

## Chapter Four: Jesus and Muhammad, the Conflicts

**B**oth Jesus and Mohammed brought a totally new way of thinking about God and a revolutionary new ethic to their world. And, in both cases, their new ideas threatened the religious and political establishments and generated severe conflicts. The way in which they responded to these conflicts distinctly sets the two men apart and has characterized the tone of the two religions ever since.

### **Jesus' Conflict With Jewish Authorities**

The first significant sign of conflict against Jesus and his followers in the gospels was when Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, was arrested and imprisoned at Machaerus Castle near the Dead Sea by Tetrarch Herod Antipas. John had openly preached about Herod's immorality because of his marriage to Herodias who had been first been married to Antipas' brother, Philip. Later, to fulfill a rash promise made to Herodias' daughter, Salome, Herod had John beheaded. Soon, some Pharisees warned Jesus that Herod Antipas wanted to kill him and Jesus' reaction was to call Herod, "That fox!"

While Jesus was still in Galilee, more and more scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees began to show up wherever he was preaching, healing, or teaching. Most of them had probably been sent by the Sanhedrin, the primary court of Judaism in Jerusalem, to investigate what Jesus was doing and saying. In Jerusalem, it gradually became clear to the High Priest,

Caiaphas, the retired High Priest, Annas, and other officers of the court that Jesus had to be eliminated. They feared that Jesus' preaching would stir up the people so much that they would turn against the religious establishment.

Several times, they sent out groups of Temple police and soldiers to capture Jesus but, each time he escaped. Then, a few weeks before Passover, probably in the spring of the year 29, Jesus fled from Jerusalem to an area east of the Jordan River after the Jewish leadership tried first to stone him and then have him arrested for blasphemy because he had announced, "The Father and I are one ... the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

A few weeks later, Jesus returned to the Jerusalem area to perform an ultimate act of healing by raising his beloved friend Lazarus who had been dead for four days. Many Jewish leaders witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus and, more importantly, witnessed the response of the many people who came to believe in Jesus because of this event.

The concerns of the Jewish leadership accelerated and they sought again to have him arrested, tried, and executed. The High Priest Caiaphas said to the high court, the Sanhedrin, "It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." But, Jesus eluded his pursuers again and escaped with his disciples to Ephraim on the edge of the desert wilderness.

Then, Jesus and his disciples returned to the Jerusalem area six days before Passover. When they were spotted at the residence of Lazarus in the suburb of Bethany, the Jerusalem Jewish leaders plotted to have both Jesus and Lazarus arrested. However, because of Passover, the population in Jerusalem had swollen with pilgrims to ten times its normal size and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had moved into the city with a legion of soldiers from Caesarea to keep order. The Jewish leadership was concerned that, because of Jesus' growing popularity, a public arrest might start riots.

The situation was further exacerbated, however, when Jesus made a dramatic entry into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey, a symbol that was understood by the crowd as an announcement that he was, indeed, the long expected Messiah. The people believed that a Messiah would come who would be in the lineage of King David, would be a powerful general with divine power, and would drive out the Roman occupying forces as well as the religious and aristocratic Jewish leadership. The crowd iden-

tified Jesus as that Messiah, shouted “Hosanna!” and lined his path with their garments and palm fronds.

When Jesus arrived in the heart of the city surrounded by immense crowds, he went immediately to the Temple area to drive out the money-changers and merchants who were selling sacrificial animals. This was a direct attack on the abuses of the Temple sacrificial system that was the primary means of financial support for the Jewish leadership.

Because most of his followers had come to believe Jesus was the Messiah, they expected a confrontation with the authorities would end in Jesus using his power to destroy the Temple leadership, the Jewish aristocracy, and the Roman occupational forces. One of Jesus’ closest disciples, Judas, a Judean and likely a member of one of the Zionist revolutionary groups like the Sicarii, betrayed Jesus to the Jewish leadership. It is probable that Judas believed that, if Jesus was arrested, it would force him to retaliate against the establishment.

However, Jesus had consistently told his followers that he was a different kind of Messiah than the one they expected. He was the “suffering servant” Messiah that had been predicted by Isaiah and he would suffer and die for the benefit of the people rather than go to war for them. He was arrested, tried, and found guilty of the capital crime of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin.

Because the Sanhedrin could not actually carry out an execution, Jesus was handed over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, for execution. After some minor questioning by Pilate, Jesus was whipped, mocked, and marched to a hill outside the city walls where he was crucified along with two thieves. He died around three o’clock on Friday afternoon and, because the next day was the Sabbath, he was taken down from the cross and laid in a nearby tomb.

On Sunday morning, Jesus rose from the tomb. He made a variety of appearances before his followers in both Jerusalem and Galilee over the next forty days and then ascended into heaven.

## **Muhammad’s Conflict With the Meccans**

Just as the preaching of Jesus immediately put him in conflict with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, Muhammad’s preaching immediately put him in conflict with the Quraysh authorities in Mecca. Two primary aspects of his preaching and teaching threatened the power structures in Mecca.

***Rigid Monotheism.*** The Quraysh believed that Allah was the High God but they also believed in a wide variety of pagan gods and 360 idols were arranged around the Kabah, a huge cube-shaped shrine in Mecca. Muhammad emphasized that there was only one God, Allah, and that all the rest were non-existent and that any belief in them was detrimental to true faith. Because of this, