
**A Concise
Introduction To
Muhammad and Islam**

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A Concise Introduction to Muhammad and Islam

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Introduction

By 570 A.D., the presumed year of Muhammad's birth, the Arabs had grown into an enormous horde of fanatically superstitious people. They worshipped the sun and the moon; they watched the sky for omens that emboldened or terrified them; they wore amulets to protect them from evil spirits and spells, and they paid homage to every god they had ever heard of or imagined.

The Arab tribes, scattered throughout the Arabian Peninsula, eked out a meager living by tending camels, sheep, and goats. The desert nomads had little or no contact with people of other nations, but easily provoked by jealousy or pride, the tribes often warred with each other.

Around 200 years before Muhammad was born, his tribe, the Quraysh, had won control of Mecca, the city of Muhammad's birth. As rulers of Mecca, the Quraysh became the guardians of the most sacred shrine in Arabia. Previous guardians of the

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shrine had dwelt in tents, but the Quraysh abandoned nomadic life. They built houses around the shrine, and they turned their attention to increasing Arabia's trade with other nations — which soon made the Quraysh wealthy and worldly-wise. Large Meccan caravans regularly traveled to foreign cities to buy and sell merchandise, and Mecca became an international trade center. The merchants dealt in a wide variety of goods, including livestock, wool, hides, swords, spears, precious stones, foodstuffs, spices, and slaves.

Idolatry was another major contributor to the Meccan economy. The city was more than a commercial hub; it was Arabia's religious center. All Arabs revered the sacred shrine and the 360 idols surrounding it. The shrine was a cube-shaped building, known as the Kabah, from the Arabic word for "cube."

In Muhammad's time, the refurbished Kabah became the Holy House of Islam. The Koran reveals that Abraham and his firstborn son, Ishmael, built the structure as a "House" of worship (The Cow 2:125,127). Although the Hebrew Scriptures do not mention Abraham's journey to Arabia or the prayer House he built there, the Scriptures provide very few details about the Patriarch's long life. Besides, Moses, or whoever recorded Abraham's story, would have had no interest in the Kabah. Arab historians tell us that when the Holy House was first erected, the nomads made pilgrimages to it, to honor Ishmael's Almighty unseen God. But soon after Ishmael died, the Arabs began housing idols in and around the shrine. An annual pilgrimage to venerate all the gods, including Ishmael's, became a major ritual.

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Despite the frequent tribal warfare, once a year, members from all the tribes made a holy pilgrimage to the Kabah, where violence was strictly forbidden. The nomads, who also made lesser pilgrimages throughout the year, brought gifts to the keepers of the Kabah and traded goods in the marketplace — all of which helped to make the Quraysh wealthy.

Muhammad was not “an ignorant, barbaric camel driver,” as Jews and Christians like to describe him. He knew of the strife and moral decadence in other nations, and he was painfully aware of the fraud, greed, and lack of self-restraint permeating Arab culture.

In his youth, Muhammad could learn much about the world in the busy streets of Mecca. He could watch wily tradesmen cheat the nomads, who depended on the Meccans to dispose of their livestock and wool. He could meet free men and slaves from other lands, who told of foreign wars, politics, and religions. He also traveled to distant cities with his uncle's caravan, and, in his adulthood, he personally engaged in caravan trade.

In short, Muhammad was not "an ignorant, barbaric camel driver," as Jews and Christians like to describe him. He knew of the strife and moral decadence in other nations, and he was painfully aware of the fraud, greed, and lack of self-restraint permeating Arab culture.

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The behavior of his countrymen deeply troubled Muhammad. Through the years, he frequently retired to a cave on Mount Hira, to pray and meditate. It was there, about 610 A.D., when Muhammad was around 40 years old, that he tells us the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared and spoke to him. Unlike the Hebrew Prophets whose history was based on similar miraculous happenings, Muhammad was overwhelmed by the experience. And he wasn't instantly convinced of his "calling." Indeed, he was so physically shaken by Gabriel's visit, he feared he had become possessed by a jinni — a spirit Arabs believed could dangerously mislead men. It took the arguments of Muhammad's wife and her Christian cousin to convince him that he had truly been visited by a messenger from the God of Abraham and Ishmael.

During the next 22 years — the rest of Muhammad's life — Gabriel occasionally visited him. With each visit, Gabriel revealed more of *the Koran*, which means "the Recital." In turn, Muhammad recited Gabriel's messages to persons he trusted. At first, his recitations were memorized and passed by word of mouth. As belief in Muhammad grew, literate believers recorded his words on any available material, including stones, scraps of leather, and palm leaves.

