The Prophet from Birth to Prophethood

Arabia before Islam, the Prophet's birth, childhood and youth, his marriage to Khadijah, his character before the call, and the first revelation in 610.

Arabia before Islam

- **Makka** was the main town of the Hijaz in western Arabia, on trade routes between Yemen and Syria. It held the **Ka'bah**, built by **Ibrahim and Isma'il**, which by then contained about **360 idols**, and the **Quraysh** tribe looked after it and the pilgrim trade.
- **Religion:** most Arabs worshipped idols (**polytheism**), but some, the **hanifs** (such as Waraqah ibn Nawfal), kept to the pure belief in one God. There were also **Jews and Christians** in Arabia.
- **Society:** it was **tribal**, with loyalty to the clan above all. There was **blood feuding**, **gambling and drinking**, **usury**, **slavery**, the burying of **unwanted baby girls** (female infanticide) and poor treatment of women, the weak and the poor. This period is called the **Jahiliyyah** ("time of ignorance").
- **Trade:** the Quraysh trade caravans went to **Syria** in summer and **Yemen** in winter.

Birth and childhood (about 570–595)

Event	Details
Birth	In **Makka**, about **570 CE**, in the **Year of the Elephant** (when Abraha's army marched on the Ka'bah but did not enter the city). Sunni tradition gives **12 Rabi' al-Awwal**; Shi'a tradition gives the **17th**
Family	The **Banu Hashim** clan of the Quraysh. His father **Abdullah** died **before he was born**, and he was brought up by his mother **Aminah** and his grandfather **Abd al-Muttalib**
Wet nurse	As was the Makkan custom, he was sent to the desert to be nursed by **Halimah** of the Banu Sa'd, where he lived for several years in clean air and learned pure Arabic
Death of his mother	**Aminah** died when he was about **6**, on the way back from visiting relatives at Madina (at al-Abwa')
Death of his grandfather	**Abd al-Muttalib** died when he was about **8**, and his uncle **Abu Talib** became his guardian
Journey to Syria	At about **12**, he travelled with Abu Talib on a trade caravan. At **Busra** a Christian monk, **Bahira**, is said to have recognised signs of future prophethood

Importance of his early life. As an **orphan** he knew hardship, which later shaped his care for **orphans and the poor**. Growing up among the shepherds taught him **patience and responsibility**.

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More about his childhood

- His mother **Aminah** named him **Ahmad** ("the praised one") and his grandfather **Abd al-Muttalib** named him **Muhammad**.
- With **Halimah** he stayed about **five years** in the desert and learned pure Arabic. An epidemic in Makka was one reason he was sent back to her after a first visit home. When he was about five, two angels are said to have opened his chest and washed his heart; this frightened Halimah, who returned him to his mother.
- After Aminah died at **al-Abwa'**, the slave girl **Umm Ayman** brought him to his grandfather. The Qur'an reminds him: "Did he not find you an orphan and give you shelter?" (93:6). Later he looked after the flocks of Abu Talib.
- At **Busra** the monk **Bahira** warned Abu Talib to protect the boy from those who might harm him, so Abu Talib sold his goods and returned to Makka.
- At about 15 he was present at the **Harb al-Fijar** ("the sacrilegious war"), fought between the Quraysh and the Hawazin in a forbidden month at the fair of Ukaz. He took no part in the fighting but helped his uncles by collecting arrows.

Youth and character before the call (595–610)

- **Work.** He worked as a **shepherd** (as did other prophets) and then as a **trader**. He became known for **honesty and fair dealing** and was called **al-Amin** ("the Trustworthy") and **as-Sadiq** ("the Truthful"). People left valuables with him.
- **The Hilf al-Fudul.** In his youth he took part in an agreement (*Hilf al-Fudul*, "the Pact of the Virtuous") by Makkan clans to **defend victims of injustice**, and he praised it after he became a prophet.
- **Marriage to Khadijah (about 595). Khadijah bint Khuwaylid**, a wealthy and respected widow, employed him to trade for her in Syria with her servant **Maysarah**. Impressed by his honesty and character, she proposed marriage. He was **25** and she was about **40**. They had **six children**: **Qasim** and **Abdullah** (both died young) and four daughters, **Zaynab, Ruqayyah, Umm Kulthum** and **Fatimah**. The marriage was happy and she was his **first supporter**.
- **Rebuilding of the Ka'bah (about 605).** When the Quraysh rebuilt the Ka'bah after a flood, the clans quarrelled over who should place the **Black Stone**. They agreed to accept the judgement of the next man to enter, who was Muhammad. He placed the stone on a **cloak**, had each clan hold a corner, and set it in place himself, which **prevented bloodshed**.
- **Retreat.** Disgusted by idol worship and injustice, he would go to the **cave of Hira** to **pray and reflect** (*tahannuth*), especially in Ramadan.

