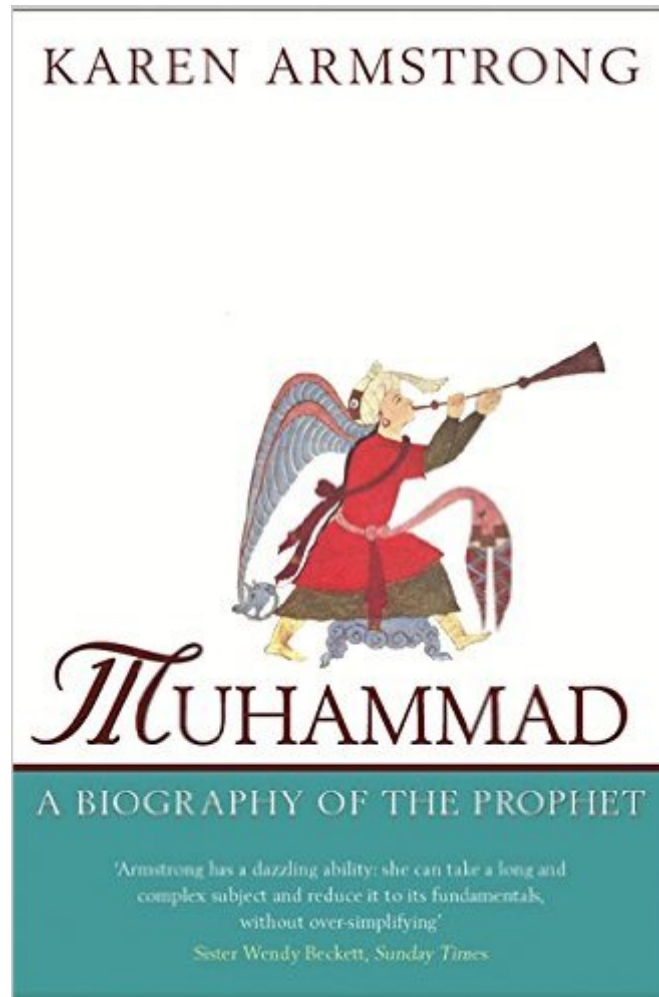


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Muhammad: A Biography Of The Prophet



Synopsis

A life of the prophet Muhammad by bestselling religious writer Karen Armstrong. Most people in the West know very little about the prophet Muhammad. The acclaimed religious writer Karen Armstrong has written a biography which will give us a more accurate and profound understanding of Islam and the people who adhere to it so strongly. Muhammad also offers challenging comparisons with the two religions most closely related to it - Judaism and Christianity.

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Customer Reviews

Armstrong has written what is likely the most accessible biography of Muhammad available today. It gives an intriguing account of not only Mohammed's life, but also the historical context under which Islam emerged. The book provides a sound introduction to how and why the Muslim world came to be, as well as glimpse into why it has evolved into its current state. One negative aspect of the novel is that Armstrong often painstakingly tries to justify many of the Prophet's actions, likely out of fear that Western readers will simply write these actions off as barbaric and primitive. There is no need to do this, and the downside is that Armstrong often comes off sounding biased. Armstrong already gives us a clear understanding of the harsh and violent society which plagued 6th century Arabia. Based on this, why the Prophet took many of the actions he did should be understandable to the reader. This however is only a minor criticism and it by no means mars this fascinating book. One only wishes Muslim writers could offer such enriching accounts of their Prophet rather than blindly praising him to no end and offering little valuable insight into the complexities of the man.

While this book is definitely an excellent introduction to the life of Mohammed, Karen Armstrong clearly doesn't have the knowledge required to write an in-depth and more accurate biography of the prophet. The sources Armstrong uses are mostly western and whilst she does depend on many early Islamic sources, she does not do so critically. Tabari, a scholar that she quotes several times in a book, recounts different versions of early Islamic history side by side (she mentions this point in the book) however she only uses those versions that are in line with the mainstream interpretation of Islamic history. Ismaili's, Shi'ites, Sufis, Kharijites and other minority sects have different interpretations of the early history of Islam, and whilst I am by no means saying that their versions of history are truer than the mainstream Sunni version, I believe that it is important to also give their viewpoints. For example, Armstrong gives a rosy picture of the Caliphate period which came after the death of the prophet, whilst minority sects are more critical of this period. She also gives little importance to the members of the prophet's family like Ali and Fatima whilst in Shi'ite Islam they are considered central figures who were persecuted by Abu Bakr, Omar and Aisha. She calls Fatima the daughter of the prophet a weak figure whilst in reality she is a very strong woman who went to the mosque after the prophet's death, and in front of an audience of mostly men, demanded her inheritance which was taken from her by Abu Bakr. Although Muslims disagree on whether it was right for Abu Bakr to take her inheritance from her, it is important to note that not all Muslims see Abu Bakr as a good person and many Shia portray both him and Omar as cunning and deceiving. I am not advocating the Shi'ite version of history, but I believe that Armstrong should have examined the discrepancies between the two versions (and also the other minority sects) thus giving a less biased viewpoint of early Islamic history. Another problem that I have with Armstrong is her apparent lack of understanding when it comes to the Arabic names of the biblical prophets. For example, she mentions that Mohammed may have confused Mary, the mother of Jesus with Miriam the sister of Aaron because they are both called Mariam in the Quran. In fact Christian Arabs call Mary, Mariam also and they call Aaron's sister Miriam (note the slight difference). All in all though, it is an excellent biography and I highly recommend that you read it.

This book may be a good starting point for a Westerner who knows little or nothing about Islam and its prophet. The book is fairly easy to read, as it is not saturated with excessive details or citations, but the tone does get monotonous quickly. Armstrong may have been very interested in the subject, but if that's the case, her passion and interest do not really come through and fail to make a deep impression on the reader. At times, I felt bored. The title is a bit misleading, too. This is not really a biography of Muhammad, but a kind of interpretation of Islam, its origins, and the character of the

prophet--all intertwined in a single book. The sources for the book are English-language secondary sources, and the author was relatively new to Islam at the time of writing. I give it a generous four stars, but strictly speaking this is not really a biography of the prophet, nor a particularly gripping account of the rise of Islam. For a secular interpretation of Muhammad, you may want to see Rodinson's book, and for the faithful, perhaps Martin Lings'. Armstrong's book is best for those who are curious about Islam but afraid to wade in with both feet. Also, the book has an absolutely beautiful cover.

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