After Muhammad died, Islamic authorities spent years collecting the verses and determining their authenticity, before publishing an authorized version of the Koran. The original Text, however, was written in a script that contained no vowels

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or diacritical points, which left the meaning of some words in doubt. To this day, official readings of the Koran vary, but they are all considered of equal authority.

Muslims firmly believe that God is the Principal Speaker throughout the Koran, though they also believe Gabriel and Muhammad speak in specific passages. Still, the need for the first Muslims to memorize Muhammad's recitations, record them on any material at hand, and collect them years later, has aroused reasonable suspicions about the Text. Today, even some devout Muslims doubt that Muhammad delivered every word included in the Koran. Furthermore, Koranic versions of certain stories unmistakably differ from their counterparts in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jews and Christians have always cited those glaring differences as proof the Koran was invented by Muhammad and

The Koran was never intended to merely repeat Bible stories in the Arabic language. The Sacred Book of Islam brings its own messages. And many of those messages severely chastise Jews and Christians for corrupting their Scriptures...

other "illiterate, ignorant" Arabs, who cunningly used religion to gain power over their even more ignorant kinsmen.

In truth, most Arabs knew little or nothing about Biblical persons and their deeds. After hearing only brief references to the numerous Bible characters, they could have easily erred when repeating the stories (even as today's schooled Jews and Christians, when speaking extemporaneously, sometimes con-

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fuse particulars). The Koran, however, *never alters the essential teachings of the Testaments*.

In fact, the Koran was never intended to merely repeat Bible stories in the Arabic language. The Sacred Book of Islam brings its own messages. And many of those messages severely chastise Jews and Christians for corrupting their Scriptures in far more serious ways than by confusing the words and deeds of a few people!

Regardless of doubts about the authenticity of individual Koranic verses, Islam's *fundamental teachings* are easily recognized: The Koran exalts the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and vehemently denounces idolatry.

Such ideas were not easy to deliver to a multitude of passionate and volatile idolaters. Although Muhammad met with opposition from all the Arab tribes, his fellow tribesmen became his fiercest opponents. The Quraysh needed idolatry to lure the pilgrims to the Kabah — and to the bazaar, where they traded the wares that enabled the Meccans to maintain their lucrative foreign trade and their comfortable lifestyle. So, the Quraysh conspired to kill Muhammad before his teachings about an unseen God decimated their income! At first, however, the Quraysh only tried to defame Muhammad by publicly pronouncing him a sorcerer, an accusation that would ordinarily cause the superstitious Arabs to flee at the sight of him. But a few pilgrims lingered long enough to become enthralled by his

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recitations, which were unlike anything they had ever heard. Thus, Muhammad not only survived the slander and the conspiracy to kill him, he gradually gained converts to Islam.

The word *Islam* means "submission to God." A believer in the religion of Islam is a *Muslim*, which means "one who submits" to God's Will. Until recently, most Jews and Christians knew little and could not have cared less about the Islamic religion. And some still think Muslims worship Muhammad, so they call them "Muhammadans."

Although the Koran praises the Testaments and the Prophets, many Muslims believe their Holy Book includes all that is valuable from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

To imply that Muslims worship a man is to disrespect all Muslims. Worse yet, Muslims can be deeply offended by a name that suggests they obey Muhammad, not God.

Wholehearted Muslims strive to submit to God's Will, as the Koran reveals it. The Koran, we're told, is a transcript of an "eternal book" (Ornaments of Gold 43:4) preserved in Heaven. The Old and New Testaments also reveal eternal truths, but Muslims believe the Koran holds the last revelations man will receive from the "eternal book," because Muhammad was "the Seal of the Prophets" (The Confederate Tribes 33:40).

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able from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Therefore, they see no need to read the Scriptures for themselves — a practice they did not initiate! Innumerable Christians have never read the entire Hebrew Scriptures or any part of the Koran. They believe the New Testament and their clergymen can tell them everything they need to learn from the first Book, and they dismiss the Koran as a fraud. Similarly, most Jews have never read either of the later Books. They learn about the younger religions by listening to and watching the people who practice them. But, those people are hardly a reliable source of information, since everyone knows that the beliefs and behavior of individual members of a religion can greatly vary and often bear little resemblance to the teachings in their Sacred Book!

