his work was inspired by Satan, and in order to prove he was the anti-Christ they also claimed he died not in 632 but 34 years later in 666, the so-called number of the satanic beast.¹

In *Western Hostility to Islam and Prophecies of Turkish Doom*, the American historian and expert on medieval Europe, Kenneth Meyer Setton wrote: “The tall tales of medieval pilgrims and the incitements of crusading preachers contributed their share to the hatred of Islam nurtured in most Christian hearts during the middle ages. Ridiculous legends grew up in the West relating to Mohammed, the stock in trade of preachers, who were always willing to inform their listeners about the origin of the Prophet and the nature of Islam. Pious Christians were usually assured that Mohammed had come to a bad end. According to one version, he had been eaten by a herd of swine when, one day, he had fallen in a drunken stupor, which made it easy enough for the European (rejoicing in Christianity) to understand why the Moslems rejected wine as well as pork.”²

Some Europeans thought Muslims worshipped The Prophet Muhammad as a god which could explain why even his fiercest critics incorrectly refer to adherents of Islam as Muhammadanists rather than Muslims and some even refer to the Muhammadan religion. As far as they’re concerned they are unable to distinguish the difference between Islam and The Prophet Muhammad. In some ways this serves to flatter his memory although it is wholly incorrect as he was not a deity or a god to be worshipped or given a status beyond that of a human being.

¹ “This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666”. The Book of Revelation 13:18 English Standard version of The Bible (1971).

² Kenneth Meyer Setton (1914-1995) was also an expert on the Crusades.

Biographers including Sir Walter Raleigh and Edward Gibbon relied on the biographer Abu'l-Fida,³ who died in 1322, for their facts and research while the orientalist and priest, David Samuel Margoliouth, drew on many other famous biographers to produce his much-lauded book, *Muhammad and the Rise of Islam*, first published in 1905.

The Oxford professor Robert G. Hoyland's book *Seeing Islam As others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* contains an extensive collection of Greek, Syrian, Coptic, Armenian, Latin, Jewish, Persian, and Chinese primary sources written between 620 and 780 offering unique eyewitness accounts of historical events during the time of The Prophet Muhammad and the next generations of Muslims.

The Prophet has indeed inspired many adversaries of Islam to put pen to paper in an attempt to try and understand and then deconstruct and undermine a religion which has proven consistently to be the biggest threat to the survival of Christianity since The Prophet Muhammad introduced Islam to a reluctant people in 610.

It is easy for them to make him a target since his name is part of the five-times-a-day call to prayer (*adhān*) in which the proclaimer announces after declaring there is only one God: "I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God (*Ashhadu anna Muḥammadan rasūl Allāh*)."

Whenever his name is spoken by Muslims, it is usually followed by the phrase *ṣalla Allāhu 'alayhi wa sallam* ("may God's blessings and peace be upon him.")

Yet his arrival into the Christian world was greeted very much in the same hostile manner as when The Prophet Muhammad first introduced the message of Islam in his own backyard in the idol-worshipping trading town of Makkah; it is almost an understatement to say his radical new religion shook the very foundations of the Christian Church which, in the 7th century enjoyed significant and unchallenged dominance.

Some view the spread of Islam in such a hostile environment as a miracle in itself; an achievement lauded equally by impressed friends and adversaries. The 21st century author, publisher and atheist Howard Bloom, who

³ Abu Al-fida' Isma'il Ibn 'ali ibn Mahmud Al-malik Al-mu'ayyad 'imad Ad-din (1273-1331) born in Damascus, a celebrated scholar and historian of Islam and biographer of The Prophet Muhammad.

approaches the phenomenal growth of Islam in a belligerent style, wrote: “Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, and Adolph Hitler tried to take over the world. All of them failed. Yet an illiterate desert prophet and his followers hammered together an empire eleven times the size of Alexander the Great’s conquests, five times the size of the Roman Empire, and seven times the size of the United States. The biggest empire in history.”⁴

The impact of Islam’s existence was summed up with less hysteria than Bloom by the renowned 20th-century Lebanese-born historian and Maronite Christian author Philip Khuri Hitti, who wrote: “If someone in the first third of the seventh Christian century had the audacity to prophesy that within a decade or so some unheralded, unforeseen power from the barbarous and little-known land of Arabia was to make its appearance, hurl itself against the only two world powers of the age, full heir to the one (Sassanid) and strip the other (Byzantine) of its fairest provinces, he would undoubtedly have been declared a lunatic. Yet that was exactly what happened.”⁵

By the time of The Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632 CE, the message of Islam had spread across virtually all of the Arabian Peninsula and within the space of 30 years, it had already become an extensive empire in its own right.

By his own admission the 18th century historian and Cambridge professor, Simon Ockley,⁶ states in his book *History of the Saracens* that the Arabs, before The Prophet Muhammad’s time, were warlike “idolators” consisting of those who lived in towns and villages and those who lived in tents and were of no particular abode. But he then followed this up by writing: “It is not the propagation but the permanency of his religion that deserves our wonder, the same pure and perfect impression which he engraved at Mecca and Medina is preserved, after the revolutions of twelve centuries by the Indian, the African and the Turkish proselytes of the Qur’ān ... The Mahometans⁷ have uniformly withstood the temptation of reducing the object of their faith and devotion to a level with the senses and imagination of man. ‘I believe in One God and Mahomet the Apostle of God’, is the simple and

⁴ Bloom, Howard, *The Muhammad Code: Why a Desert Prophet Wants You Dead*, Howard Bloom Publishing (2013).

⁵ Hitti, P. K., *The Arabs: A Short History*, Princeton University Press (1943).

⁶ At a time when oriental studies were in their infancy in the UK, Ockley (1678-1720) devoted his life to the subject and authored several books on the subject.

⁷ Ockley chose a spelling favoured by some orientalist which is incorrect.

invariable profession of Islam. The intellectual image of the Deity has never been degraded by any visible idol; the honours of the prophet have never transgressed the measure of human virtue, and his living precepts have restrained the gratitude of his disciples within the bounds of reason and religion.”

Among his detractors were also conspiracy theorists who spent lifetimes trying to undermine the very fabric of Islam with the intention of destroying it for good. It goes without saying that they have all failed miserably in their mission. But perhaps the title of chief conspiracy theorist should go to the Reverend Archibald Sayce (1846-1933) who wrote of the extraordinary rise of Islam, concluding that it had been planned with the assistance of the Jews and Sabaeans centuries earlier, dismissing those who said Islam was born in a primitive, backward wilderness on the Arabian Peninsula. He wrote: “It had been prepared for centuries previously. Arabia had for ages been the home of culture and the art of writing, and for about two hundred years before the birth of Muhammad his countrymen had been brought into close contact with the Jewish faith. Future research will doubtless explain fully how great was his debt to the Jewish masters of Mecca and the Sabeian kingdom of Southern Arabia.”⁸

Perhaps the key phrase “Future research will doubtless explain . . .” exposes the weakness of his argument as well as the futility and failure of the priest’s attempts to dismiss the work of The Prophet and Islam. Surely such an outrageous theory should be backed up with research and proof which are glaringly absent in the Christian cleric’s written work. That he expects the reader to wait around for “future research” to prove his argument exposes the futility of his mission.

Before 1100 there was little interest in The Prophet Muhammad as an individual in Western Europe, but Karen Armstrong, the former Roman Catholic nun, a respected writer on comparative religions, says that by 1120 “everybody knew who he was. At about the same time as the myths of Charlemagne, King Arthur and Robin Hood were being evolved in the West, the myth of Mahound, the enemy and shadow-self of Christendom, was firmly established in the Western imagination.”⁹

⁸ An independent quote sitting ahead of the first chapter called *The Origins and Sources of Islam: A Challenge to Faith*, Zwemer, S. M. Published by the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, New York (1907).

⁹ Armstrong, K., *Muhammad, Biography of the Prophet*, p. 26.

