



Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet

Karen Armstrong

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A fresh, evenhanded biography of the founder of Islam by the author of "A History of God." "Portrays Muhammad as a passionate, complex, fallible human being."-- "Publishers Weekly"

Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet Details

Date : Published September 10th 1993 by HarperOne (first published April 1st 1991)

ISBN : 9780062508867

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Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Religion, Islam, History, Biography, Nonfiction

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From Reader Review Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet for online ebook

Alice says

I was doubtful at first -- Armstrong seemed to be biased too much in the other way (i.e. going out of her way to portray Islam in a good light to counteract what she perceives as centuries of Western ignorance and prejudice). She spent a good chapter at first excoriating the West for its reprehensible attitude toward Islam.

But then the biography got really good. You know, once it actually started. Armstrong's descriptions of life, traditions, and politics in 7th century Arabia are fascinating. Her narrative of the beginnings of Islam is quite compelling. And, of course, the characters are vivid: Muhammad, all of his wives (Khadija and Aisha were particularly interesting), Abu Bakr, Umar Uthman, Ali, and all of his enemies. It was an engrossing and informative read.

Rewgreen says

An insight for us ignorant westerners brought up on purely Christian doctrine as to what makes the other half of the world tick. This book eases the reader through the violent landscape of tribal Arabia to help us appreciate just why Muhammad is important, not only as the Muslim prophet, but as a complex, political character who could unite nations.

Whether read on a secular or religious level the book entertains the reader with its exotic backdrops, entertaining cast and non-judgemental text. One is left to form ones own opinions on the merits of Muhammad's life as the author adeptly records events without ever making the error of sounding like a dry, dusty, critical historian.

All the details are in place, but in a format that reads like an adventure novel rather than a lecture, highly entertaining and fresh.

Current events are touched upon in a sensitive, restrained fashion but really they are the one unnecessary aspect of the book. The storyline alone provides many answers as to just why fanatical adherents are willing to go to such extremes in the name of their prophet.

One comes away from the book, if not fully understanding the Muslim mindset, then at least appreciating why the devotion is there.

A wonderful, entertaining read.

Larry says

As it is sub-titled this work is more a biography than a review of Muhammad's theology and yet it provides a deeper understanding of the social forces that gave rise to that theology. He was a man of exceptional insight and uncommon courage. The Arabian peninsula was a hard and unforgiving place where strength and power only barely insured survival. Its peoples lived on the edge of extinction constantly and many social mores were adaptations to those conditions, the infacide of daughters and the practice of having multiple wives being examples. But Muhammad saw beyond tribal existance and its endless destructive warfare to an ummah, or brotherhood of believers, who looked to the welfare of all. His beliefs were grounded in the same history as Judaism and Christianity with funadamentally the same humanistic values. Yet for all this

Muhammad only ever referred to himself as a Messenger for there was only one god, Allah, a lack of conceit missing in the other two sister religions.

Osman Ali says

Alanoud says

Very interesting !!!

When I first started reading this book, I was sorta doubtful, putting in mind that; a book about the prophet or Islam written by a non-Muslim would be somehow biased, inaccurate or misleading. But to my surprise, this book was beyond my wildest expectations!

Karen Armstrong was concerned enough to write a book about the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to clarify some of the most controversial and debatable issues about him and Islam a whole. Especially after the wake of September 11 and all the Islamophobic attitudes which increasingly started to break out in the air. In her book, Armstrong does a very good job in introducing an analytical, well-written, decent biography about Muhammad (PBUH) with a cleverly clear emphasis on issues have been always subject to a great criticism by westerns such as the concept of jihad and war, his multi wives and hijab. She also portrays amazingly the ideology of Arabia in the 6th century before the Islam would be introduced and before the prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH), in order to show the massive complex challenges faced the prophet when he began to reform the social, political and economic systems.