More about his youth

- The **Hilf al-Fudul** was agreed at the house of **Abdullah ibn Jud'an**. The Prophet said later that he would not exchange his part in it "for a herd of red camels" and would answer such a call again in

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Islam.

- He was known as **as-Sadiq** and **al-Amin**. His business partners said he never quarrelled or lied. At the pilgrimage he gave water to the pilgrims.
- **Khadijah** was impressed by his profit and by what her servant Maysarah reported. She sent a proposal through her friend **Nafisah**, and he accepted after consulting his uncle.

The first revelation (610)

- At **40**, in the cave of Hira, the angel **Jibril** appeared and said "**Iqra'**" ("Read" or "Recite"). The Prophet (pbuh) replied that he could not read. The angel pressed him three times and then revealed the first verses of **Sura 96**.
- He returned home trembling and told **Khadijah**, who comforted him ("God will never disgrace you; you keep family ties, speak the truth, help the poor and honour guests") and took him to her cousin **Waraqah ibn Nawfal**, a Christian scholar, who said that he had received the same angel who came to Musa and that his people would turn against him.
- After a pause the revelation resumed, and he was commanded to **call people to God**.
- **First believers: Khadijah** (the first woman and the first person to accept Islam), **Ali** (his young cousin), **Abu Bakr** (his closest friend) and **Zayd ibn Harithah** (his freed slave and adopted son).

More about the call

- Tradition says the first revelation came on **27 Ramadan**. After the angel left, the Prophet heard a voice and saw the angel filling the horizon: "O Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God, and I am Jibril."
- Waraqah was an elderly, blind Christian scholar.
- During the pause (*fatrah*) the Prophet was anxious until Jibril appeared again and the command came: "O you wrapped in your cloak, arise and warn" (74:1–3).
- **Secret preaching.** About **forty** people accepted Islam in three years, including Talha, Zubayr, Ja'far, Uthman, Abdur Rahman ibn Awf, Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas and Abdullah ibn Mas'ud. Ali was about ten. The early Muslims prayed twice a day and the house of **al-Arqam** became their meeting place. None of the Prophet's uncles accepted, although **Abu Talib** protected him.
- **The banquet.** After the verse "warn your nearest relatives" (26:214) the Prophet asked Ali to prepare a meal for the Banu Hashim. Abu Lahab said he had been bewitched and the guests left. The next day he asked: "Which of you will help me in this cause and be my brother?" Only the young **Ali** answered that he would.
- **Open preaching.** After the command of 15:94 he called the people of Makka to **Mount Safa**, asked whether they would believe a warning of an army behind the hill, and called them to worship one God. **Abu Lahab** said "may you perish", and **Sura 111** was revealed about him.

Why was it important that the Prophet could not read or write? It shows he could not have composed the Qur'an himself, so it came from God; it fitted the Arabs' strong oral tradition; and the scribes later

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became witnesses to the revelation.

Why was his marriage to Khadijah important? She supported him with her wealth and her faith, was the first to believe, gave him the peace to spend time in Hira, and comforted him after the first revelation.

Why was secret preaching sensible? The message was new, the Quraysh's reaction unknown, the small group needed time to grow in strength, and the Prophet waited for God's command to go public.

> **Before the call he was already trusted as al-Amin: his honesty, the fair judgement at the Ka'bah and his marriage to Khadijah show the character that made people listen when he began to preach.**

> TRY IT
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> Describe the main events of the Prophet's life (pbuh) from his birth to his call to prophethood.

Outline. Birth in 570 (Year of the Elephant), father died before birth; Halimah; mother died at 6; grandfather died at 8; Abu Talib; journey to Syria and Bahira; al-Amin; Hilf al-Fudul; marriage to Khadijah at 25; the Black Stone; retreat to Hira; first revelation in 610; Khadijah and Waraqah; the first believers.

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