

Key concepts

- Pre-Islamic Arabian context – the idol worshipping, pagan Arabs who practised social ills. This was the context which influenced the life and teaching of Muhammad.
- The possibility of the failure of Islam under Makkan persecution, countered by the life and teachings of Muhammad, and his teachings following the Night of Power that challenged the practices of the time.
- Pre-Islamic Arabia was known as the age of Jahiliyya: a period of barbarity. Arabs were said to bury their daughters alive if they feared poverty. People came to the Ka'aba to worship idols and donate gifts to them. Corruption, slavery and many social ills were widespread.
- That said, Muhammad acted according to tribal rules. He was a peacemaker between tribes when they argued at the Ka'aba. He benefitted from his uncle Abu Talib's protection when he preached, because of tribal honour.
- Muhammad preached the key doctrines of tawhid (oneness of God), risalah (prophethood) and Akhirah (the Day of Final Judgement) as a warning to the pagan Arabs. This made sense when the people were worshipping idols and ignoring social justice, because they did not fear a reckoning in the afterlife.
- However, the simple message of the revelations he received was regarded as the same as that revealed to earlier prophets, and relevant for all time. It was a message applied in terms which pre-Islamic Arabia would understand.

- Muhammad faced many setbacks in his mission. Some of his followers were whipped, and hot stones were laid on the backs of his supporters, such as Bilal. The insides of a camel were thrown on Muhammad whilst praying. His community were exiled to a barren valley.
- Muhammad doubted what he had received after the Night of Power, and at times was confused and upset, but always looked to Allah for guidance.
- Leaving Makkah may have seemed like the mission had failed. At the time, Muslims could not worship openly, despite all the years of preaching which Muhammad had put in.
- Muslims see Muhammad's leadership as a model to follow when facing difficulties and persecution; Allah would have never allowed Islam to fail.

Key quotes

- 'The old image of the 'uncivilised Bedouin' is most misleading, for in fact desert life was lived to the highest of values.' (Turner)
- 'Whilst some Arabs held children dear to their hearts and cherished them greatly, others buried their female children alive because of an illusory fear of poverty.' (Islamweb)
- 'Mecca was emerging as a new commercial centre with a vast new wealth but also growing division between rich and poor, challenging the traditional system of Arab tribal values and social security.' (Esposito)
- 'Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him. (Qur'an, Sura 112, Yusuf Ali)
- 'Some of his biographers have deleted the passages which speak of his doubts and fears; but they are perhaps the most convincing elements of the story.' (Alfred Guillaume)

Key words

Jahiliyya	Bedouin	Makkah	Madinah	murua
oral tradition	Shaykh	feudal	hanif	Ka'aba
Allah	Manat	Al-Uzza	Ghassanids	jinn
Zoroastrians	Qur'an	Hijrah		

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments, and debates

1. Muhammad addressed the tribal Arabs of seventh-century Arabia. Does that mean his message can only be understood in that context? Some argue that it should be taken literally, just as in the early days of Islam. Others argue that the principles from Muhammad's teachings should be re-interpreted and applied to the different situations Muslims face today.
2. Could Islam have failed under Makkan persecution? In the extremes of persecution, it might have, but Muslims believe that Allah wills all things and controls what happens in the doctrine of predestination. How, then, do Muslims understand suffering? Can suffering really come from the All-Compassionate? Or is it part of a test for humanity? How should Muslims react to suffering and abuse today, bearing in mind the teachings and actions of Muhammad?