It is a view shared by the late medieval historian, Sir Richard William Southern, who wrote: “There can be little doubt that at the moment of their formation these legends and fantasies were taken to represent a more or less truthful account of what they were purported to describe. But as soon as they were produced they took on a literary life of their own. At the level of popular poetry, the picture of Mahomet and his Saracens changed very little from generation to generation. Like well-loved characters of fiction, they were expected to display certain characteristics, and authors faithfully reproduced them for hundreds of years.”¹⁰

This commonly-held narrative is echoed in the latest 21st century edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which states under the entry for The Prophet Muhammad: “Although his name is now invoked in reverence several billion times every day, Muhammad was the most-reviled figure in the history of the West from the 7th century until quite recent times. Because Muhammad is one of the most influential figures in history, his life, deeds, and thoughts have been debated by followers and opponents over the centuries, which makes a biography of him difficult to write. At every turn, both the Islamic understanding of Muhammad and the rationalist interpretation of him by Western scholars, which grew out of 18th and 19th century philosophies such as positivism, must be considered. Moreover, on the basis of both historical evidence and the Muslim understanding of Muhammad as the Prophet, a response must be fashioned to Christian polemical writings characterising Muhammad as an apostate if not the Antichrist. These date back to the early Middle Ages and still influence to some degree the general Western conception of him. It is essential, therefore, both to examine the historical record—though not necessarily on the basis of secularist assumptions—and to make clear the Islamic understanding of Muhammad.”

Since it is easier to ridicule than to embark on a serious academic study of his life, many of his achievements were dismissed as the acts of a faker and magician. Stories without foundation emerged, written by so-called pillars of society, of false miracles, doves being trained to peck peas from his ears so it looked as though a divine being was whispering to him with a message from God. Both Edward Gibbon¹¹ and Thomas Carlyle exposed the trickery and wrote about the deceit behind the doves-and-the-peas story in their works. They exposed some of the “pious” lies written in the missionary texts

¹⁰ Southern, Richard W., *A Monograph called Western Views of Islam*, St Martin’s Press, New York, p. 29.

¹¹ Gibbon, E., *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Strahan and T. Cadell, London (1776) Vol. II Ch. 50, n. 154.

by the Dutchman Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and translated by Edward Pococke (1604-1691). The Arabic translation of Grotius's *De veritate*, which appeared in 1660, illustrates Pococke's vested interest in the propagation of Christianity in the East to the cost of Islam. Pococke had a long-standing interest in the subject, which he had talked over with Grotius in Paris on his way back from Constantinople.

“When Pococke inquired of Grotius, Where the proof was of that story of the pigeon, trained to pick peas from Mahomet's ear, and pass for an angel dictating to him? Grotius answered that there was no proof!” said Carlyle.¹²

Despite the occasional exposures of such deceit, scholars, theologians and writers continued to dismiss the significance of The Prophet Muhammad preferring instead to portray him as a false prophet, magician, faker and sexual deviant, a figure of fun to be ridiculed.

While this may have played well to the mindless masses, more thoughtful and well researched Western academics from the 17th century onwards began to feel uncomfortable at the simplistic Islamophobic narrative that had played previously as outlined by Setton.

“.. in Europe the study of Arabic, and therefore access to a basic knowledge of Islamic culture, declined markedly after about 1330, not to be revived until the seventeenth century.”

When the serious study of Islam declined in Europe, the nonsense written about Muhammad was certain to continue. In the late fourteenth century, for example, William Langland furnished readers with his vision of “Piers the Plowman” with an account of Muhammad’s career that had received wide currency in earlier generations. To begin with, Muhammad was a Christian, “and a cardinal of the court, a great clerk with-alle” who wanted to become pope, “pryns of holychurche”. But he was a bad penny, says Langland; and there was no place for him in the social economy of Rome. Muhammad therefore made his way to Syria where by wiles and magical

¹² Direct quote from Thomas Carlyle's "The Hero" lecture series, given in 1843 and based on his book *Heroes and Hero Worship* under the chapter title "Hero as a Prophet" (1837).

