

Muhammad: A man who excelled in all roles

(part 1 of 2): Not to Worship but to Emulate



Prophet Muhammad is the 7th century CE man loved by more than 1.6 billion people in the world today. He is a man who lived in a time where the strong dominated the weak, female children were buried alive and women were little more than possessions traded from father to husband. However before he died the world had been transformed, no longer did the weak perish simply because they were weak, the common person was given a voice, and women were liberated from the shackles that bound them. The Arabian Peninsula changed; its religion went from paganism and idolatry to worship of One God, tribal quarrels gave way to solidarity and cohesion and drunkenness and debauchery turned into sobriety and piety.

Muslims across the centuries and across the world do not worship Prophet Muhammad; they understand only too well that he is just a man, a human being, like every other human being on this earth. They also understand that he is a man who excelled in whatever role that was thrust upon him. He seized every opportunity to please God. In the 21st century CE we have the advantage of being able to look across time and see what an excellent man Prophet Muhammad was and understand how even people who hated him viewed him as a man of exceptional qualities. He was, as the Quran so eloquently stated, a man of excellent character.

"And verily you, O Muhammad, are on an exalted standard of character." (Quran 68:4)

As a young man Muhammad was thrust into many different situations and was always successful. As a young orphan boy he worked as a shepherd, and as a teenager he accompanied his uncle, a trader and merchant, as far afield as Yemen and Syria. It was on these journeys that he learned to be an excellent businessman, gained a reputation for being trustworthy and earned the nickname Al-Amin (the trustworthy). In his early twenties he began to work for and later married the wealthy business woman Khadijah. Together they

succeeded in running a prosperous business and raising a family. Even before prophethood Muhammad was considered to be a man with high standards of morality, he preferred the company of his young family to the decadent and debauched lifestyle that was prevalent around him.

Prophet Muhammad excelled at business and marriage and fatherhood. In fact for some years he lived an enviable lifestyle. Due to his honesty and fair dealings with all people, he also became known as Al-Sadiq (the truthful). He was a gentle and hospitable man whose admirable qualities and kind way of dealing with others made people want to draw close to him. He was able to deal justly with people and many came to him for advice often asking him to mediate disputes. When he was 40 years old Muhammad was shocked to find that he was to be the final Prophet of God.

After prophethood life changed for Muhammad but he was able to conquer his apprehension and excel in this area too. He had a close circle of friends and companions and his excellent way of facing the tests and trials God set before him resulted in his companions and even those on the periphery of his sphere of influence wanting to emulate him. Prophet Muhammad was acutely aware of what a great responsibility this was therefore he was careful to teach the message just as God had prescribed. He warned his followers not to adulate him the way Jesus, son of Mary was praised.^[1] We have here a man not to be adulated but to be emulated; a man who excelled in all roles.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Prophet Muhammad as the "founder of the religion of Islam,(and) accepted by Muslims throughout the world as the last of the prophets of God." They also call him one of the most influential figures in history whose life, deeds and thoughts continue to be debated by followers and opponents. There are of course many influential figures throughout the history of humankind however one would be hard pressed to find many that have excelled in all facets of life. Many experts across many fields, both believers and non-believers consider Prophet Muhammad to be a man that did just that, he excelled in all aspects of both his public and private life.

In the 19th century CE the French writer, poet and politician Alphonse Marie Louis de Prat de Lamartine had this to say about Prophet Muhammad. "Philosopher, orator, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas, restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images, the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad. As regards all the standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he?"^[2]

Also in the 19th century Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish philosopher, satirical writer, essayist, historian and teacher echoed Lamartine's opinion when he was "simply amazed" that "...one man single-handedly, could wield warring tribes and wandering Bedouins into a most powerful and civilized nation in less than two decades."^[3]

In the 20th century CE, Indian philosopher, psychologist, parapsychologist, educationist, teacher, researcher and administrator, Koneru Ramakrishna Rao (b.1932), wrote about Prophet Muhammad. Towards the end of the essay he said, "The personality of Mohammad! It is most difficult to get into the truth of it. Only a glimpse of it I can catch. What a dramatic succession of picturesque scenes. There is Muhammad, the Prophet. There is Muhammad, the Warrior; Muhammad, the Businessman; Muhammad, the Statesman; Muhammad, the Orator; Muhammad, the Reformer; Muhammad, the Refuge of Orphans; Muhammad, the Protector of Slaves; Muhammad, the Emancipator of Women; Muhammad, the Judge..."[4]

Earlier in the century George Bernard Shaw, playwright, critic, political activist and co-founder of the London School of Economics had this to say about the character of Prophet Muhammad. "The medieval ecclesiastics, either through ignorance or bigotry, painted Muhammadanism[5] in the darkest colours. They were in fact trained both to hate the man Muhammad and his religion. To them Muhammad was Anti-Christ. I have studied him — the wonderful man, and in my opinion far from being an Anti-Christ he must be called the Saviour of Humanity. I believe that if a man like him were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world he would succeed in solving its problems in a way that would bring it the much-needed peace and happiness." [6]

In the following article we will look at and evaluate some of the roles Prophet Muhammad played and excelled at.

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[2] Lamartine, *Histoire de la Turquie*, Paris, 1854, vol. ii, pp 276-277

[3] Carlyle Thomas, *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*, available at Project Gutenberg.

