

Understanding Islam

Series One: The Big Picture

To view the video that goes with this article, go to <https://chrishewer.org/>

Part One: Where to start?

The most obvious place to begin an understanding of Islam is with the Prophet Muhammad, who was born in Makka on the western side of the Arabian peninsula probably in the year 570 (all dates are given according to the common calendar dating system). In the year 610, he said that he began to receive the revelations of the Qur'an from God and these continued to come in small groups of verses up until his death in 632. In the year 622, a major change took place when Muhammad and his small Muslim community migrated from Makka to another city about 300kms further north, which from this time onwards was known simply as Madina. This migration (*hijra*) is so important in Islamic history that it marks the start of the Islamic calendar. This is called AH; "in the year of the *hijra*." Muhammad continued to live in Madina for the rest of his life until his death in 632.

We can see then that we can divide the life of Muhammad into three parts.

- First, from his birth until the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an in 610.
- Second, from 610 until 622 during which time he was in Makka. The Muslim community only amounted to a few hundred people during this period. They were persecuted by the people of Makka because Muhammad brought a new way of life and new teaching. The Arabs at that time worshipped many gods but Muhammad taught that there was one God only, who was to be worshipped by human beings and that the worship of anything else was worthless and to be avoided. He laid great stress on living an ethical way of life; being faithful in all one's dealings and relationships. The hallmark of the Muslim way of life was to be justice. A person is required to do justice even if it goes against oneself [Q. 4:135]. Muhammad also taught that this life is not all that there is, there is also the "life hereafter" and every human being will face the judgement of God, which will determine where and how that life is to be lived.
- Third, from the migration to Madina in 622 until Muhammad's death in 632. The life of the Muslim community in Madina was quite different to that in Makka. They were now a settled community in which there were also people of other faiths, notably Jews as well as those who continued to follow the traditional Arab way of life. The verses of the Qur'an that were revealed at this time guided Muhammad in establishing a way of life under the divine decrees. We can think of the period in Madina as being "City-State Islam" in which Muhammad was not only the spiritual guide but also the political leader of the community, the final court of appeal in legal matters and the one who had to call the community to arms when necessary to defend themselves.

The problem with starting from this point in history is that it distorts the bigger picture of Islam. Muslims never claim that Muhammad was the only prophet sent by God but

rather than he was the last prophet. There were thousands of earlier prophets before the time of Muhammad. Similarly, Muslims never claim that the Qur'an was the only scripture revealed by God but rather than it was the last; again, there were many other scriptures sent to earlier generations of humankind. To begin here is like opening a detective thriller at the last chapter; one gets the ending but not the plot! We need to return to this final prophet and revelation but that is not the place to start. Just notice, before we go on, that Makka can also be spelt Mecca, and Madina – Medina, and also Qur'an – Koran. We are trying to make the sound of an Arabic word using English letters.

The family of Abraham

We could turn to a biblical starting point and look at the person of Abraham. In the Bible (Genesis chapters 16, 17 and 21), we read of Abraham being married to Sarah but them growing older together childless. Abraham, we are told, took a second wife, Hagar, an Egyptian, and together they had a son called Ishmael. Later, Sarah was blessed by God and she and Abraham also had a son called Isaac. It was through Sarah and Isaac that the Hebrew people are descended, who feature in the biblical accounts. Of the Hebrew people was born Moses and so we can speak of Judaism. Jesus was born a Jew and thus we can see that Christianity grows out of and separates from Judaism. Jews and Christians often forget the second part of the Abrahamic family tree. According to the Bible, God promised that a people would also descend from Hagar and Ishmael. They too would be protected by God. The Bible calls them the Ishmaelites but we more commonly know them now as the Arabs. The Bible tells us that God told Abraham to let Hagar and Ishmael go into the land between the Red Sea and the great rivers of Iraq. Of this people Muhammad was born and thus we can speak of the coming of Islam. We often hear the expression that Jews, Christians and Muslims are part of the Abrahamic family. They are cousins in the faith of Abraham; that is, faith in the one and only God, three communities that have a special place for Abraham in their traditions.

The Qur'an teaches that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Moses and Jesus were earlier prophets sent by God. Similarly, Abraham, Moses and Jesus received earlier scriptures just as Muhammad received the Qur'an [Q. 2:136]. In fact, there are twenty-five prophets mentioned by name in the Qur'an and twenty-one of them also appear in the Bible. This broadens out our starting point but it is still pretty narrow; it only speaks about one of the groups amongst humankind, the Semitic peoples. It tells us nothing about all the other human groups: the peoples of Asia, Africa, the Americas, Europe and so on. It is a fundamental belief of Islam that God is the one and only God of all humankind and not the god of one small section. We need to go in search of a wider starting point yet.

Beginning with God

The only ultimate starting point for the story of Islam as far as Muslims are concerned would be with God. God alone existed before anything was created; God is the only

eternally existing being. As soon as we put a capital G on the word God, we have made a statement. God in the one and only, there is no plural form of the word. The many gods of the ancient world are written with a small g. If we translate the word God into Arabic, we have the word Allah. This means “the one and only God” in just the same way; it too has no plural form. Allah is an Arabic word and is used by Muslims worldwide to refer to God. Muslims read the Qur'an in Arabic and say their formal prayers in Arabic, therefore they use the name Allah for God even if Arabic is not their mother-tongue. It is important to remember that only around fifteen per cent of Muslims worldwide today have Arabic as their mother-tongue, so we cannot think of Islam as an Arab religion.

People who speak Arabic and share the Muslim belief in the one and only God also speak of God as Allah. This is important as there are some fourteen million Arabic mother-tongue Christians in the world, who also speak of God as Allah. In addition there are around two million Jews in the world, who are descended from the Jewish communities of southern Europe, who were driven out by the Christian conquest of those lands in the eleventh to seventeenth centuries. They were welcomed into the Muslim lands around the eastern Mediterranean and thus Arabic became their cultural mother-tongue too. They also speak of God as Allah when speaking Arabic.

This belief in the one and only God is the central belief of Islam. God is one and God created one human family. All human beings are called to live in obedience to this one God; that is the human project. God has no favourites. The whole human family has been guided by God to live the human project with the prospect of drawing ever-closer to God in this world and the life hereafter [Q. 40:78]. Here is a crucial point: one God, one human family, one human project and one human destiny; therefore the guidance sent by God to guide this human family to their destiny has always been in essence the same. All the peoples of the earth have been sent at least one scripture and at least one prophet by God; the message of those scriptures and prophets has always been in essence the same. Now we can see Muhammad and the Qur'an in context. Muhammad is the final and universal prophet of humankind bearing witness to the essential human way of life to which all are called. Likewise, the Qur'an is the last and definitive scripture sent to guide humankind with the pure, essential, timeless guidance that God has sent throughout the human centuries.

This insistence on the oneness of God is the defining belief, not just of Muhammad but also of the earlier prophets too. We can think of Abraham, Moses and Jesus also as living at a time when there were people around them who held other views of the divine. There were people who followed tribal gods, local gods, political gods – many gods. So also in the time of Muhammad; the pre-Islamic Arabs worshipped hundreds of various gods. The key criterion for whether one had joined the community of Muhammad or not was whether one followed his pure monotheism or was still living in an age of ignorance of God following idolatry. This is why Muslims are so opposed to any notion of worshipping anything other than God and it is through the Qur'an and the prophethood of Muhammad that humankind has the best access to knowledge of that one and only God.