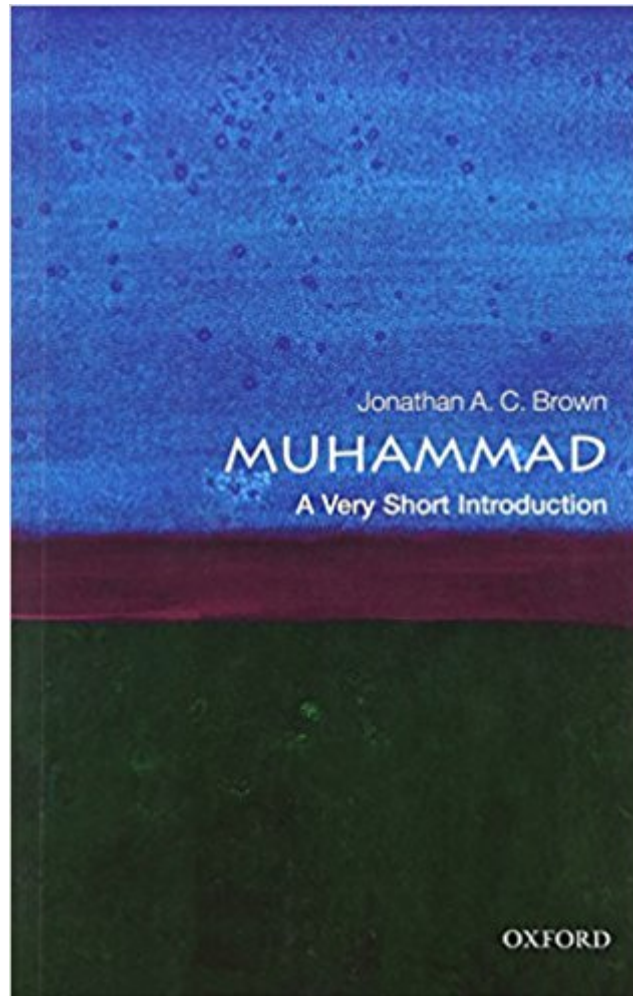




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# Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

As the founder of Islam, a religion with over one billion followers, Muhammad is beyond all doubt one of the most influential figures in world history. But learning about his life and understanding his importance has always proven difficult, as our only source of knowledge comes from the biography of him written by his followers, the reliability of which has been questioned by Western scholars. This Very Short Introduction provides a superb introduction to the major aspects of Muhammad's life and its importance, providing both Muslim and Western historical perspectives. It explains the prominent roles that Muhammad's persona has played in the Islamic world throughout history, from the medieval to the modern period. The book also sheds light on modern controversies such as the Satanic Verses, for which author Salman Rushdie was condemned for blasphemy, and the uproar over Danish cartoons of Muhammad, which triggered violent protests around the world. As these recent events show, whatever the truth about Muhammad's life, his persona still plays a crucial role in Muslim life and civilization. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is a masterful treatment informed by first rate scholarship yet engaging, accessible, and distinctively different from previous books on Muhammad." --John L. Esposito, Georgetown University, and author of 'The Future of Islam'

Jonathan A. C. Brown is Assistant Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle.

Dr. Jonathan Brown has published research in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, Islamic law, and hadith (prophetic traditions - he has published at least two books on this topic as well). Well-versed in traditional accounts and contemporary studies to the Prophet's biography, he takes the same approach to introduce his readers to the subject. One finds that a reader will directly or indirectly be acquainted to many an approach contained in texts ranging from traditional to the modern including Ibn Hisham and Ibn Kathir to the other extreme such as Patricia Crone and Michael Cook. Additionally, other works, such as Ptolemy's account, content similar to Robert Hoyland's "Seeing Islam as Others Saw It", which is a very resourceful collection of narratives from non-Muslim sources regarding the Muslims in the seventh and eighth centuries, and present day accounts in the media also seem to have been utilized. Dr. Brown does not limit research to only sira accounts though but also delves into pre-Islamic Near Eastern history to provide context for several practices of the Arabs which are now anathema to us in the modern world. Many a time, this removes the inherent bias that one comes with to study Islam (this bias can either be for or against Islam). Given the plethora of research on the subject and the fact that it runs a wide gamut, Dr. Brown has done amazingly well to keep the introduction short, yet the reader would come out no less educated about the topic than any other book on the subject. And that is why this work is a class in itself, and has the potential to become an introductory text for college courses to the Prophet. The book is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 takes the reader into the Arabian milieu in which the Prophet lived and acquaints the reader to the traditional account of his biography. Dr. Brown plays no games and walks through with the caveat that we must study the "legend", the word repeated thrice in first five pages. This is important because if you have a Muslim neighbor, you would be reading a book to get a handle on what he believes in as well as an objective understanding of the pertinent issues with that account. Chapter 1 accomplishes the goal of telling you what a Muslim would believe in. Chapter 2 steps into the actual problems with the accounts. These vary from authenticity of the historical reports to miraculous incidents to similarities with the accounts of other prophets. As the second chapter unfolds, Dr. Brown, relying on recent scholarship, starts introducing the readers to the problems inherent in the account, contributing factors, and the parts of the biography that ought to be subtracted. He gives quite some details about the earliest biography, that of Ibn Ishaq, and how it may have been redacted by Ibn Hisham to produce a version favorable to the ruling elite.