[4] *Mohammed The Prophet* By Prof. K. S. Ramakrishna Rao, Head of the Department of Philosophy, Government College for Women University of Mysore, Mandya-571401 (Karnataka) 1978.

[5] This term was formerly common in usage. The term Islam is now commonly used.

[6] Letter to the Reverend Ensor Walters (1933), as quoted in Bernard Shaw : *Collected Letters, 1926-1950* (1988) by Dan H. Laurence, p. 305

(part 2 of 2): Fulfilling his Mission in an Excellent Way

In part one we looked at Prophet Muhammad's early life to see what made him a man admired by millions both across the centuries and across the globe. We will now examine some of the roles he took and excelled at, for the benefit of his fledgling community and as a mercy for humanity. Before he died Prophet Muhammad was the leader of an empire however he lived simply and

concerned himself primarily with completing his mission and worshipping God. The roles he took on and those most often mentioned in books, essays and lectures about Prophet Muhammad always took second place to, or were a consequence of, his mission to spread Islam.

Prophet Muhammad was first and foremost a religious leader. One definition of a prophet is "one who proclaims ideas central to the human experience"^[1], with attention to a particular time and place. It has been said that the mark of a great prophet is the profound attraction of his ideas for those to whom they are addressed. 1400 years before this was written Prophet Muhammad was indeed displaying these qualities.

Prophet Muhammad excelled in the role of a teacher. He was chosen by God to be the teacher of Muslims and was given the responsibility of reciting and conveying the message to all of humankind. Being a teacher requires special skills. Prophet Muhammad was a teacher under many different circumstances with all levels of students. He understood the importance of education and even allowed some prisoners of war to secure their freedom by teaching the illiterate amongst his followers to read and write.^[2] His beloved wife Aisha said, 'His character was just (a reflection of) the Quran'.^[3] He taught it and he lived it. Prophet Muhammad taught the fundamentals of Islam and at the same time he was a role model. His personal life complimented his teaching.

O Messenger, announce that which has been revealed to you from your Lord, and if you do not, then you have not conveyed His message. And Allah will protect you from the people. Indeed, Allah does not guide the disbelieving people. (Quran 5:67)

True to his covenant with God, Prophet Muhammad transmitted the text of the Quran, he interpreted it, and it was this understanding of the revelation that formed the basis of all the Islamic sciences. He founded a new spiritual and religious community, taught many followers and created a means for the continued transmission of Islam. Prophet Muhammad was by any standards an excellent religious leader. Prophet Muhammad's success as a prophet and religious leader is described in the words of W. Montgomery Watt, "...by God's grace he has been enabled to provide millions of men with a better religion than they had before they testified that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God."^[4]

Prophet Muhammad used the conceptual framework found in the Quran to found a working community. He organised a Muslim society in the small city to become known as Medina. Prophet Muhammad was not only a prophet and religious leader he was now also a statesman. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines a statesman as one versed in the principles or art of government, and a wise, skillful and respected political leader. This was a role in which Prophet Muhammad excelled. He translated God's law into state law, the first example of which was the constitution of Medina. The policies and institutions he set in place in Medina enabled the initially small community to become the heart

of an Empire. The Muslim nation expanded with remarkable speed because its remarkable leader built a society based on the Islamic concepts of justice and tolerance.[5]

Prophet Muhammad did not achieve this alone; he surrounded himself with capable and trustworthy people. He excelled at the role of an administrator and practiced the art of delegating. Prophet Muhammad understood social dynamics and was always able to choose the right person for the job at hand. He was known to be politically creative in the areas of conflict resolution and diplomacy. He developed a sophisticated intelligence network in order to keep abreast of political and military affairs in the regions surrounding his new nation. He used this intelligence to make correct and fact based judgements. It was Prophet Muhammad's implementation of sound policies that enabled the fledgling nation to withstand the shock of his death.

Prophet Muhammad used his remarkable understanding of international affairs to negotiate treaties and resolutions that were beneficial to the Muslim nation, even relinquishing small military considerations to strengthen long term political positions. The shy shepherd boy had grown into one of history's most effective generals. He excelled at military leadership. In the short space of just ten years Prophet Muhammad had fought eight major battles. He so transformed his armies and the military warfare of Arabia that his successors were able to defeat the armies of Persia and Byzantium to establish the empire of Islam.[6]

Prophet Muhammad's most important role was to convey the message of Islam, that God is one, without partners, sons or daughters, and He alone deserves worship. He excelled at this role and many others even though he was completely human with normal human limitations. He was a statesman, administrator, diplomat, teacher, military leader and reformer. Prophet Muhammad was a man who excelled in many roles.

Footnotes:

[1] W. Montgomery Watt. Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman. Oxford University Press, 1961.

[2] Shirazi, Imam Muhammad. The Prophet Muhammad - A Mercy to the World. Createspace Independent Pub, 2013, p. 74.

[3] Saheeh Muslim

[4] W. Montgomery Watt. Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman. Oxford University Press, 1961 from pg. 229.

[5] <http://islamoblog.blogspot.com.au/2008/10/prophet-muhammad-pbuh-prophet-or.html>

[6] R A Gabriel, 2007, Muhammad: The Warrior Prophet in, MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History.