For instance, Muslims quickly became convinced that the Koran's messages superseded the Testaments. That conviction led them to the convenient conclusion that Muslims are clearly superior to Jews and Christians, who believe "inferior teachings." Similar reasoning, however, led Christians to believe themselves superior to Jews. And the Jews were never averse to believing themselves superior to all Gentiles. Thus, while Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, each in his own way, warned their followers to "...walk humbly on the earth..." (The Criterion 25:63), each family has managed to exalt itself and denigrate the others.

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Muhammad's recitations *never* dishonor the Testaments, though the behavior of some Muslims conveys the opposite impression. Nor does the Koran indiscriminately denounce Jews and Christians, who are respectfully called, "the People of the Book" (The Family of Imran 3:113; Women 4:171). In fact, the Koran honors all the Messengers introduced in both Testaments, and it reverently summarizes the history of monotheism.

The Sacred Book of Islam says, "...We have revealed the Torah, in which there is guidance and light. By it the prophets who surrendered themselves [to God] judged the Jews...." "After them We sent forth Jesus...and gave him the Gospel...corroborating what was revealed before it in the Torah...." "And to you [Muhammad] We have revealed the Book with the truth. It confirms the Scriptures which came before it and stands as a guardian over them" (The Table 5:44,46,48).

Although the Koran preaches respect for "the People of the Book," the Text speaks better of the Christians, who acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, than of the Jews, who don't. Still,

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when speaking of Jews, the Koran says, "There are among the People of the Book some upright men who...believe in God and the Last Day; who enjoin justice and forbid evil and strive with one another in good works. These are righteous men: whatever good they do, its reward shall not be denied them. God well

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knows the righteous" (The Family of Imran 3:113-115). Another time, the Koran plainly tells Muslims, "...among the people of Moses there are some who preach the truth and act justly" (The Heights 7:159).

Muslims are specifically told, "Be courteous when you argue with the People of the Book, except with those among them who do evil" (The Spider 29:46). Even if Jews and Christians try to lure Muslims away from Islam, the Koran says, "Forgive them and bear with them until God make[s] known His will" (The Cow 2:109).

Hence, Muhammad told Muslims to treat their fellow believers in God with respect, tolerance, forgiveness, and patience. But he also had much to say about idolaters and evildoers, and the treatment due them. And those are the teachings many Muslims have practiced with zeal.

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The Koran unconditionally denounces idolatry. Muslims are told, "Idolatry is more grievous than bloodshed." Therefore, Muslims should "Fight for the sake of God those [idolaters] that fight against you...Slay them wherever you find them...." "Fight against them until idolatry is no more and God's religion reigns supreme." But, the Koran adds, "...do not attack them first. God does not love the aggressors" (The Cow 2:190,191,193). Furthermore, Muslims are explicitly forbidden to attack "...those idolaters who have honoured their treaties with you...." "So long as they keep faith with you, keep faith with them. God loves the righteous" (Repentance 9:4,7).

Muslims, however, are warned, "...do not befriend your fathers or your brothers if they choose unbelief in preference to faith" (Repentance 9:23), but "...if they mend their ways, know that God is forgiving and merciful" (The Cow 2:192). Otherwise, "It is not for the Prophet [Muhammad] or the believers to beg forgiveness for idolaters, even though they be related to them...they have earned the punishment of Hell" (Repentance 9:113).

Jews and Christians might instantly shrink from a religion that forbids prayer for unbelieving kin and unconditionally condemns them to hell. Indeed, the Hebrew Scriptures rarely even mention a "netherworld" (Ps.139:8; Proverbs 5:5.) And the New Testament, though it speaks of hell and "...the fire that shall never be quenched..." (Mark 9:43), quotes Jesus asking God to forgive his own heathen executioners (Luke 23:34).

Outsiders like to cite those grisly descriptions as proof that Islam is an "absurd religion," deliberately designed to frighten childish superstitious people into worshipful obedience of a new leader.

The Koran, however, has much to say about hell. And the Text doesn't leave "the punishment of Hell" to the imagination. Unbelievers are told of "...water as hot as molten brass, which will scald their faces" (The Cave 18:29). The damned will be dragged with "...chains and shackles round their necks..." (The Believer 40:71), and "...lashed with rods of iron" (Pilgrimage 22:21).

Outsiders like to cite those grisly descriptions as proof that Islam is an "absurd religion," deliberately designed to frighten childish superstitious people into worshipful obedience of a new leader. Yet, not one word in the Koran suggests that Muslims should worship Muhammad. And they *never have*. He called the Arabs to obey and worship the One and Only compassionate and merciful God of all mankind — but a God Who is not *wholly* compassionate and merciful, as the Hebrew Prophets made clear.

Long before Muhammad lived, the Hebrew Scriptures described the Lord God as a merciless and terrifying "man of war" (Ex. 15:3), as evidenced when He ordered the Hebrews to kill every Canaanite man, woman, child, and animal in certain cities (Josh. 6:21; 10:30-40; 11:9-15). (In light of modern medical knowledge, we could reasonably wonder if that seemingly merciless order was actually merciful to mankind. Some promis-

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cuous Canaanites, whose sexual behavior God strongly condemned, might have acquired fatal diseases that urgently needed to be eradicated, until men learned to recognize how such diseases are transmitted.)

Unlike the Hebrews, who fought the heathen Canaanites solely to gain control of the Promised Land, Muhammad declared war on idolatry wherever it flourished. The Christians had been commissioned to love their fellowmen; the Muslims would have a very different role to play. They were to introduce God to the unbelievers that Christianity could not persuade. And if Muhammad's teachings about the "forgiving and merciful" God didn't sway them, his vivid depictions of the hell awaiting unbelievers got their attention!

Although, by Muhammad's time, Christianity had made a little progress among the Arabs, Christian teachings were utterly foreign to the vast majority of desert dwellers. Their sense of justice didn't include "turning the other cheek," as Christianity would have them do. To the desert-hardened Arabs, accustomed to dispensing swift and often barbaric retribution for offenses, Muhammad's fearsome descriptions of hell weren't inconceivable. Besides, if the promise of hell's agonies left some idolaters unmoved, the threat of total ostracism by their own converted families would cause them to think twice about Muhammad's God.

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Actually, the Arabs had always been aware of the invisible God of Abraham and Ishmael, and they had always included Him in their pantheon of gods. But they gave their real devotion to the hundreds of visible gods surrounding the Kabah.

“When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly...”

Muhammad sternly told the idolaters: "Call on no other god besides God..." (The Poets 26:213); "...there is no god but Him...He is the Executioner of Justice, the Only God, the Mighty, the Wise One" (The Family of Imran 3:18). Muhammad gave his people no leeway. It was not enough to include Abraham's God with their other gods. They had to destroy all their idols or suffer the excruciating punishments of hell.

That all-encompassing and uncompromising command prompted the Quraysh to draw their swords to defend their gods — and their income from the pilgrims! During all the ensuing battles, the words of the Koran sounded in the ears of the faithful. "When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly...Had God willed, He could Himself have punished them; but He has ordained it thus that He might test you..." (Muhammad 47:4).

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Hence, the Muslims became dedicated to reducing the number of unbelievers in the world, by peacefully introducing them to Islam or by killing them if they broke their treaties. Muhammad, however, didn't confine his attention to heathens, alone. Nor were heathens the only persons who resisted Muhammad. The Jews living in Arabia also saw him and his new religion as a serious threat.

In 70 A.D., the Romans destroyed the Great Temple in Jerusalem and expelled the Jews from their Promised Land. Some Jews took refuge in Arabia, where they could live peace-

Above all else, Muhammad's teachings were concerned with the *omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God and the promised Messiah*. Those teachings "confirm the Scriptures and stand as a guardian over them."

fully among their Semitic cousins who, like most heathens, allowed men to worship their own gods, without interference. But the emergence of the Muslims worried the Jews, for they already had bitter knowledge of the Christians.

Those preachers of "love and mercy" were seldom loving and merciful toward the people who had wanted Jesus crucified. Many Christians openly despised Jews and relentlessly demanded their total allegiance to Jesus. Although Muhammad treated the Jews respectfully, the Jews feared the Muslims would ultimately turn against them. And the day did come when Muhammad announced that Islam is "The only true faith in God's sight..." (The Family of Imran 3:19).

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While Muhammad's recitations praised the Scriptures, his instructions for daily behavior differed from Moses' teachings. Ritual worship, rules for marriage, and other conduct prescribed for Muslims was in keeping with Arabic culture, not Jewish traditions. In like manner, Christian rituals, rules, and dietary laws differed from Jewish customs. (From those facts, we can reasonably conclude that some Divine edicts are the laws for the day, not the Laws for all time.) But, above all else, Muhammad's teachings were concerned with the *omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God and the promised Messiah*. Those teachings "confirm the Scriptures and stand as a guardian over them." In *that sense*, an unprejudiced eye can see Islam as *the essence* of Judaism and Christianity combined into one "true faith."

