

## Session Four

# Jesus and Muhammad, The Conflicts

**F**or a quick summary of the events of Jesus' conflict with authorities and his final Passion, go to the following Scriptures:

**The death of John the Baptist:** Matthew 14.3-12; Mark 6.17-29.

**Jesus' predictions of his Passion:** Matthew 16.21-23, 17.22-23, 20.17-19; Mark 8.31-33, 9.30-32, 10.32-34; Luke 9.22, 9.43-45, 18.31-34; John 6.67-71.

**Jesus' preaching against the Scribes, Pharisees, and Herod:** Matthew 15.1-9, 23.1-39; Mark 7.1-7; Luke 11.37-54, 13.31-33, John 10.31-38.

**Jesus hiding from Jewish authorities:** John 7.10-13, 10-39-42, 11.54-57.

**Jewish authorities plotting against Jesus:** Matthew 26.3-5; Mark 11.18, 14.1-2; Luke 19.47-48, 22.1-2; John 11.45-53.

**The triumphal entry into Jerusalem**

**and the cleansing of the Temple area:** Matthew 21.1-17; Mark 11.1-19; Luke 19.28-48.

**Jesus' Passion:** Matthew 26.1-28.20; Mark 14.1-16.8; Luke 22.1-24.53; John 13.1-38, 18.1-21.25.

Jesus' conflict with the established authorities in Palestine led to his arrest by Temple police and Roman soldiers, his trial and conviction by the high priests and Sanhedrin, his execution by the Roman government, and his ultimate resurrection. Jesus' response to hostility was to avoid it as long as possible and then to submit passively so that God could turn the entire situation from horrible defeat to glorious victory.

**?** *What are some of the common reactions to change that you have witnessed in your community, church or family? What would your reaction be if someone came to your church and said that most of what you do*

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*in worship is all wrong and needs to be radically changed?*

**?** *Do you understand the focus of Jesus' hostilities to be the Roman government of occupied Palestine, the Jewish religious authorities, or the Jewish aristocracy?*

**?** *What about Jesus or his teachings stirred up the establishment enough to want him killed?*

**?** *Who do you believe was responsible for the death of Jesus?*

### Muhammad's Response to Conflict

Muhammad's response to hostility was very different from Jesus' response. Living in the middle of one of the world's most violent societies, Muhammad responded to violence with violence, believing that his cause was just and righteous.

In Mecca, Muhammad's emphasis on rigid monotheism, building an egalitarian society, the Last Judgment, and a unified society soon brought him into serious conflict with the authorities of the Quraysh tribe that controlled the city.

**Monotheism.** The first thing that threatened the Quraysh tribe was Muhammad's radical monotheism. When Muhammad demanded that the people of Mecca worship Allah alone and abandon the worship of other gods, he was asking them to adopt an entirely new religious attitude that many of his fellow tribesmen were not ready to accept. Accepting monotheism was more than an intellectual change. The commitment to the tribal gods was deeply ensconced in the psyche of every individual and it linked them to the sacred traditions of their ancestors. Many believed that the very survival of their society depended on perpetu-

ating the faith of their ancestors even when they believed their religion to be inferior to that of the Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews they encountered in their business dealings.

The concept that there was only one God was an innovation in a world that was suspicious of anything new, of anything that severed them from their historic traditions. Even Muhammad was greatly offended when he was accused of being an innovator because the attachment to tradition was so strong. Muhammad strongly believed that the Quran was merely "putting them back on the straight path" from which they had wandered over the years. However, telling the Quraysh tribe that their historic gods weren't as powerful or important as Allah was acceptable but telling them that their minor gods didn't exist was a threat to everything in which they believed.

Finally, it is important to understand that the Kaaba in Mecca was the most important religious shrine in Arabia and it attracted thousands of pilgrims every year. It was dedicated to the "High God" Allah but was also surrounded by statues of 360 gods each dedicated to a different Arabian tribe. When pilgrims came to Mecca to see and circumambulate the Kaaba, they also visited the shops, restaurants, inns, and taverns of Meccan merchants.