arts the Saracens were beguiled into believing that he was in direct communication with heaven, and thus it was a false Christian who had founded the false faith which dominated the Levant.¹³

Setton later concludes that tiring of both pen and sword, enemies of Islam began to soften their attitudes towards the religion and The Prophet Muhammad. Scholars began to seriously study Arabic texts and the Holy Qur'ān which resulted in a growing tolerance towards Muslims. As Setton pointed out: "If one could build mosques in western cities in the nineteenth century, it was largely owing to the rescue of Mohammed from medieval abuse by the historians, philosophers, dramatists, and (Protestant) theologians of the two preceding centuries, especially in France and England."¹⁴

Serious students of religion, dedicated to basing their work on facts and historically accurate documents, would start to follow with the real story of the achievements of The Prophet Muhammad who would be named in the 20th century as the most influential being to have walked the planet in the author Michael H. Hart's book, *The 100*, a ranking of the most influential persons in history.

¹³ Setton, K. M., *Western Hostility to Islam and Prophecies of Turkish Doom*, The American Philosophical Society (1992), p. 14.

¹⁴ Setton, K. M., *Western Hostility to Islam and Prophecies of Turkish Doom*, The American Philosophical Society (1992), p. 53.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD AND HIS EARLY YEARS

WHATEVER their long-term objectives, most biographers share the common view that Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib ibn Hāshim, otherwise known as The Prophet Muhammad, was born into great privilege around 570 to wealthy and influential parents who tragically both died before he reached the age of six.

His birthplace was Makkah, a regional hub for trading where businesses such as carpenters, smiths, sword-makers, wine merchants, oil and leather merchants, tailors, weavers, arrow-makers, stationers, and money-lenders operated.

His mother, Aminah, was the daughter of Wahb Ibn Abdu Manaf of the influential Zahrah family, while his father was the son of the influential Abd al Muttalib. His genealogy has been traced back 40 generations to Ishmael, the son of the prophet Abraham, according to prophetic tradition.

The couple were indeed privileged and, by today’s standards in the celebrity obsessed West, would have been treated as part of the elite or aristocrats, if not some equivalent to Arab nobility.

His father Abdullah was said to be extremely handsome and considered to be an eligible bachelor of such distinction, that when he did marry Aminah local spinsters were left feeling bereft, although unsurprisingly most authors pour scorn on tales that 200 young women died on the spot on hearing the news of the marriage.

I’ve taken the decision to largely ignore such fabulous references probably made by well-intentioned devotees of The Prophet, as their gushing accounts and stories serve only to undermine true events of his life and times.

What we do know is that The Prophet Muhammad's father died, according to most biographers before he was born, while others say his demise occurred just several weeks after his birth during a trading journey to Palestine and Yemen; either way he never got to meet or hold his first born. Equally tragically, six years later his mother Aminah also passed away due to illness.

It was the custom of all the great families that had come to settle in Arab towns to send their sons into the desert soon after their birth to be suckled and weaned, and to spend their early childhood amongst the Bedouins. The Quraish, who were previously nomadic, had chosen in recent times to build more permanent homes clustered around the sanctuary or place of worship known as the Ka'ba¹ in Makkah, so the decision to send their children into the desert was based on health and cultural reasons as well as providing an opportunity for their children to learn pure Arabic unadulterated by outside influences.

Some of the tribes had better reputations than others for rearing the Makkan children and Aminah decided to entrust her baby to the Bani Sa'd ibn Bakr tribe.

Although much is often made of the fact that The Prophet Muhammad was an orphan, he was certainly not left needy and wanting physically or emotionally after the death of Aminah. As the grandson of the wealthy Makkan merchant, Abd al Muttalib, he was never going to be begging in the streets. However, as a child he undoubtedly tasted more than his fair share of tragedy and loss as, two years after coming under the care of his grandfather, he was again to experience the sorrow of bereavement.