It was so interesting to read a biography about the prophet (PBUH) from a western and non-Muslim perspective. I loved the way her analysis went so profoundly to shed light on the different aspects of the prophet's life, and then relating them to today's misunderstood conceptions of Islam. For me, the most astonishing part was when she talked about the Qur'an. The way she talked about it was remarkably marvelous to the extent that I really couldn't believe that she is not a Muslim!!! She didn't only talk about the

Qur'anic tolerable teachings but her deep analysis extended to consider the rich allusive language used and its spiritual effects on humans' consciousness.

Armstrong seeks through her book to encourage a new understanding towards Islam taking Muhammad (PBUH) as a starting point. It was crystal clear also that she is trying to advance understanding and appreciating one another religion. Finally, although her research and study are notably valid as she refers to people such as Ibn Ishaq and Tabari, some of the events and facts were incorrect and inaccurately addressed.

ayesha says

I have always heard good things about Karen Armstrong's books; however, I was extremely disappointed in this biography of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Of course, as an outsider to Islam, Armstrong's writings do not confirm or support Islam as the religion of God. Rather, most of the book is dedicated to proving what a genius the Prophet (peace be upon him) was to create such a religion. She attempts to connect many of the Islamic traditions with the old Arab pagan traditions. From an Anthropological standpoint, I was disappointed in her treatment of the Arab society. Armstrong depicts Arab society as lacking in civilization and looking for religious enlightenment that the Christians had obtained. There are some positives to the book, not everything is negative. Armstrong does a decent job of detailing Christian abuse against the Muslims throughout history and points to Christianities blood soaked past. However, there are better biographies out there of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Ahmed says

I've read several biographies of the prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, but this one was unique. Karen is respectful and yet not reverential, and although she uses orthodox Muslim historical sources (Ibn Ishaq, Tabari, Muhammad Ibn Sa'd and al-Waqidi) her outsider approach produced some surprises in what I thought was a familiar topic.

She tries to rationalize several incidents, sometimes ignoring the sources in the search for a more credible explanation. An early example is that the army of Abraha the Abyssinian governor of southern Arabia which attempted to destroy the ka'bah on the year of the prophet's birth, relating that "at the very gates of the city it seems that his army was stricken by plague and forced to beat an ignominious defeat". This isn't a weakness though, as it provides historical context and forces an evaluation of the source - whether they could be romanticised, tweaked or exaggerated in retelling. She also strongly contextualizes many incidents, providing significant political background to the conflict with the Jewish tribes of Medina.

One of the most interesting things about the narrative by far was the attention paid to the socioeconomic situation in Arabia through the time period, explaining it from several generations before the prophet's birth to his death in more detail than the original sources or any secondary ones I've yet come across. This brings an understanding of the power dynamics in the community, how various factors interplay with the newly

founded religion of Islam and the complex motivations of different characters. She claims that the tribal solidarity ethic of nomadic Arabs was ill-suited to more cosmopolitan life when Quraysh settled in Mecca, and discussed the slow dissolution of society as the first generation to be born without the daily risk of desert life became mercantile and obsessed with financial profit, neglecting the weak and creating a rapidly-growing wealth and class divide which was new to Arabs. The youth, who felt growing malaise and a lack of belonging in this new Arabia, were naturally among the first to be attracted to Islam, given that social solidarity was one of the first messages preached.

The main weaknesses of the book are poor transliteration and several infuriating contradictions of itself or its sources ("there is no evidence that Muhammad saw Islam as a universal religion" being one of the worst). But if you are already familiar with the source material, that isn't significantly detrimental to its enjoyability.

Ultimately it ends on a positive note, balancing the just war theology with the strong evidence for a complementary paradigm of peace evidenced from the treaty of Hudaybiyah, the opening of Mecca and the subsequent reconciliation with and forgiveness of Quraysh. Written at the time of the Rushdie crisis, the opening chapter discusses the modern climate of fear and hatred towards Islam and Muslims together with historical trends in Eastern-Western relations, and calls for an attempt to come to mutual understanding and fight Western media and academic bias against Islam. I think she succeeded in presenting a sympathetic, accessible portrayal which is greatly relevant to our modern times, and therefore I happily recommend it.