**Egalitarian Society.** The second part of Muhammad's message that troubled the Quraysh was his emphasis on an egalitarian society. Modern scholars argue as to whether Muhammad was a socialist just as they do about Jesus. Muhammad never condemned capitalism itself, but he frequently attacked its abuses. He never discouraged the acquisition of personal wealth, but he demanded that most of it be distributed to others. He never advocated a radical "selling everything and giving the money to the poor," as Jesus did, but he demanded a significant portion of everyone's

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income be given to those in need. Almsgiving was established as one of the pillars of Islamic life very early and it certainly threatened the rabid capitalism that had developed in Mecca. Muhammad preached that all people had a responsibility to look after orphans, widows, the handicapped and the poor and that ostentatious wealth was a sin. Living frugally was an important sign of being a dedicated Muslim and benevolent treatment of all people at all levels of society was a hallmark of an Islamic "just society."

Muhammad himself always lived a simple and frugal life, even when he became the most powerful leader in Arabia. He hated luxury, ate modestly, never had more than one set of clothes, and refused to wear anything except the coarse clothing of the common people. When he received booty or gifts from tribal leaders, he gave it away to the poor and he preached, like Jesus, that the poor would enter the kingdom of heaven before the rich. The earliest converts to Islam were from the poorer classes in Arab society and, throughout history, the faith has been more attractive to the "common people" than to the aristocracy. Muhammad argued that a decent society that was obedient to God's will would always cultivate an egalitarian way of life and this was especially threatening to the rich and powerful of Mecca.

**Last Judgment.** The third focus of Muhammad's preaching that angered the upper classes of the Quraysh was his emphasis on the Last Judgment. He emphasized that individual responsibility and piety would be rewarded and selfishness, greed, and abuse of others would ultimately be punished by Allah. He warned that on Judgment Day, the wealth and power of the Quraysh would be of no value because each individual would be judged on his or her own merits. Persons would be

asked on the Last Day whether or not they had used their wealth to live ostentatiously or whether they had used it to help the disadvantaged. The idea that there would be a general resurrection some day was abhorrent to the Quraysh tribal leaders who believed that there was nothing beyond death and that the only way to happiness was through the acquisition of as much wealth and power as possible during this lifetime.

**Islamic Unity.** A fourth area of concern for the Quraysh tribal leaders was that Muhammad preached about the unity of the Islamic community as being more important than tribal or clan or even family unity. With similarities to the preaching of Jesus, Muhammad called for loyalty to God, to himself, and to the community of believers to supersede all other loyalties. For centuries, the tribal structures of Arabia had been the sole source of authority, power, and government. Loyalty, obedience, and civil protection within the tribes was absolute but there was total lawlessness in dealing with persons from other tribes. Constant warfare, vendettas, and raids on other tribes was so much a way of life that the concept of brotherhood extending beyond tribal boundaries was unheard of. The levels of trust of persons and institutions in other tribes was so low that any attempt to unite them was intensely resisted.

- ?** *What about Muhammad's preaching do you think most threatened the power structure of Mecca?*
- ?** *Do you believe that Jesus and Muhammad were socialists? What do you think each would feel about modern society?*
- ?** *Christians also believe in a Judgment Day but with the exception of the most conservative churches, it is not emphasized much. Why do you think this is so?*

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During what many call “The Second Meccan Period” – when hostility was building against Muhammad and the Islamic community – the Quranic revelations became longer with more discussion, more doctrine and some Biblical material about Noah, Mary, Joseph, and Abraham. The suras from this period place more emphasis on the miraculous and sacred nature of the Quran and on the importance of the Islamic community. Note the implications about who is “in” and who is “out” as well as the references to the Old Testament characters of Adam and Noah in this sura from the last years in Mecca:

*In the name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful...*

- 1. Successful indeed are the believers.*
- 2. Those who offer their prayers with all solemnity and full submissiveness.*
- 3. And those who turn away from all that Allah has forbidden.*
- 4. And those who give the required alms.*
- 5. And those who guard their chastity*
- 6. Except from their wives or the slaves that their right hands possess, for then they are free from blame;*
- 7. But whoever seeks beyond that, then those are the transgressors;*
- 8. Those who are faithfully true to their trusts and to their covenants;*
- 9. And those who strictly do their prayers*
- 10. These are indeed the inheritors.*
- 11. Who shall inherit Paradise. They shall dwell therein forever.*
- 12. And indeed We created Adam out of an extract of clay.*
- 13. Thereafter We made him as the offspring of Adam...*
- 15. After that, surely, you will die.*
- 16. Then, surely, you will be resurrected on the Day of Resurrection.*

*17. And indeed We have created above you seven heavens, and We are never unaware of the creation...*

*23. And indeed We sent Noah to his people, and he said: “O my people! Worship Allah! You have no other God but Him. Will you not then be afraid of Him?” (Quran 23.1-13, 15-17, 23)*

As the Meccan opposition grew, they first went in a deputation to Muhammad’s uncle Abu Talib to lay their complaints before him. They accused Muhammad of cursing their gods, insulting their ancient religion, mocking their way of life, being a charlatan, accusing their forefathers of errors, and preaching fairy tales about eternal life and heaven. They complained that Muhammad’s attack on the minor gods of the Kaaba was damaging their economic interests. They asked Abu Talib to either stop Muhammad from preaching or to stand aside and allow them to attack him. Abu Talib refused and, as head of the respected Hashim clan, his commitment to Muhammad provided protection from other members of the Quraysh tribe.

Then, the opposition leaders offered Muhammad inducements of wealth, power and prestige to turn from his preaching but Muhammad refused. Then, when they demanded that he show them miracles to prove the truth of his message, Muhammad told them, “My Lord is exalted but I am only a mortal, a messenger.”

When nothing else worked, the tribal leaders imposed a boycott on the Muslim group of about 70 families. No member of the Quraysh was allowed to marry or trade with them and no one was allowed to sell or give them food. The boycott lasted two years during which Muhammad’s beloved wife, Khadija, died and many of the families were ruined financially.

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Some slaves that had converted to Islam were tied up and left to burn in the sun.

Even though this was a dark period for Muhammad and the new Islamic community, in the midst of the worst turmoil, the Prophet had his greatest mystical experience. One night, after reciting the Quran at the Kaaba, Muhammad went to sleep in a nearby portico where he was visited by Gabriel. The Prophet was lifted on a heavenly steed called Buruq and flown miraculously through the night to Jerusalem. This "Night Journey" is mentioned in the first verse of Sura 17:

*In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful...*

*1. Glorified and exalted is Allah above all evil who took Muhammad for a journey by night from the mosque at Mecca to the farthest mosque in Jerusalem, the neighborhood whereof We have blessed, in order that We might show him of Our signs. Verily, He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer! (Quran 17.1)*

From Jerusalem, Muhammad climbed through the seven heavens to the Throne of God. In the First Heaven, he met with Adam. Then he met with Jesus, Joseph, Enoch, Aaron, Moses and Abraham in the remaining six heavens until he came face to face with Allah.

The ban on the Islamic community was finally lifted by the leaders of the Quraysh. However, shortly after, Muhammad's uncle and protector, Abu Talib, died and Muhammad's hostile uncle, Abu Lahab, became the new chief of the Hashim clan. (See the Sura against Abu Lahab in Session Three). Muhammad was an orphan with no family to avenge attacks on him. Under tribal law, the only protection against being attacked was the certainty of a vendetta by the victim's family or protector. Both Muhammad and his small

congregation of followers were in imminent danger.

**?** *When Jesus encountered conflict, his followers mostly abandoned him in fear of reprisals against themselves but when Muhammad encountered conflict, his followers stood solidly with him. What do you think caused this difference?*

**?** *Discuss the situation of a group of approximately 70 people in the midst of several thousand people whose leaders are hostile to you and in a society in which there are no legal protections, no police forces, no courts, and no military other than those controlled by the leaders of the majority.*

### **The Hijra (Immigration)**

Given the sense of crises within the small Islamic community at this time, it is not surprising that Muhammad responded with interest to a delegation of tribal chiefs from Yathrib that came to visit him during the Hajj of 620. Yathrib (later renamed "Medina" which means "The Prophet's City") was a small agricultural community approximately 250 miles north of Mecca. A few tribes – some Jewish tribes but mostly Arab tribes – had abandoned the nomadic way of life and settled in the town. Because of their feuding past, the tribes were having trouble living in peace in the close quarters of an urban community. They had heard of Muhammad and his new Islamic ethic and thought he could help them learn to live together as a single community.

The chiefs in the delegation were already familiar with the concept of monotheism because three of the larger tribes of Yathrib were Jews. The next year, the chiefs converted to Islam after meeting again with Muhammad

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and, as part of their conversion, they pledged they would not fight with other Muslims and would defend all Muslims from common enemies. In 622, after an assassination attempt on Muhammad by the Meccan leaders, the entire Muslim community of Mecca decided to move to Yathrib.

At this same time, Muhammad had been longing for a female presence in his life since the death of Khadija and he needed someone to run his household. So, he married the 30 year old widow, Sawdah, from the Amir clan. Then, Alisha, the six year old daughter of Muhammad's closest friend Abu Bakr, was formally betrothed to Muhammad.

The move to Medina, called the Hijra which means "The Immigration," was a historic event of such import that it is considered by Muslims to be the beginning of the true Islamic society. The year of the Hijra, 622, is Year One of the Islamic calendar. It was an unprecedented move. The Muslims of Mecca were not just moving to another town, they were leaving the Quraysh, the tribe of their ancestors, and moving to become part of a new tribe. The sacred bonds of blood that were the basis for all Arabian societal structure had been severed. The pledge of the tribal leaders of Medina to protect and aid the Muslims and the promise of the Muslims to protect the people of Medina was a radical departure from Arab custom.

In Medina, unity came slowly. Muhammad's first task was to build a mosque, a rough building that expressed the austerity of the Islamic ideal. It had a stone that showed worshippers the direction to Jerusalem to which they faced while reciting their prayers and a pulpit from which Muhammad recited the Quran and preached. In addition, the mosque had a courtyard where the people met to discuss all of the issues of importance to the community: reli-

gious, military, sexual, economic, social, etc. Muhammad and his wives lived in small buildings on the edge of the courtyard.

There were four distinct groups in Medina that had to relate to one another: the immigrants from Mecca, the Arabs of Medina that had converted to Islam, the Arabs of Medina that remained pagan, and the Jews. Muhammad's task was to arbitrate disputes and bring some semblance of stability to the town. He negotiated a series of pacts that formed everyone into a single "Ummah" or community. The pagans and Jews were allowed to retain their own faith but the entire town was declared to be a sacred enclave. In effect, Muhammad created a "super tribe" made up of a variety of people held together in a single society – something totally unheard of in Arab culture before. Ultimately, everyone agreed to submit all disputes to Allah and His Prophet and Muhammad assumed the role of chieftain of the entire community.

During this period, the revelations from God continued but took on a new tone. Muhammad was now a prince as well as a preacher and Islam was now a political force as well as a faith. The new revelations called Muslims to fight to protect themselves against those who wronged them and treated them badly. The Muslims were urged to stand against unbelievers (those who did not believe in the one God of the Muslims, Christians, and Jews) and against hypocrites (those who pretended to be believers but whose actions showed them to be the opposite). This meant Holy War with outside forces such as the Quraysh that wanted to destroy the new community and internal forces in Medina that were trying to sabotage the new movement.

**?** *Westerners have often been critical of Muhammad for being more of a political leader than a religious leader, for having*

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*multiple wives, and for using military force against those who threatened the Islamic community. How do you feel about these issues?*

**?** *What examples in Christianity do we have of political leaders that have been deeply religious. In what ways did the religion of these persons guide their actions as political leaders?*

One of Muhammad's greatest disappointments in Medina was that the Jews who responded warmly to him at first eventually turned against him. He was convinced that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam could live together in peace as brothers because they all worshipped the same God and were all "People of the Book." The Jews, however, were unable to accept him as a true prophet and as he solidified the Arabs into a single community the Jews felt threatened. In 624, as hostility from the Jews increased, Muhammad had the people in the Muslim congregation begin facing Mecca instead of Jerusalem during their prayers.