The responsibility of raising him then fell to his uncle Abu Talib ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib, a man who would treat The Prophet Muhammad as though he were his own son. In his work on the companions of the Prophet, Ali 'Izz al-Din ibn al-Athir² discusses this question in detail. He mentions that after the death of his grandfather, custody of The Prophet Muhammad would go

¹ The large cube-shaped building inside the al-Masjid al-Haram mosque in Makkah was also a pre-Islamic sanctuary which Muslims believe was built by Abraham—known as Ibrahim in Islamic tradition—and his son Ismail as a monotheistic house of worship. Muslims around the world face its direction during their five daily prayers.

² Kurdish-born (1160-1233), he lived a scholarly life in Mosul and for a time travelled with Salahuddin's army in Syria. He later lived in Aleppo and Damascus. His chief work was a history of the world, *al-Kamil fi at-Tarikh* (The Complete History).

to one of his uncles, Zubair or his brother Abu Talib. Ibn al-Athir then mentions several narrations concerning how the matter was settled including Zubair and Abu Talib drawing lots to see who would take custody.

Young Prophet Muhammad chose to stay with Abu Talib, who was gentler than Zubair.

Before his death Abd al Muttalib specifically chose Abu Talib for the task according to *Usd al-Ghaba fi Ma'rifat al-Sahaba*.

A fourth narration, mentioned by The Prophet Muhammad al-Zarqani, says that custody was shared between the two, but that Abu Talib is mentioned more often than Zubair as The Prophet's guardian because he outlived Zubair, who "did not live to see the age of Islam", according to *Sharh al-Mawahib al-Ladunniyah*.

Being the son, adopted or not, of a wealthy merchant did not necessarily mean leading the life of a spoiled, indulged child, far from it. Early observers are on record as saying the young Muhammad was employed to look after sheep and camels which were kept at Uranah near Mount Arafat just as Abu Talib's son Ja'far tended to a flock in Badr.

In later years his followers would be amazed to watch the Apostle of God brand and tar camels and sheep with great dexterity and practise other skills identified with the Bedouin way of life. As the biographer David Samuel Margoliouth observed in his book *Mohammed and The Rise of Islam*³ "In such societies as that of Meccah the difference between the occupations of the grand and the humble is at all times small, most of all in the time of youth. Mohammed probably did much the same as was done by his cousins and those of his uncles who were near his age."

Not a great deal appears to have been written or narrated about The Prophet Muhammad's early years through to his teens that could be considered accurate, although some writers have managed to incorporate snippets into their accounts of the life and times of the man who was to become universally known as the Apostle of God.

We are told that the Bedouin children in that era would play desert games including one where a bone of "dazzling whiteness" is thrown in the dark

³ Margoliouth, D. S. (1858-1940), *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London (1905).

of night and the one who finds it becomes the leader. It is assumed by several writers that these are the sort of games that The Prophet Muhammad would have played but most of what is written during this period is probably conjecture.

It is also assumed that his love of horses throughout his later life would have been inspired by his youthful experiences, and when he became the Muslims' leader he is said to have encouraged and taken part in horse racing, according to Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal.⁴ Although camels were the transport of the day used by Makkans, the horse was seen as an animal for combat.

It seems that not all animals enjoyed The Prophet Muhammad's blessings as it is also known that he detested dogs and is reputed to have considered extinguishing the species altogether. Since his early days were spent caring for livestock he may have encountered the sheep worrying of his stock, especially during the lambing period, which could account for his dislike of canines.

In the 21st century there is zero tolerance for stray dogs exhibited by some council and legislative authorities which have them rounded up and destroyed or placed in animal shelters waiting for a "rescue family" to adopt them in parts of Europe and America.

However, his regard and humanity for the animal kingdom were much more benevolent to other creatures no matter how large or small. He banned marksmen from using live birds as targets and remonstrated with anyone who ill-treated their camels. Even insects were shown mercy. When some of his followers set fire to an anthill he compelled them to extinguish it.

