

Muhammad

Muhammad is the founder of Islam whose prophetic teachings, encompassing political and social as well as religious principles, became the basis of Islamic civilization and have had a vast influence on world history. God, he asserted, had sent prophets to other nations throughout history but, having failed to reform, those nations had been destroyed. Muhammad proclaimed his own message, the Qur'an, to be the last revealed Book and himself to be the last of the prophets, consummating and superseding the earlier ones. Insisting on the necessity of social reform, Muhammad advocated improving the lot of slaves, orphans, women, and the poor and replacing tribal loyalties with the fellowship of Islamic faith. This egalitarian and reformist tendency quickly aroused the enmity of the rich merchants who dominated Mecca. They persecuted some of Muhammad's weaker followers and, in 615, he ordered 83 families to take refuge in Ethiopia.

Muhammad escaped Mecca just as his enemies were preparing to murder him, and he arrived in Medina eight days later. Muhammad, now the most powerful leader in Arabia, enforced the principles of Islam and established the foundation of the Islamic empire. He ordered the destruction of the idols in the Kaaba, the traditional place of pilgrimage in Mecca, which then became the holiest shrine of Islam. He granted Jews and Christians religious autonomy as “peoples of the Book,” whose revelations anticipated his own. On his last visit to Mecca, at the time of the annual pilgrimage, he gave a sermon in which he summarized his reforms, declared the brotherhood of Muslims, and repudiated all distinctions of class, color, and race.

The oldest extant Islamic structure, the Dome of the Rock stands on the sacred rock in Jerusalem where the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven.