

Three Men, One Mission

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History

History is shaped by people, and inevitably some leave more of a mark than others. Amongst those standing out, the central figures of major world religions have had an impact far beyond their own followers. The three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, continue to influence world events millennia after Moses, Jesus and Muhammad walked upon the earth. Throughout their history, they have often been in competition and conflict, even at war. Their adherents often do not realise, therefore, that their key message was essentially the same.

This booklet is intended to briefly present their lives and works and show how they complement, rather than contradict, each other. Although this account of their history is supported by verses from the Qur'an and quotations from the Bible, it is not aimed at the believer in any specific religion. Rather, its purpose is to provide a better insight into the monotheistic world-view these three men subscribed to and which has not lost any of its relevance in the world of today.

The impact of those prophets was both religious and political. They called for belief and moral conduct, and by doing so often conflicted with the established order based on corrupt practices and oppression. As the political realities differed from one period of time to another, so did the course of events in which the prophets and their followers confronted the ruling elites of their time in an attempt to reform society. Yet the underlying basis of their message, the motivating factors, and the high principles they espoused, were essentially shared by all of them.

Moses (peace be upon him)

Moses (Musa) lived at the time of a mighty tyrant ruler, the pharaoh, and rose from a member of the oppressed classes to a formidable antagonist, ultimately bringing down the whole edifice of arrogant power. He was ideally placed to play this role by having been brought up in the household of the pharaoh himself .

"And the family of Pharaoh took him up, that he might become for them an enemy and a sorrow." (Al-Qur'an 28:8)

Just as a prophet's work continues to leave an impact long after his departure from this world, his arrival is usually preceded by a period of high anticipation. Moses was no different in this respect: Tales of a saviour of the oppressed Israelites were making the rounds in Egypt and grew so strong that the ruling class felt the need to take precautionary measures. To prevent the birth of this champion of the people they had enslaved, the pharaoh ordered that every newborn male child would be put to death during the year his arrival was foretold, leaving only the female babies alive.

"Pharaoh exalted himself in the earth and made his people castes. A tribe among them he oppressed, killing their sons and sparing their women. He was one of those who work corruption." (Al-Qur'an 28:4)

Fearing for the life of her son, Moses' mother, Miryam put him into a basket and let him drift on the river to be found by a member of pharaoh's family, as intended by Divine decree.

"And We inspired the mother of Moses, saying: Suckle him and, when you fear for him, then throw him into the river and fear not nor grieve. We shall bring him back to you and shall make him (one) of Our messengers." (Al-Qur'an 28:7)

Not only was Moses reared and nurtured in the household of his future enemy, but to console his mother, she was even employed as a wet nurse when nobody else suitable could be found.

"And We had before forbidden foster-mothers to him, so she said: Shall I show you a household who will rear him for you and take care of him? So We restored him to his mother that she might be comforted and not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of Allah is true. But most of them know not." (Al-Qur'an 28: 12-13)

Moses is usually seen as the liberator as well as the law-giver for the Israelites. However, like all lives, his life is complex and not done justice by over-simplifying. There are numerous lessons and sources of inspiration in his teaching and actions, starting from his early days before he was even called to the prophethood, until his final days when the Promised Land was barred to him and his people for their persistent disobedience.

"And (remember) when Moses said to his people: O my people! Remember Allah's favour to you, how He placed among you prophets, and He made you kings, and gave you that (which) He gave not to any (other) of (His) creatures. O my people! Go into the holy land which Allah has ordained for you. Turn not in flight, for surely you turn back as losers. They said: O Moses! A giant people (dwell) in it and we go not in till they go out from there. When they go out from there, then we will enter (not till then). Then spoke two of those who feared (their Lord, men) to whom Allah had been gracious: Enter in upon them by the gate, for if you enter by it, you will be victorious. So put your trust (in Allah) if you are indeed believers. They said: O Moses! We will never enter (the land) while they are in it. So go you and your Lord and fight! We will sit here. He said: My Lord! I have control of none but myself and my brother, so distinguish between us and the wrong-doing folk. (Their Lord) said: For this the land will surely be forbidden them for forty years that they will wander in the earth, bewildered. So grieve not over the wrongdoing people." (Al-Qur'an 5:20-26)

Naturally, a brief treatise on the life of a great person like him must be limited to only some aspects chosen as relevant either for providing a better overview or some more interesting details whose importance is not merely historic but retains validity up to our own time.

Moses grew up as the privileged young man destined to be a future ruler. Yet, he did identify with his people, either consciously through an understanding of his origins, or unwittingly through a more general sense of justice. When witnessing a fight between an Israelite and an Egyptian, he takes sides and helps the Israelite. The blow he gives the Egyptian was so powerful that it killed him, bringing immediate trouble to a remorseful Moses who did not expect his interference in the rights and wrongs of a dispute to have such lasting consequences.

"And he entered the city at a time of carelessness of its people, and he found in it two men fighting, one of his own caste, and the other of his enemies; and he who was of his caste asked him for help against him who was of his enemies. So Moses struck him with his fist and killed him. He said: This is of the devil's doing. He is an enemy, a mere misleader. He said: My Lord! I have wronged my soul, so forgive me. Then He forgave him. He is the Forgiving, the Merciful." (Al-Qur'an 28: 15-16)

It must have been a time of general turmoil in Egyptian society, for the very next day he encounters the man he saved involved in another quarrel and once again asking for his help. Moses hesitates and then, helped by the urging of third parties, decides to leave the city altogether, realising that he would otherwise be tracked down and asked to account for what he had done.

"And morning found him in the city, fearing, vigilant, when he who had appealed to him the day before called out to him for help. Moses said to him: You are indeed a mere hothead. And when he would have fallen upon the man who was an enemy to them both, he said: O Moses! Would you kill me as you did kill a person yesterday. You would be nothing but a tyrant in the land, you would not be of the reformers. And a man came from the uttermost part of the city, running. He said: O Moses! The chiefs take counsel against you to slay you; therefore escape. I am of those who give you good advice. So he escaped from there, fearing, vigilant. He said: My Lord! Deliver me from the wrongdoing people." (Al-Qur'an 28: 18-21)

A refugee and fugitive from a justice he knew would not be in his favour, Moses travelled as far as Midian, a territory around where Jordan and Saudi Arabia meet today and which was the home of another prophet, Jethro (Shu'aib) from whom Moses would learn much to equip him for his eventual return to Egypt. At his arrival at Midian a hungry and tired Moses felt

compassion for two shepherd girls who had difficulty getting their flock to the watering place amidst all the male shepherds, so he offered to carry out that task for them. In return, their father invited him to his home where, after listening to his story, he offered him employment for a set number of years and marriage to one of his daughters.

"And when he came to the water of Midian he found there a whole tribe of men watering. And he found apart from them two women keeping back (their flocks). He said: What troubles you? The two said: We cannot give (our flocks) to drink till the shepherds return from the water; and our father is a very old man. So he watered (their flock) for them. Then he turned aside into the shade, and said My Lord! I am needy of whatever good You send down for me. Then there came to him one of the two women, walking shyly. She said: My father asks you, that he may reward you with the payment for that you did water (the flock) for us. Then, when he came to him and told him the (whole) story, he said: Fear not! You have escaped from the wrong-doing people. One of the two women said: O my father! Hire him! For the best (man) that you can hire is the strong, the trustworthy. He said: I intend to marry you to one of these two daughters of mine on condition that you hire yourself to me for (the term of) eight years. Then if you complete ten it will be of your own accord, for I would not make it hard for you. Allah willing, you will find me of the righteous." Al-Qur'an 28: 23-27)

A good decade later Moses left Midian with his family in search of a livelihood elsewhere or, as some suggest, wanting to return incognito to Egypt. But God had other plans. En route he noticed a fire. Since where there is a fire there must be people, he leaves his family behind as a precautionary measure and goes to either find some food or some news. But this fire was not of the usual kind. It burned without devouring the bush from which it seemed to come, and a voice called from within ordering Moses to take off his shoes as a mark of respect. He is further told to throw down his shepherd's staff which turns into a snake, and to pick it up again and watch it regain its original shape. And his own hand changes colour and becomes a pale white, without any sign of disease however.

"Then, when Moses had fulfilled the term, and was travelling with his family, he saw in the distance a fire and said to his family: Wait (here). I see in the distance a fire; perhaps I shall bring you tidings from there, or a flame from the fire that you may warm yourselves. And when he reached it, he was called from the right side of the valley in the blessed field, from the tree: O Moses! I, even I, am Allah, the Lord of the worlds; Throw down you staff. And when he saw it writhing as if it was a demon, he turned to flee headlong, (and it was said to him): O Moses! Draw near and fear not. You are of those who are secure. Put your hand into the inside of your robe. It will come out white without hurt. And guard your heart from fear. Then these shall be two proofs from your Lord to Pharaoh and his chiefs. They are evil-living people. He said: My Lord! I killed a man among them and I fear that they will kill me. My brother Aaron is more eloquent than me in speech. Therefore send him with me as a helper to confirm me. I fear that they will give the lie to me. He said: We will strengthen your arm with your brother, and We will give you both power, so that they cannot reach you for Our signs. You both, and those who follow you, will be the winners."(Al-Qur'an 28: 29-35)

Frightening as this encounter was it set him up for his mission in life: to go and confront pharaoh with the demand to release the Israelites from bondage. It helped him overcome the fear to face up to the tyrant who would surely have him killed, and it provided him with the miracles needed to make the pharaoh's magicians take notice. Still, Moses is unsure whether he will be up to the task and asks for his elder brother Aaron (Harun) to come along with him. This wish is granted, although we do not know whether Aaron had already caught up with Moses in Midian or was going to meet him upon his return to Egypt.

Pharaoh, who considered himself a god to be worshipped, was anything but delighted to have Moses come back and challenge him with a higher authority, demanding the release of the Israelites on whose slave labour the Egyptian economy depended.

"But when Moses came to them with Our clear signs, they said: This is nothing but invented magic. We never heard of this among our fathers of old. And Moses said: My Lord is Best aware who brings guidance from His presence, and whose will be the sequel of the Home (of bliss). The wrongdoers will not be successful. And Pharaoh said: O chiefs! I know not that you

have a god other than me, so kindle for me (a fire), O Haman, to bake the mud; and set up for me a lofty tower in order that I may survey the God of Moses; and I consider him of the liars." (Qur'an 28:36-37)

He was hardly inclined to consider this man a true prophet, having previously raised him in his own household but finding that, instead of showing him gratitude he had turned against him.

"(Pharaoh) said (to Moses): Did we not rear you among us as a child? And you did dwell many years of your life among us, and you did that deed of yours which you did, and you were one of the ungrateful."(Qur'an 26:18-19)

For this purpose pharaoh arranged for a magnificent public event, and the magicians who had been honing their skills in preparation were given further prizes and incentives should they win the contest.

"And verily We showed him all Our signs, but he denied them and refused. He said: Have you come to drive us out from our land by your magic, O Moses? But we surely can produce for you magic the like of it; so appoint an appointed time between us and you, which neither we nor you shall fail to keep, at a place convenient (to us both). (Moses) said: Your appointed time shall be the day of the feast, and let the people assemble when the sun has risen high."(Qur'an 20:56-59)

"So the wizards were gathered together at a set time on a day appointed. And it was said to the people: Are you (also) gathering? (They said): Yes, so that we may follow the wizards if they are the winners. And when the wizards came they said to Pharaoh: Will there surely be a reward for us if we are the winners? He said: Yes, and you will then surely be of those brought near (to me)."(Qur'an 26:38-41)

Nobody doubted the outcome, yet when Moses' staff devoured all the magic they conjured and rendered it void, the magicians realised that a greater power was involved and submitted to Moses and his religion, much to the dismay of pharaoh.

"Then the wizards were (all) flung down prostrate, crying: We believe in the Lord of Aaron and Moses. (Pharaoh) said: You put faith in him before I give you permission. He is your chief who taught you magic. Now surely I shall cut off your hands and your feet alternately, and I shall crucify you on the trunks of palm trees, and you shall know for certain which of us has sterner and more lasting punishment. They said: We choose you not above the clear proofs that have come to us, and above Him Who created us. So decree what you will decree. You will end for us only this life of the world. We believe in our Lord, that He may forgive us our sins and the magic to which you did force us. Allah is better and more lasting." (Qur'an 20:70-73)

"And the wizards were flung prostrate, calling: We believe in the Lord of the worlds, The Lord of Moses and Aaron. (Pharaoh) said: You put your faith in him before I give you permission. He doubtless is your chief who taught you magic! But verily you shall come to know. Verily I will cut off your hands and your feet alternately, and verily I will crucify you, every one. They said: It is no hurt, for to our Lord we shall return. We ardently hope that our Lord will forgive us our sins because we are the first of the believers."(Qur'an 26:46-51)

The miraculous signs given to Moses, however, make pharaoh cautious, and he decides to put the matter off for another date in order to have his claim tested.

This event is followed by a showdown between Moses and pharaoh over many years during which Egypt is plagued with one disaster after the other as a warning and punishment from God.

"And we distressed Pharaoh's people with famine and shortage of fruits that perhaps they might heed. But whenever good befell them, they said: This is ours; and whenever evil struck them they ascribed it to the evil auspices of Moses and those with him. Surely their evil auspices were only with Allah. But most of them knew not." (Qur'an 7:130-131)

At the same time the Israelites were suffering persecution and hardship until many of them also turned against Moses in frustration, blaming him for the turn of events.#

"They said: We suffered hurt before you came to us, and since you have come to us."(Qur'an: 7:129)

After years of suffering throughout Egypt the pharaoh finally concedes that Moses should be allowed to lead the Israelites out of captivity. When they had hardly a day's head start, however, he regretted his decision and pursued them ahead of his army.

"Then Pharaoh followed them with his forces and there covered them that which covered them of the sea."(Qur'an 20:78)

The Israelites lose faith in Moses and fear annihilation, but he parts the sea with his staff to let them through, drowning the Egyptians after them.

"And when the two forces saw each other, those with Moses said: We are indeed caught. He said: Nay, verily! for my Lord is with me. He will guide me. Then We inspired Moses, saying: Strike the sea with your staff. And it parted, and each part was like a vast mountain. Then We brought the others near to that place. And We saved Moses and those with him, every one. And We drowned the others. In this is indeed a sign, yet most of them are not believers." (Qur'an: 26:61-67)

Far from his mission being accomplished, there follow long years of wandering through the desert during which Moses finds that his people could be stubborn and obstinate, but had little faith, conditioned through generations of subservience and slavery. In spite of the many miracles that they had witnessed and continued to be blessed with, like finding food and water in the barren desert, they resented the hardship of their journey and started idealising their regulated lives back in Egypt.

"And when you said: O Moses! We are weary of one kind of food; so call on your Lord for us that He bring out for us that which the earth grows - of its herbs and its cucumbers and its corn and its lentils and its onions. He said: Would you exchange that which is higher for that which is lower? Go back to Egypt, there you will have what you ask for. And humiliation and wretchedness were stamped upon them and they were visited with wrath from Allah. That was because they disbelieved in Allah's revelations and killed the prophets wrongfully. That was for their disobedience and transgression." (Qur'an 2:61)

They were also jealous of other people whom they encountered and who had idols made of precious materials. They wanted prosperity and idols like them.

"And We brought the Children of Israel across the sea, and they came to a people who were given up to idols which they had. They said: O Moses! Make for us a god just like they have gods He said: You are a people who know not."(Qur'an: 7:138)

In fact, when Moses climbed up to mount Sinai in order to receive commandments from God, leaving his people camped at the foot of the hill, they make a golden calf and declare it as their god and saviour.

"And the people of Moses, after (he left them), chose a calf (for worship), (made) out of their ornaments, of saffron hue, which gave a lowing sound. Did they not see that it spoke not to them nor guided them to any way? They chose it, and became wrongdoers."(Qur'an 7:148)

Moses, once he returned from having talked to God on his own, became furious at what they had done. He initially blamed his brother Aaron for not stopping them but accepted that any such attempt would have only divided them and created vicious fighting amongst them.

"He (Moses) said: O Aaron! What held you back when you did see them go astray, That you followed me not? Have you then disobeyed my order? He said: O son of my mother! Clutch

not my beard nor my head! I feared lest you should say: You have caused division among the Children of Israel, and have not waited for my word." (Qur'an 20:92-94)

Only Moses himself was a charismatic enough leader to demand unconditional compliance from his people. He ordered the idol destroyed and banished Samiri, who had invented the worship of the calf for them, making him the first untouchable in recorded history.

"(Moses) said: And what have you to say, O Samiri? He said: I perceived what they perceive not, so I seized a handful from the footsteps of the messenger, and then threw it in. Thus my soul commended to me. (Moses) said: Then go! and in this life if it is for you to say: Touch me not! and there is for you an appointed time you cannot break. Now look upon your god of which you have remained a devotee. Verily we will burn it and will scatter its dust over the sea."(Qur'an 20:95-97)

To teach his people Moses took a selected party of seventy from amongst them up the mountain with him where they witnessed such grandeur and power that they fell unconscious.

"And Moses chose out of his people seventy men for Our appointed time and, when the trembling came on them, he said: My Lord! If You had willed, You had destroyed them long before, and me with them. Will you destroy us for that which the ignorant among us did? It is but Your trial (of us). You send whom You will astray and guide whom You will: You are our Protecting Friend, therefore forgive us and have mercy on us, You, the Best of all who show forgiveness."(Qur'an 7:155)

Yet, when they were ordered to sacrifice a cow after having returned to their people, they tried all kinds of clever reasoning and questioning in order to avoid having to give up one of their best animals and almost did not observe the command.

"And when Moses said to his people: Allah commands you that you sacrifice a cow; they said: Do you make fun of us? He answered: Allah forbid that I should be among the foolish. They said: Pray for us to your Lord that He make clear to us what (cow) she is. (Moses) answered: He says, Surely she is a cow neither with calf nor immature; (she is) between the two conditions; so do that which you are commanded. They said: Pray for us to your Lord that He make clear to us what colour she is. (Moses) answered: He says: Surely she is a yellow cow. Bright is her colour, gladdening beholders. They said: Pray for us to your Lord that He make clear to us what (cow) she is. Cows are much alike to us; and if Allah wills, we may be led aright. (Moses) answered: He says: Surely she is a cow unyoked; she ploughs not the soil nor waters the tilth; whole and without mark. They said: Now you bring the truth. So they sacrificed her, though almost they did not." (Qur'an 2:67-71)

The Qur'an also contains a story of Moses travelling to meet the mysterious Green Prophet al-Khidr trying to learn wisdom from him but being unable to keep up with his demands due to a lack of insight and knowledge of the matters he was confronted with.

"Then they found one of Our slaves, to whom We had given mercy from Us, and had taught him knowledge from Our presence. Moses said to him: May I follow you, to the end that you may teach me right conduct of that which you have been taught? He said: You cannot bear with me. How can you bear with that of which you cannot comprehend any knowledge?"(18:65-68)

Many other stories and spiritual parables about Moses abound. In summary, he was a strong and determined man, devoted to the worship of the only one God, facing up to the greatest tyrant in human history, yet in need of guidance himself and unable to fully rally his own people behind him and make them see the truth for what it was. The story of the next major prophet to whom we now turn our attention, Jesus, is not all too different in this respect.

Jesus (peace be upon him)

Due to his unusual entry and exit from our world, having been born, like Adam, without a father,

"The likeness of Jesus is as the likeness of Adam, He created him from dust, then He said to him: Be! and he is." (Qur'an: 3:59)

and having been spared death by being raised to heaven prior to his return or second coming,

"But Allah took him up to Himself. Allah is ever Mighty, Wise."(Qur'an 4:158)

Jesus ('Issa) is so unusual amongst the prophets that some have mistakenly elevated him to divine status. As they focus on his spiritual activities and miracles, it is often forgotten that he also played a political role in confronting the Jewish Pharisees,

"The law teachers and the Pharisees sit in Moses' chair. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach."(Matthew 23:2)

and thereby posed a problem to the Roman rulers under whose ultimate jurisdiction they operated. Whilst focusing mostly on teaching personal virtues rather than direct action, he did, however, violently evict the money changers from the temple:

"Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written", he said to them, " 'My house will be called a house of prayer', but you are making it a 'den of robbers'." (Matthew 21:12-13)

Since being born to a virgin is not something people take for granted, Jesus' mother Mary was faced with accusations of infidelity when she returned from a secluded place after having given birth to him.

"Then she brought him to her own people, carrying him. They said: O Mary! You have come with an amazing thing. O sister of Aaron! Your father was not a wicked man nor was your mother a harlot."(Qur'an 19:17-28)

Amongst the gifts he was given was to be able to talk already as a baby in the cradle, and speaking in defence of his mother and announcing his mission as a prophet must surely have caused a great surprise and commotion and established his reputation early on.

"Then she pointed to him. They said: "How can we talk to one who is in the cradle, a young boy?" He spoke: "I am the slave of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and has appointed me as a prophet". (Qur'an 19:29-30)

As he grew up he displayed both knowledge and wisdom and exerted the powers of a healer ensuring his popularity. Yet he never sought fame or following for himself, always instead pointing to the one who sent him: God.

"When Allah says: O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods besides Allah? he says: Be glorified! It was not for me to utter that to which I had no right."(Qur'an 5:116)

This is, for example, clearly expressed in Matthew 10:40 where he instructs his disciples: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives Him Who sent me."

His disciples were a selected number of people who followed him as he travelled the land to exhort people to the virtues of belief and good deeds and taught them that to serve God was more than to just obey a set of legalistic rules. As such, he was a reformer for the Israelites, "sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" as he is quoted in Matthew 15:24, and had no ambition to extend his mission to those not under the Law of Moses.

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them." Matthew 5:17-19:

The Israelites, who as we have seen already found it difficult to keep to Moses' instructions without deviation, had established an elaborate Rabbinical system by the time Jesus was born, which replaced the simplicity of the Laws of Moses with a complicated set of interpretations. Naturally, they saw Jesus' call to return to the spirit of the law and the essence of the belief in God as a challenge to their authority. Ultimately, they plotted to have him removed or killed.

Whilst not all Christians ascribe divinity to Jesus, most believe that the Jews succeeded in having him crucified by the Romans. The Qur'an contradicts this account by declaring that they had no certainty about the matter and it only appeared to them as if,

"...they killed him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so to them; and those who disagree concerning it are in doubt of it; they have no knowledge of it except pursuit of conjecture; they killed him not for certain." (Qur'an 4:157)

in other words, they crucified someone else in his stead whilst God raised Jesus to Himself, saving him from the intended crucifixion, a death described in the Bible as a curse. Trinitarian Christianity later tried to explain that it was necessary for God to curse and sacrifice his only son in order to save the rest of humanity from original sin. Yet, the Bible does not support the idea of a cruel and punishing God who kills the innocent for the sins of others.

"The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the fathers, every man shall be put to death for his own sin."
Deuteronomy 24:16:

As a loving God He is able to forgive rather than having to exact revenge.

Whilst Muslims and Christians disagree on how Jesus departed this world when the Israelites plotted against him, they agree that he will return near the end of time as the Messiah, the Anointed, the Saviour. The Jews also expect their promised Messiah, but having rejected Jesus and denounced him as a tool of Satan, they would not agree on the choice. Just as Jesus would be a false Messiah in their eyes, for Christians and Jews any Jewish Messiah proclaimed in the future would be a false Messiah, a liar, the Anti-Christ, given the name "Dajjal" by Islamic tradition. According to that tradition Jesus will descend near Damascus and confront and defeat the false Messiah, after which he will rule over a period of peace and prosperity for forty years, marry, have children and die a natural death. He will be buried next to Muhammad, the final prophet.

Muhammad (peace be upon him)

Muhammad, too, was both a spiritual leader and a reformer, but because unlike other prophets before him he succeeded in establishing an organised social structure following the rules he brought, many biographers focus more on his political career than his spiritual teachings. His miracles, too, receive little attention since they are dwarfed by that ongoing miracle, the Qur'an, preserved unchanged since the days of its revelation.

"He has revealed to you (Muhammad) the scripture with truth, confirming that which was (revealed) before it..." (Qur'an, 3:3).

"And we reveal in the Qur'an that which is a healing and mercy for the believers..." (Qur'an 17:82)

Muhammad was born into a noble family in Makkah, but the death of his father before his mother gave birth made him an orphan and somewhat more vulnerable in Arabian society. His mother died while he was still young and he was then brought up by his uncle Abu Talib. He became a successful trader in the employment of a wealthy widow, Khadija, who was so impressed with his integrity that she approached him with a proposal of marriage, although he was considerably younger than her. He was respected in society, and it was only after he had been called to prophethood by the archangel Gabriel whilst meditating in the cave of Hira, as

he often did, that the very same society turned against him. They did not resent him as a person, but feared his message of equality before God.

"Or do they not know their messenger, and so reject him? Or do they say: There is a madness in him? Nay, but he brings them the Truth; and most of them hate the Truth. And if the Truth had followed their desires, verily the heavens and the earth and whosoever is in it would have been corrupted." (Qur'an 23:69-71)

Initially his call to reject idolatry and submit to the only true God was only directed at his family and friends. When it became a public invitation, however, the upholders of the established order, who benefited from the influx of pilgrims and wealth connected to their existing religion, became increasingly intolerant of this new movement and responded with slander and vilification as well as physical persecution. Eventually the growing number of Muslims following Muhammad's teachings were banished from town and an embargo on trade and dealings with them was ordered.

"The Quraysh gathered together to confer and decided to draw up a document in which they undertook not to marry women from Banu Hashim and the Banu al Muttalib, or to give them women in marriage, or to sell anything to them or buy anything from them. They drew up a written contract to that effect and solemnly pledged themselves to observe it. They then hung up the document in the interior of the Ka'bah to make it even more binding upon themselves." (Tarikh al-Tabari)

When Muhammad managed to find a safe haven amongst supporters of a different town, Yathrib (later known as Madinah), he began to organise the migration of his followers into exile and did not leave himself until they had all safely reached their new home. An attempt to intercept the prophet on his own migration to Madinah failed, and he established himself at the head of a flourishing community there whilst at the same time forging further alliances with neighbouring tribes and leaders of state. For the people of Makkah he became even more of a threat and rival by doing so, and their enmity culminated into drawing him and his followers into a military confrontation. In spite of their inferior numbers and lack of equipment they emerged victorious from the battle of Badr, and later at the battle of Uhud, during which Makkah tried to avenge its earlier defeat, the Muslims suffered heavy losses but survived the onslaught. Within less than ten years since the Hijrah, the first migration to Madinah, Muhammad retook Makkah at the head of a numerous and invincible army, but showed great compassion and leniency to its inhabitants and his former foes. He rooted out idolatry by removing the idols from the Kaabah, the House of God, to which people had made pilgrimage from the days of Abraham.

"On the morning of Friday, 20 Ramadan, 8 A.H., the Messenger of Allah entered Makkah with his head bowed. When he realised the honour of the conquest Allah had bestowed upon him, he felt so humble before Allah that his chin almost touched the back of his camel. He was reciting Surat al-Fath as he rode into Makkah in victory. He raised the standard of justice, equality, and humility. Behind him rode Usamah ibn Zayd, the son of his freed slave, rather than any sons of the Banu Hashim or of the Quraysh leaders, even though they were present. One man, trembling with awe on the Day of the Conquest, was told, 'Be at ease. Do not be afraid. I am not a king. I am only the son of a woman of the Quraysh who used to eat meat dried in the sun.' ...

The people assembled at the Ka'aba, and the Holy Prophet delivered the following address: "There is no God but Allah. He has no associate. He has made good His promise that He held to His bondman and helped him and defeated all his confederates. Remember that every claim of privilege, whether that of blood or property is abolished except that of the custody of the Ka'aba and of supplying water to the pilgrims. Remember that for any one who is slain the bloodwit is hundred camels. O people of Quraish, surely God has abolished from you all pride of the time of ignorance and all pride in your ancestry, because all men are descended from Adam, and Adam was made of clay." Then the Holy Prophet turning to the people said: "O Quraish, what treatment do you think I should accord you". And they said, "Mercy, O Prophet of Allah. We expect nothing but good from you." Upon this the Holy Prophet said: "I speak to you in the same words as Joseph spoke to his brothers. This day, there is no reproof against

you: Go your way, for you are free." This announcement was received with great joy and applause." (Biography of Muhammad, based on Ibn Ishaq)

When Muhammad returned to Madinah he was the undisputed ruler of a united Arabia, and Islam began to spread in all directions across the world. Within just over two decades Muhammad had transformed a remote desert community with superstitious practices into an enlightened world power with a written constitution and a refined code of law, establishing universities and cultural centres across the then known world. Europe, then still under the yoke of an ossified and monopolistic church rule, owes its scientific advances and cultural progress to the inspiring contact with the world of Islam which did not stop until the church regained its authority during the dark days of the inquisition and later the crusades.

Muhammad was not only a worldly leader. He established a state on the foundations of religious laws in order to secure the freedom of people to worship God without persecution. During his night journey to Jerusalem and ascent to heaven (Isra and Mi'raj),

"Glorified be He Who carried His servant by night from the Inviolable Place of Worship to the Far distant place of worship the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed, that We might show him of Our tokens! Lo! He, only He, is the Hearer, the Seer."(Qur'an 17:1)

long before the migration to Madinah and whilst most people still doubted he and his followers would ever survive the persecution in Makkah, he declared his mission as a universal prophet and final link in the chain of prophets who had gone before him.

Belief and good works

All the prophets of God, including the three examples selected above, shared a common goal: to re-orientate people's minds towards their Creator and thereby encourage them to act piously and responsibly. They preached that only the one true God deserved to be worshipped and neither loyalty to, or fear of, a despotic ruler, nor subservience to the trappings of wealth and influence – as represented in the golden calf or the idols once housed in the Kaabah – should interfere with such true belief. Their faith, therefore, demanded to be expressed publicly through a change in behaviour and society. They preached justice, compassion and equality before God. They demanded an end to usury, exploitation and oppression. People who enrich themselves at the expense of others frequently try to even make religion a weapon in their arsenal of fooling others into giving up their rights and serving them. They incite hatred through focussing on the differences between, for example, Jews, Christians and Muslims. An honest look at the teachings of their respective prophets, however, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, reveals that they essentially brought the same message around which humanity can unite and build a prosperous future without false divisions. This message is best preserved and unadulterated in the Qur'an, making Muhammad the final link in the chain of divine messengers and his message of paramount importance to all of us who want to live in accordance with the expectations of our Creator.