

Muhammad Becomes a Prophet

Once upon a time, there was a little boy named Muhammad. His father died before he was born, but his mother, Aminah, loved him very much and was sure he was destined for greatness. When Muhammad was six years old, Aminah and Muhammad took a trip to the city of Yathrib. For eleven days, they rode on camels across the hot, desert sands. They were part of a caravan that carried goods across the peninsula, and they passed the time listening to the merchants' incredible stories about their various adventures.

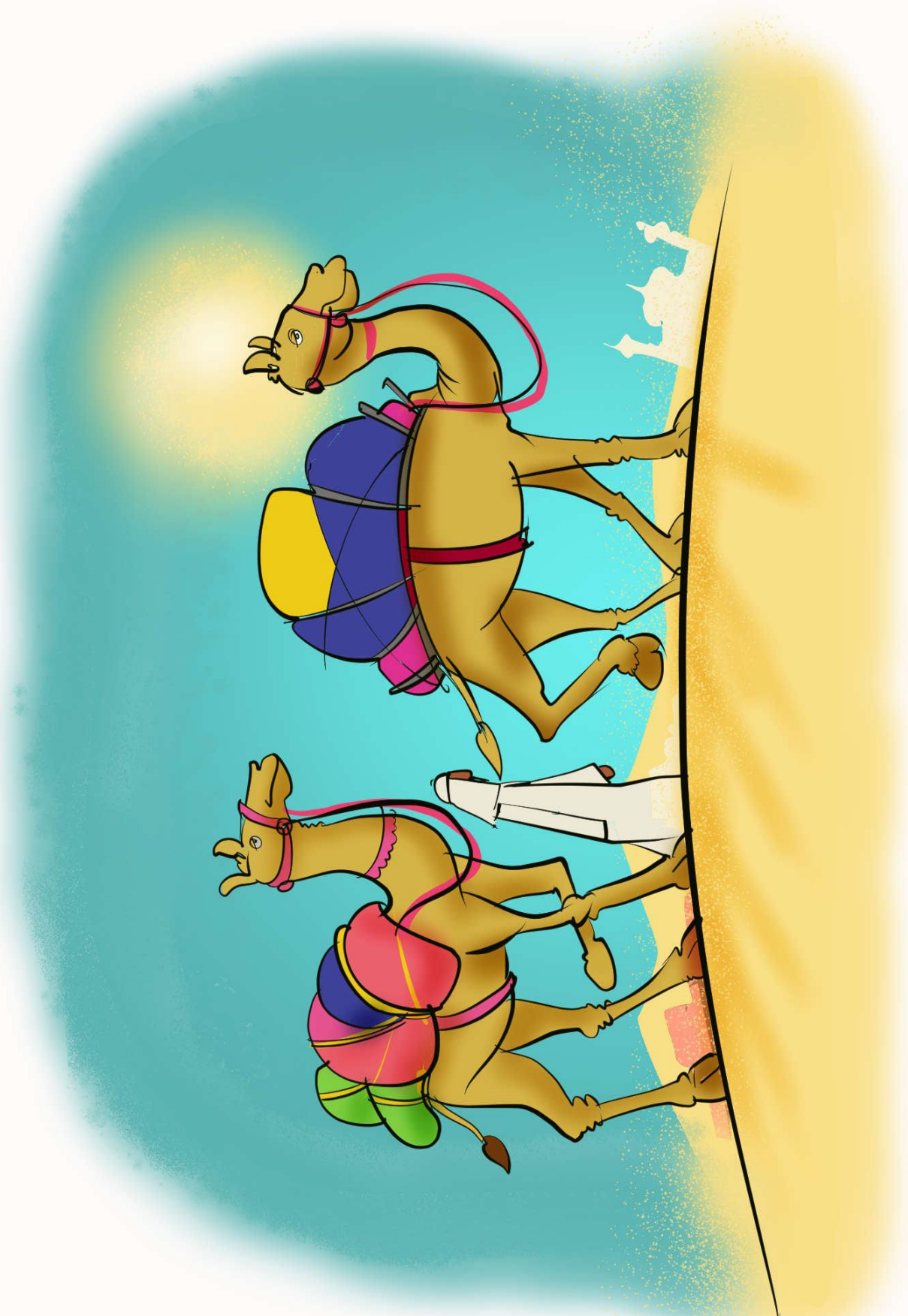
When they finally arrived in Yathrib, Aminah's family greeted them warmly. Muhammad had a wonderful time meeting his aunts and uncles and playing with his cousins. They had a pool, so they taught Muhammad how to swim. And when they got tired of swimming, they taught Muhammad how to fly a kite. It was the best visit ever!