Cruel acts linked to old superstitions and paganism were swept away such as tying a dead man's camel to his tomb to perish of thirst and hunger. He also brought an end to the "evil eye" quackery which involved blinding a proportion of a herd, and he stopped the practice of tying burning torches to the tails of oxen in the hope of conjuring up rain. Horses were not to be hit on the cheek, and asses were no longer branded or hit on the face. Even the cursing of cockerels was discouraged under the rule of The Prophet.

There is a profusion of such anecdotes, but in the 40 years of his life before his mission from God emerged, there is surprisingly little narrated about the

⁴ A collection of *hâdith* collected by the scholar and theologian Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Hanbal Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shaybani (780-855).

early years with the exception of one significant milestone brought about by his first ever business trip with his beloved uncle, Abu Talib.

The event, when The Prophet Muhammad was around 12 years old, is recorded with some authority by several biographers, including the Syrian scholar, historian and narrator Ismail ibn Kathir. Reports compiled in the 14th century note that he accompanied his uncle Abu Talib on a business trip to Busra; the journey took several months, reflecting the limitations of travel during that era. It was at Busra in southern Syria that The Prophet Muhammad met a Christian monk or hermit called Bahira who invited the travellers to join him for supper. According to Ibn Kathir, the monk said to Abu Talib: “Return with this boy and guard him against the hatred of the Jew, for a great career awaits your nephew.”

This meeting is seen as highly significant in the eyes of some critics of The Prophet Muhammad. The story of this seemingly innocuous encounter with the adolescent is found in the works of early historians, Ibn Hisham, Ibn Sa’d al-Baghdad, and Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari. Their versions differ slightly in detail, although it is widely accepted by all that during this meeting the monk revealed Muhammad’s prophetic future to his uncle, and that is when he warned Ibn Talib to preserve the child from the Jews according to Ibn Sa’d’s account or from the Byzantines in al-Tabari’s version. Perhaps more controversially, both Ibn Sa’d and al-Tabari write that the monk had previously found a prophesy of the coming of The Prophet Muhammad in original, unadulterated Christian gospels which were in his possession; the standard Islamic view is that Christian scholars must have later corrupted the gospels in part by removing any references to The Prophet Muhammad from their scriptures.

Non-Muslims have, naturally, scrutinised this meeting exhaustively and, in the Christian-fuelled polemics against Islam, Bahira was eventually held up and dismissed as a heretical monk, whose views had served only to inspire the Qur’ān; therefore he must be an enemy of the Christian doctrine, and so in their view his words cannot be trusted. The stories around the controversial monk⁵ vary in terms of names and religious affiliations, but among the most poisonous accounts are those penned by St John of Damascus, himself a Syrian monk and priest born in 675.

⁵ Bahira, known also by the names Sergius, Nestorius, Baeira or Pakhyras was a Nasorean, a group usually conflated with Nestorians. He was also called an iconoclast and occasionally a Jacobite or Arian.

He wrote that the unscheduled encounter with Bahira and his introduction to Christianity probably inspired The Prophet Muhammad to create the new religion of Islam.

The following passage from St John's *The Fount of Knowledge, Part 2* entitled "Heresies in Epitome: How They Began and Whence They Drew Their Origin" will prove disturbing reading to most God-fearing Muslims, but it is relevant to illustrate some of the more repugnant ideas held by enemies of The Prophet: "This man, after having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk, devised his own heresy. Then, having insinuated himself into the good graces of the people by a show of seeming piety, he gave out that a certain book had been sent down to him from heaven. He had set down some ridiculous compositions in this book of his and he gave it to them as an object of veneration.

He says that there is one God, creator of all things, who has neither been begotten nor has begotten. He says that the Christ is the Word of God and His Spirit, but a creature and a servant, and that He was begotten, without seed, of Mary the sister of Moses and Aaron. For, he says, the Word and God and the Spirit entered into Mary and she brought forth Jesus, who was a prophet and servant of God. And he says that the Jews wanted to crucify Him in violation of the law, and that they seized His shadow and crucified this. But the Christ Himself was not crucified, he says, nor did He die, for God out of His love for Him took Him to Himself into heaven."

More than 1200 years later and the narrative is promulgated through the pen of another Christian, The Reverend William Goldsack, who, in his book *The Origins of the Qur'ān*, published in 1907 wrote "Muhammad had many opportunities of learning of Christianity, both during his journeys into Syria and also in Arabia itself. We have already pointed out that Waraqa, the cousin of his wife Khadija, was at one time a Christian and was well versed in the Christian scriptures; later on, not a few Christians became Muhammad's followers, and from Mary, his Coptic wife, also he could easily learn the Scripture and especially the apocryphal stories then current amongst the Eastern Christians. Thus it would be easy for Muhammad to take these stories and give them out in his own eloquent Arabic as though revealed from heaven. Muhammad's contemporaries had no doubt that he did so, and frequently charged him with obtaining the help of certain well-known persons."

This sort of negativity was anticipated and revealed in the Holy Qurʾān warning readers about the sceptics and doubters that would emerge to try and harm Islam. Chapter 16, Surat l-nahl (The Bees) states from ayats 101-105:

“And when We substitute a verse in place of a verse—and Allah is most knowing of what He sends down—they say, ‘You [O Muhammad], are but an inventor [of lies].’ But most of them do not know.

Say [O Muhammad], ‘The Pure Spirit has brought it down from your Lord in truth to make firm those who believe and as guidance and good tidings to the Muslims.’

And We certainly know that they say, ‘It is only a human being who teaches the Prophet.’ The tongue of the one they refer to is foreign, and this Qurʾān is [in] a clear Arabic language.

Indeed, those who do not believe in the verses of Allah—Allah will not guide them, and for them is a painful punishment.

They only invent falsehood who do not believe in the verses of Allah, and it is those who are the liars.”⁶

While observant Muslims were wary of malodorous narratives against The Prophet Muhammad, it was something that the eminent historian and Scottish academic, William Montgomery Watt (1909-2006) lamented both publicly and privately. An Emeritus Professor in Arabic and Islamic Studies at Edinburgh University, he was considered one of the foremost non-Muslim interpreters of Islam in the West. His comprehensive biographies, *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (1956), are both judged to be timeless classics of the 20th century which portray their subject in a favourable light.

In his 1961 book *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* he wrote: “Of all the world's great men none has been so much maligned as Muhammad. We saw above how this has come about. For centuries Islam was the great enemy of Christendom, since Christendom was in direct contact with no other organised states comparable in power to the Muslims. The Byzantine Empire, after losing some of its best provinces to the Arabs, was being attacked in Asia Minor, while Western Europe was threatened through Spain and Sicily. Even before the Crusades focused attention on the expulsion of the Saracens from the Holy Land, medieval Europe was building up a conception of ‘the

⁶ English translation from *Sahih International*.

great enemy'. At one point Muhammad was transformed into Mahound, the prince of darkness. By the twelfth century the ideas about Islam and Muslims current in the crusading armies were such travesties that they had a bad effect on morale. Practical considerations thus combined with scholarly zeal to foster the study and dissemination of more accurate information about Muhammad and his religion.”

Almost in direct response to the charges laid out by St John of Damascus, Montgomery Watt says: “One of the common allegations against Muhammad is that he was an impostor, who to satisfy his ambition and his lust propagated religious teachings which he himself knew to be false. Such insincerity makes the development of the Islamic religion incomprehensible. This point was first vigorously made over a hundred years ago by Thomas Carlyle in his lectures *On Heroes*, and it has since been increasingly accepted by scholars. Only a profound belief in himself and his mission explains Muhammad's readiness to endure hardship and persecution during the Meccan period when from a secular point of view there was no prospect of success. Without sincerity how could he have won the allegiance and even devotion of men of strong and upright character like Abu-Bakr and Umar? For the theist there is the further question how God could have allowed a great religion like Islam to develop on a basis of lies and deceit. There is thus a strong case for holding that Muhammad was sincere. If in some respects he was mistaken, his mistakes were not due to deliberate lying or imposture.”