Additionally, several accounts are favorable to sunnis than shiites, such as the Prophet's uncle Abbas was closer to the Prophet and more aware of his condition than Ali. In some cases, he does not take the reader to a conclusion, simply introduces to the problem perhaps because the data is not enough yet. He narrates for instance that the change of qiblah has been thought to be a political motivation by some modern historians than a religious issue. In controversial issues, taking the Prophet's marriage with Aisha as an example, he takes the reader into the social milieu of that time outside of the Arabian peninsula and compares with the practices of non-Arabian regions (such as those of the Byzantine empire) to set the context. However, he takes Bukhari's account and does not address other competing accounts of Aisha's marriage with the Prophet, justifiably because it's a "short introduction". In chapter 1, it was stated that Muslim accounts held that a sanctuary existed in Mecca. In chapter 2, he cites Ptolemy who had recorded centuries earlier that Arabs did in fact have a building which was the center of their religious life. Similarly, a synopsis of Hagarism, which many Muslims find extremely offensive, is provided along with the non-Muslim accounts that address the historicity of the Prophet. It must be kept in mind that quite some research on non-Muslim accounts was published after Hagarism (e.g. in Robert Hoyland's *Seeing Islam*) and thus many readers were unaware of the other non-Muslim accounts when Hagarism was published. Some later scholars (such as Neal Robinson in his book on the Quran) have also used those contemporary non-Muslim sources to negate Hagarism's account. Chapter 3 introduces the readers to the current day issues, such as the fatwa from Khomeini for Salman Rushdie's execution. He provides the background as to how Khomeini would arrive at it with a clear indication that many other clerics would reach the same conclusion. Some issues related to the current Islamic culture and Muslim life are also discussed, which includes Prophet's images, and small sections on seeing him in dreams, and modern biographies of the Prophet which depict him more as a historical figure than a sacred one (e.g. Husayn Haykal's biography). All references are listed at the end of the book for further research. By all means, I do not agree with some other reviewers that it is a pro-Islamic narrative. In fact, many a Muslim are quite likely to find it anti-Islam specifically due to negation of many events that Muslims otherwise hold sacred. Change of qiblah is an obvious one. To bring this issue in chapter 2 and state that this has been concluded so by modern historians could be considered offensive by some Muslims, and could also have been avoided by Dr. Brown. Nonetheless, Dr. Brown simply states it and moves on. Dr. Brown also "introduces" and does not always go in depth into many issues to necessarily drive a conclusion, which I would have liked but given the expectation that it was a short introduction, I am content to live without (the qiblah issue itself being a case in point.) Quite a reasonable part of what would take one months of readings (if

not years) of several scholars to get the breadth of the issues surrounding the biography of the Prophet is covered here. Of course, it is "short" and just an "introduction" so it only covers the breadth without delving into much depth. For any in-depth issues, references in the book are a good starting point, although many topics would eventually require specialized research often in Arabic source materials. I sincerely hope that we can have this as a model for all religious introductory books. I would like to study Jesus, Bible, Buddha, Hinduism and other religions (and even non-Religious topics) in the same format. All in all, it was \$8 and a few hours very well spent!

I really liked this quick intro to the life of the Prophet Muhammad. It reads like a story at the beginning, giving an Islamic historical account, and then begins a discussion about some of the pros and cons in modern Islamic thought. It's a good place to begin.

A pithy precise and very true to spirit book . The journey The author has taken to to embrace the truth and translate it in this book is simply profound

A brief, but informative introductory book.

Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources<sup>1</sup> is still the standard in the field, providing a beautiful account that weaves Quran and bibliographical material together in an epic narrative. That being said, Jonathan Brown's biography of Muhammad is the best account for someone who wishes to get a quick outline of the life of Muhammad. The book is divided into two sections. The first section covers the actual outline of Muhammad's life as conveyed in the primary sources themselves. This is extremely useful. Some accuse it of being hagiography rather biography because it follows the Islamic sources closely without employing non-Islamic sources. But such critics should continue to the section of the book which explains that there are not actually any historical records of Muhammad's life other than those prepared by Muslims themselves. This complicates the task of many historians and there is really no way to avoid this problem. Dividing this book into two sections as does Brown is an excellent way around the complication. The second section runs through the various approaches to the primary source material that have been taken in the secondary literature. Brown does a good job of providing a even keeled approach. He also takes the time to point out how certain objections to Muhammad and Islam have infiltrated the presentation of his biography in the West and thus produced hyper-critical approaches that are even less objective than some of the more hagiographical biographies in the Islamic tradition. Within the

limited framework provided by the very short introductions, this is a job very well done. For something a bit longer, but not as daunting as Lings' masterpiece, I would suggest *The Life and Work of Muhammad* (Critical Lives). Nonetheless, this is now the biography that I often suggest. The chapter on the life of the Prophet in the beginning of *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* is also excellent.

Good book. As a Muslim quite a few things in the book rub me the wrong way. That is why I gave it a 4 instead of 5 but I understand that the author was trying to be objective

A great book to recommend for anyone that wants a snapshot into the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in under 1 hour.

Love it. Horrible primary source, but love it

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