On the way home, however, tragedy struck. Muhammad's mother got sick, and there was nothing they could do to save her. She died, and was buried, in the village of al-Abwa. Muhammad, with the help of his nanny and some other travelers, eventually made it back to his hometown of Mecca. But, as you might imagine, he was horribly sad about his mother's death. Muhammad's grandfather took him in, and they had a very special bond. The old man and the little boy were nearly inseparable. They spent most of their days at the holiest site in Mecca, a temple called the Kaaba {KAH-buh}. People would come from miles around to pray to the statues housed in the temple and to drink from the sacred well, which Muhammad's grandfather had discovered. When they weren't at the Kaaba, they could be found walking hand-in-hand through the streets of Mecca or attending the House of Assembly, where important decisions were made.



It was a wonderful time in Muhammad's life, but his grandfather was quite old, and he died a couple of years later. This time, Muhammad was taken in by his aunt and uncle. They, too, loved Muhammad like their own son. Despite all the sadness in his life, Muhammad continued to thrive. Sometimes, he joined his uncle on the caravan routes, eventually becoming a successful merchant of his own. In fact, Muhammad was widely known as al-Amin {ahl-ah-MEEN}, which means "One Who Is Honest and Truthful."

One day, a rich female merchant, name Khadijah {kah-dee-juh}, hired Muhammad to take some of her goods across the desert to Syria. The trip was highly profitable for both of them and, soon after, they decided to marry. Khadijah and Muhammad were extremely happy together. They had four daughters of their own, but they regularly welcomed and befriended relatives and business partners from around the region. They were known for their kind-hearted generosity, and their home was filled with love, which they readily extended to any, and all, visitors.



Over time, Muhammad's reputation for being honest and truthful helped him become an important leader in the Meccan community, but only a few of his closest family members knew about the visions. At first, the visions came to Muhammad while he was sleeping. But, somehow, they seemed brighter and more powerful than regular dreams. Sometimes, Muhammad would feel the need to go off by himself after one of these visions. In fact, there was a cave, located on the side of a mountain just outside of Mecca, that offered the perfect place for such a retreat. Being removed from the hustle and bustle of Meccan life gave Muhammad the peace and quiet he needed to connect with God and contemplate his spiritual experiences. This went on for a few years, until Muhammad was 40 years old. That's when the truly miraculous event happened.

On this occasion, near the end of the month of Ramadan, an angel of God appeared to Muhammad while he was alone in the cave. The angel wanted Muhammad to recite a message, but Muhammad had no idea what the message was or why he was supposed to say it. Then, the angel held Muhammad in an overpowering embrace and repeated the request. The whole thing was so frightening and confusing that Muhammad ran out of the cave and down the mountainside. But, when he was halfway home, the angel appeared in the heavens above him, filling the sky with light, and said, "Oh, Muhammad, you are the messenger of God, and I am the angel, Gabriel."



And that's how Muhammad's life as a prophet began. The first revelation was followed by a second revelation. And then a third. And then a fourth. Sometimes, they would come quickly, one right after another. Sometimes, there would be breaks in between. Either way, they always left Muhammad feeling as though something intense and amazing had happened. At first, Muhammad told only his wife and his closest friends about the visions. Eventually, however, he began to share Gabriel's teachings with others. Muhammad taught these followers how to pray to God and showed them how to wash before praying. Muhammad also instructed them to greet one another with peace.

More and more Meccans became convinced that Muhammad was God's true messenger. Eventually, Muhammad's work led to the start of a new religion, called Islam. It was a very difficult journey. Many members of Muhammad's tribe actively worked against him. They tried to convince the people of Mecca that Muhammad was scary and evil. They harassed Muhammad, his family members, and his companions. They even offered Muhammad lots of money and power, if only he would stop talking about God!

But nothing worked. Muhammad kept talking about God. People kept listening. And when the harassment intensified, Muhammad made the difficult decision to leave his hometown of Mecca. He, his family, and his followers moved to Yathrib, the beautiful town Muhammad had visited with his mother when he was just a boy. There, he formed the first Islamic community and encouraged everyone to live in harmony with one another. Every year, during Ramadan, they would fast, eating and drinking nothing, to honor and remember Muhammad's first revelations – the ones in the cave that happened during the month of Ramadan.

Many things have changed since that time but, hundreds of years later, those who follow the religion of Islam still honor the month of Ramadan. They fast; pray five times a day; share with those in need; and listen to the words of God that were shared with the prophet, Muhammad, by the angel Gabriel.