David C. Mueller says

This is an important book about a Person Westerners need to know more about. The author has set an example of balanced scholarship and sensitivity that all religious scholars would be well served to emulate. In the book, the author not only chronicles the life of the Founder of Islam, but also documents the many false statements promulgated in the West for centuries about Muhammad and Islam. The author courageously explains such difficult subjects for Westerners such as the station of women in Muhammad's day (along with what He did to elevate their status) as well as the concept of jihad (which is revealed to the reader to be much more than just "holy war"). I found the author's insights into Muhammad's politics fascinating and these insights did not quell the great respect I have for this Divine Revelator, but rather increased my astonishment at His social creativity in the hostile environment He found himself in. Finally, the book is written with sensitivity to Muslims and helped me understand some of the special challenges Muslims living in the West have. As a delightful bonus, the book is quite readable for a religious scholar's work.

Johannes Bertus says

In this book Armstrong cherry picks the worst bits of Christian history - Crusades, programs, Jesus cursing his enemies - and then argues something along the lines of "Well, Muhammed wasn't quite as bad as that!" She seems to think this constitutes an apologia for Islam. There is actually a passage where she argues Muhammed's slaughter of Jews was acceptable because it wasn't as bad as Hitler's! A terribly dishonest book.

Nancy says

I've been on a quest to read more about Islam, (so I will not be an absolute ignoramus about it, as Americans are often accused of being.). I've read a few books on the topic, but this is the first one I can honestly recommend. Karen Armstrong has not written a page-turner with this biography of Muhammad - in fact, I brought it with me for a long plane-flight, figuring only total boredom would force me to read it. But she has written a powerful biography that not only details Muhammad's long and very interesting career, it also reveals his beating heart, his absolute sincerity, and his humanity in both its frailty and its spiritual strength. I was genuinely touched by what I learned of Muhammad's spiritual visions, his kindness, his integrity, and especially his relationships with women. And, oh yes, I definitely did improve my knowledge of Islam, which Armstrong is able to unpack with great skill.

It IS a bit tedious to plow through in places. But truly: if you want to understand the spiritual core of Islam - not the Islam that has been co-opted by terrorists - this is a great place to start.

Deborah Blair says

Comparative religions writer, Karen Armstrong's book, Mohammad, really helps us to understand the Prophet of Islam; I believe that this book is a must read for all Westerners who really care to know, in an unbiased way, the foundations of Islam. Because we often do NOT understand, in being "western" we can often cause more harm than good in the wrongful "opinions" that we believe and espouse.

In working to help Christian and Jews of the west to understand people of Islam, I have often used this as a reference, a recommendation for church groups, and for people helping refugees and immigrants from Islamic countries integrate here in the west. Unlike many writers from the East, Armstrong tries to show us exactly who Mohammad was, his strengths, his weaknesses, and his actual life. She gives us background in the area, especially where Mecca is, and its historical background so we can understand Mohammad's early life and the importance of what this religion brought to the area when it came forth.

Armstrong helps us to understand Mohammad's early life - His father dead before he was born, his mother dead by the time he was seven, being brought up as an orphan by his uncle, going to work for Kajika, a woman in her forties who had survived four husbands and was a major business person who employed and promoted many men in the trade business that she conducted - - - Kajika's marriage proposal to Mohammad, 16 years her junior and their 26 year marriage; Kajika's providing support for Mohammad's spiritual searching and then becoming the first convert to Islam after his remarkable interactions with the angel, Gabriel - - for the Islamics, Gibreal.

The book then goes on to give us an account of his mistakes, his struggles, the wars, Kajika's eventual death and his eventual marrying of many women and why this occurred, why it was important for women of the time, and how we can fully understand it.