No matter how the unprejudiced might see Islam, the greatly outnumbered Jews in Arabia didn't trust the Muslims to "be courteous" to them or to guard their Scriptures! Moreover, the Jews' distrust of the Muslims could only grow more intense, as they listened to Muhammad's recitations. He frequently spoke of Jews who "...believe in idols and false gods..." (Women 4:51), and those who "...believe neither in God nor the Last Day..." (Repentance 9:29). "You see many among them vie with one another in sin and wickedness and practice what is unlawful" (The Table 5:62). Furthermore, "...they broke their covenant, denied the revelations of God, and killed the prophets unjustly" (Women 4:155).

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The Jews can never forget or deny their ancestors' transgressions, which their Scriptures thoroughly describe. Muhammad, however, was also speaking of the current behavior of "many among" the Jews in Arabia. While those teachings were more than enough to arouse instant and indiscriminate contempt for Jews, Muhammad also condemned the Jews for a specific offense they committed shortly before their final exile. The Koran reports that the Jews "...denied the truth and uttered a monstrous falsehood against Mary" (Women 4:156). In other words, the Jews didn't believe Mary was a virgin. But their denial of Mary's virginity was an integral part of rejecting her son: If the Jews had believed Jesus was miraculously conceived, they could not have rejected him, much less demanded his execution.

The New Testament reveals that Jesus foretold his crucifixion and the destruction of the Great Temple (Matt. 20:19; 24:2). But, throughout Christianity's history, the Jews have accused the Christians of inventing those prophecies after the fact, along with concocting such "miracles" as the Virgin Birth. Atheists have always claimed that all the "fulfilled prophecies" and "miracles" described in the Sacred Books were invented after the fact, or conceived by outright liars or dupes. And there's nothing to prevent the Jews — or any believers — from using those popular atheistic accusations, if they're willing to say of the other Books what they deeply resent when it's said of their own!

Muhammad didn't confine his condemnation to idolaters and faithless Jews. He delivered equally serious charges against

the Christians who, by Muhammad's time, not only prayed to saints but also identified Jesus as "God the Son." The Koran says of Christians, "They make of their clerics and their monks, and of the

Neither the Jews nor the Christians would give their allegiance to Islam and Muhammad. The Koran succinctly describes the situation: "The Jews say the Christians are misguided, and the Christians say it is the Jews who are misguided...God will judge their disputes on the Day of Resurrection" (The Cow 2:113).

Messiah...Lords besides God; though they were ordered to serve one God only" (Repentance 9:31). Mary and Jesus came as "...a sign to all mankind" (The Prophets 21:91), but "Unbelievers [in God] are those that say: 'God is the Messiah, the son of Mary.' For the Messiah himself said: '...serve God, my Lord and your Lord'" (The Table 5:72).

The Koran warns Christians: "People of the Book, do not transgress the bounds of your religion. Speak nothing but the truth about God...and do not say: 'Three'...God is but one God...The Messiah does not disdain to be a servant of God..." (Women 4:171-172).

From the start, the Jews had denounced the Christians for corrupting the worship of the One and Only "Lord God." And the Christians had denounced the Jews for denying that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah. So, both families could wholly agree with Muhammad's condemnation of the other. But both families wholly rejected his condemnation of themselves!

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Consequently, neither the Jews nor the Christians would give their allegiance to Islam and Muhammad. The Koran succinctly describes the situation: "The Jews say the Christians are misguided, and the Christians say it is the Jews who are misguided...God will judge their disputes on the Day of Resurrection" (The Cow 2:113).

Nevertheless, some Muslims haven't been content to instruct heathens and wait for God to judge "misguided" Jews and Christians. They've preferred to obey another Koranic teaching, which they speak of as "the law of retaliation."

To study more of the urgently needed, essential teachings delivered by Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, read *Of Promises and Previews: Urgent Old Messages for a New Millennium*.

About The Author

Jane Broida Drake honed her conversational writing style while co-authoring a business book. The experience ultimately prepared her to discuss her lifelong study of religious teachings and beliefs with a “businesslike” realism and startling common sense seldom found in religious writings. She sincerely invites you to express your thoughts about this book or her website www.ofpromisesandpreviews.com by clicking on the Contact the Author link on the site.