

■ Muhammad

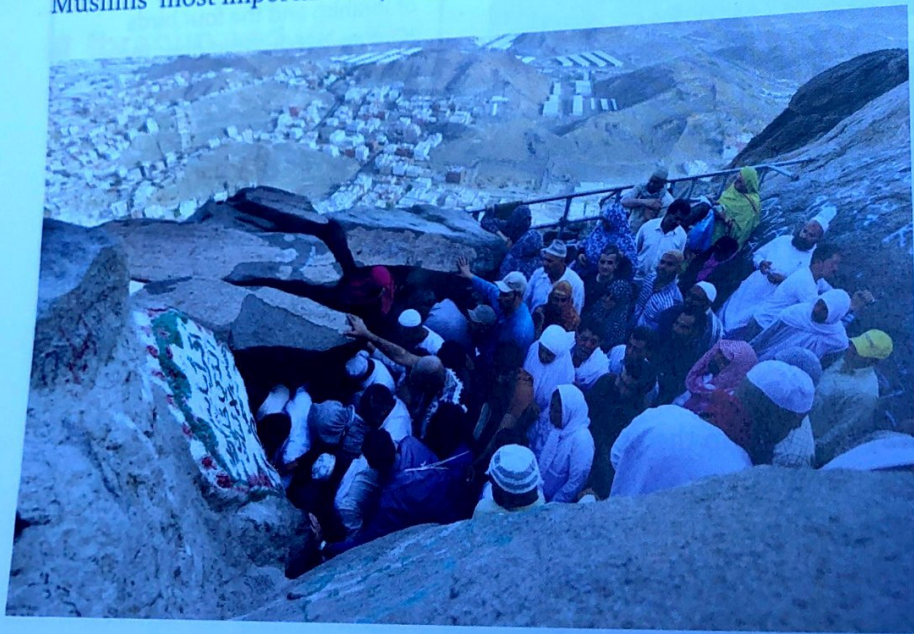
Muslims believe that Muhammad received the final revelation of Islam from God. He is known as the last and greatest of the prophets.

“ Muhammad is not the father of any one of you men; **he is God's Messenger and the seal of the prophets:** God knows everything. ”

Qur'an 33:40

Born around 570 CE in Makkah (Mecca), a city in present-day Saudi Arabia, Muhammad became an orphan at an early age and was brought up by his uncle Abu Talib. He became a merchant and gained a good reputation for honest dealing. When he was 25 he married his employer, a wealthy widow named Khadijah.

From an early age he was religious and on occasions he went to a cave in the mountains for meditation and prayer. There on Mount Hira in 610CE he had an experience that changed his life. The angel Jibril (Gabriel) appeared to him with a message from God. This was his first revelation from God. For more than 20 years, Muhammad received further revelations and these were combined together to form the Qur'an, the Muslims' most important holy book.



▲ Pilgrims at the cave on Mount Hira where the angel Jibril revealed the Qur'an to Muhammad

Muhammad's preaching

Three years after the first revelation, Muhammad began preaching the words he had received and he spent the remainder of his life proclaiming that God is One, and that complete surrender to God is the

Objectives

- Know the important events in Muhammad's life.
- Understand the importance of Muhammad for Muslims.
- Understand the role and significance of the Imamate in Shi'a Islam.

Key terms

- **Caliph:** a person considered to be a political and religious successor to the prophet Muhammad, and the leader of the Sunni Muslim community
- **imam:** 1. a person who leads communal prayer; 2. (Imam) in Shi'a Islam, the title given to Ali and his successors
- **Imamate:** the divine appointment of the Imams

Activities

- 1 Describe what happened in 610 CE that changed the life of Muhammad.
- 2 What was the main message that Muhammad started preaching?
- 3 Describe what happened to Muhammad in 622 CE and explain its importance to Muslims.
- 4 Explain the importance of Muhammad for Muslims.
- 5 Explain the importance and significance of the Imamate for Shi'a Muslims.

only acceptable way to live. He challenged the people of Makkah to give up cheating, drinking alcohol, gambling and idol worship. This was not a message the leaders of Makkah wanted to hear and he fled persecution with his followers to Madinah in 622 CE. This event is known as the Hijrah (departure), and marks the beginning of the Ummah (the worldwide family of Islam). The Islamic calendar starts from this date and the years are numbered AH (after Hijrah).

Muslims believe that before the Hijrah, Muhammad had an amazing experience which is recorded in the Qur'an. The angel Jibril took Muhammad on a miraculous journey to Jerusalem. In this event, known as the Night Journey, Muhammad was carried on a horse-like creature with wings, called al-Buraq. From Jerusalem he ascended into heaven, saw magnificent signs of God and spoke to prophets such as Isa (Jesus). He was told that people should pray five times every day.

In Madinah, Muhammad united the tribes and gathered an army of 10,000 Muslim converts. He marched on Makkah and conquered the city in the name of God. The 360 idols at the Kaaba were destroyed and Muhammad set about introducing Muslim law. Muhammad's teachings and practices (Sunnah), which are found in the Hadith and Sira texts, are still used as sources of Islamic law (Shariah). Muhammad won many battles but in 632 CE he returned to Madinah, became ill and died. He was buried in a simple grave.



▲ One of the largest mosques in the world now sits above Muhammad's grave

■ The Imamate

When Muhammad died it wasn't clear who should succeed him. Muslims split into two groups, Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis elected Abu Bakr as their first **Caliph**. Shi'as believe that Muhammad named his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, as his successor – so Ali became the Shi'as' first **Imam**. For Shi'as, it was important that Ali took control because they believed the prophet had appointed him by divine instruction, and that leadership should follow the family line. When Ali died, his son became the Imam. Each Imam that followed was the son of the previous Imam (with the exception of Husayn ibn Ali, who was the brother of Hasan ibn Ali).

The Twelver branch of Shi'a Islam believes that there have been twelve Imams in total. The last of the Imams is Muhammad al-Mahdi, who they believe has been kept alive by God and hidden somewhere on earth, and who will return with Jesus to bring justice and equality.

The Twelvers believe that the Imams not only rule justly but are able to maintain and interpret the Qur'an and Shariah law without fault. They believe that the receiving of God's law was completed through Muhammad, but that guiding people, and preserving and explaining Muhammad, continued through the Imams. The **Imamate** is the divine law, continued through the Imams. The **Imamate** is important because people need divine guidance to know how to live correctly. The Twelvers believe that, in each generation, there has always been an Imam who is the divinely appointed authority on all matters of faith and law, and is part of the Ahl al-Bayt (family of Muhammad).

Discussion activity

In small groups or in pairs discuss why Muhammad is often referred to as 'the seal of the prophets.' What do you think it means?

★ Study tip

Focus on learning an overview of the life of Muhammad, and his importance to Muslims as the last and greatest prophet.

Summary

You should now understand the importance of Muhammad for Muslims, and know why the Imamate is important in Shi'a Islam.