Armstrong then gives us a history of the rest of Mohammad's life and the aftermath after his death with the political and wars happening between his cousin, and named successor, Ali, married to Mohammad's

daughter, Fatima -- and his youngest wife, Aisha that give us the present major factions of Islam, the Sunni and the Shi'ite.

Over all this book is one of the best, non biased books to help all of us understand Islam and how it relates to Judaism and Christianity. It points out the many wrong stereotypes that we have came from the Roman Catholic church who felt so threatened by Islam's direct relationship with God, that even in Mohammad's time the Roman church was making up lies about Mohammad and Islam.

For understanding Islam and women for westerners, I highly recommend, *Nine parts of Desire: the Hidden World of Islamic Women* by Geraldine Brooks who helps us to break down our stereotypes and see the problems of living within many cultures from the actual view point of the Islamic Women themselves who help us to understand where we do NOT understand them.

In understanding what is going on in Afghanistan and in part the middle east right now - I also recommend *Holy War, Unholy Victory: Eyewitness to the Cia's Secret War in Afghanistan* for a real understanding of the roots of where we are right now with the Afghan war. Although it only covers up to the early nineties, it helps us understand the Soviet invasion of 1979, our creation of the Taliban, and what is really going on right now. It takes away many of the false premises that we have been given for the current war.

Daniel says

Written in the years following 9/11, this book has a clear goal of trying to convince Westerners that the origins of Islam include much that is appealing. Others may fault her for bias, but I think it is successful and honest at the same time. Armstrong does not conceal those acts of the Prophet that are hardest for moderns to understand (most notably, in my view, the execution of 700 men and the sale of their women and children into slavery because of an act of tribal perfidy); she does, however, point out that the thrust of Muhammad's teaching was toward a new kind of harmony within Arabia and for Arabs with their neighbors. She argues that Islam at its origins is an essentially pluralistic religion, requiring of its believers chiefly that they be monotheists and only secondarily adherence to the tenets of the Founder. This emphasis on the worship of the One God thus accords a great deal of respect to others who believe similarly but do not necessarily follow the Quran. It is hard to know how accurate her view is. Well, hard, that is, to those of us who are relatively ignorant of Islam. My own reaction to 9/11 was to read the Quran and books about the religion, including some works by the dean of Arab studies, Bernard Lewis. My only objection to Armstrong's treatment of the subject is her failure to account for the bloody missions seeking converts, but I may now remember my Lewis now as well as I ought. It is well to quote her at length from her closing, because it is where she is headed the whole way through: "If we are to avoid catastrophe, the Muslim and Western worlds must learn not merely to tolerate but to appreciate one another. A good place to start is with the figure of Muhammad: a complex man, who resists facile, ideologically-driven categorization, who sometimes did things that were difficult or impossible for us to accept, but who had profound genius and founded a religion and cultural tradition that was not based on the sword but whose name -- 'Islam' -- signified peace and reconciliation."

Allyson Abu-hajar says

I had read this some time back, and just recently purchased my own copy. Karen Armstrong provides a great source of history during the time period and brings clarity to what transpired. I recommend this book to those interested in reverting to Islam, before reading the Quran; as well as, to non-Muslims, so they would have a better understanding of whom Muhammad (pbuh) actually was. In the beginning of this book, Karen does a great job of writing how other religious groups have suffered for their beliefs. Where the lies born of imagination, were spread about them that lead to fear mongering, and simply having a different faith, meant it was acceptable to discriminate, and even kill. Sadly, the same fear mongering about Muhammad (pbuh) from the middle ages, still echoes today and I often see it reiterated time and time again, it is very sad that in this day in age how much ignorance still exists regarding Muhammad (pbuh) and Islam . I thought this book was thought provoking as well as educational. Great read!

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Charlie says

A great biography of Muhammad (PBUH) that follows him throughout his life. If a person is used to some spellings of Arabic words, it will take time to learn other spellings. This book is a great companion to the Qur'an, and will allow the reader a greater understanding of the development of one of the world's greatest religions: Islam.