As the Muslim community in Medina expanded, they quickly outgrew the agricultural resources of the area and they decided to turn to ghazu (raids) that were a common means of support for many Arabian tribes. They began attacking caravans of other clans for booty and livestock. They were explicitly forbidden to attack caravans of either the members of the Islamic community or of the small number of tribes and clans that had begun to align themselves with them. In addition, they tried to avoid physically harming any of the people from whom they took booty so as not to set off vendettas. The caravans of the wealthy Quraysh tribe of Mecca became their most common target and, for a while, they had some success. Then, in 624, when

Muhammad was leading a raid against a large Meccan caravan, the Meccans dispatched a large army to drive the raiders back. The Muslims were vastly outnumbered but, through the military expertise of Muhammad, they defeated the Quraysh army.

This victory got the attention of many smaller tribes that began to see the Muslim community as an important force in Arabia. But, it also galvanized the large Meccan Quraysh tribe who launched a ceaseless war against the Muslims with the express purpose of exterminating them. For three years, the Muslims were severely damaged in a series of major battles but, in 627, a Muslim army of roughly 3,000 soldiers defended their city from an attack by a 10,000-man army of the Quraysh and their new allies, the Jewish Qurayzah tribe of Medina. The Muslims under Muhammad's leadership had built a trench around Medina as a fortification against the Meccan cavalry so this battle is remembered as the Battle of the Trench. Again, because of the military prowess of Muhammad, the Meccan army was routed even though they outnumbered the Muslims three to one.

The Muslims felt especially betrayed by their Medinan neighbors, the Jewish Qurayzah tribe, that had sided with the Meccans against them and after the battle victory they killed all 700 of the Jewish men and sold their wives and children into slavery. Although this was a decidedly harsh act even by Seventh Century Arabian standards, it was understood as an action against traitors, not against Jews. Jews continued to live in Medina and, until modern times, anti-Jewish and anti-Christian hatred was largely non-existent in the Muslim world. There are certainly anti-Jewish passages in the Quran but they were specifically aimed at the three Jewish tribes of Medina that turned against the Muslims, not against Jews in general.

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Because the Quran teaches that war is so terrible that Muslims must do everything possible to bring hostilities quickly to a peaceful end, Muhammad used their victory at the Battle of the Trench as the beginning of a peace offensive. In 628, Muhammad announced that he was going to make the Hajj to Mecca and asked for volunteers to accompany him. Even though pilgrims on the Hajj were forbidden to carry weapons and would be traveling into the center of the Quraysh tribal power, more than a thousand Muslims joined him. As the Muslims approached the city, their peaceful demonstration pressured the Quraysh to sign a peace treaty with them and the event was a major turning point for the Islamic community. Soon, a growing multitude of Arab tribes aligned themselves with the Muslims in Mecca. Many of these alignments were purely political and military in nature but they also resulted in thousands of legitimate converts to Islam.

In 630, the Quraysh violated the peace treaty by attacking one of the small tribes aligned with the Muslims and Muhammad led an army of more than 10,000 men to the gates of Mecca. Faced with this show of overwhelming force the Quraysh surrendered the city without a drop of blood being shed. Muhammad's Muslims entered the city, destroyed all the pagan idols around the Kaaba, turned the Hajj into a purely Islamic pilgrimage dedicated to Allah, and enlisted the members of the Quraysh into the Muslim alliance. Like others that allied themselves with the Muslims, the

Quraysh were not required to become Muslims but, eventually, most of them did.

In 632, Muhammad died peacefully in the arms of his favorite wife Alisha, just ten years after the immigration to Medina. Virtually all of the tribes of Arabia had joined the Muslim community and submitted to Islamic law either as allies or as converts to Islam. The bloody cycle of warfare that had plagued Arabia for centuries was stopped and the Islamic community was on its way to becoming the largest empire under one government in the history of the world.

**?** *In the group, discuss the concept of "cultural religion" in which people join a particular religion because of cultural pressures. Does this happen in Christianity as well as Islam? What kinds of pressures can push a person to become a Muslim or a Christian in the modern world?*

**?** *How do you feel about military resistance being a formal part of religion?*

**?** *Why do you think the Islamic community spread so fast under Muhammad's leadership?*

#### **NEXT SESSION..**

In preparation for the next session, encourage the group to read Chapter Five: Apostle and Caliphs in their student books and the following material from the Acts of the Apostles before the next session: Acts 1.6-8, 2.1-47, 4.32-37, 6.1-7, 8.1-40, 9.1-31, 10.1-48, 13.1-5, and 15.1-41.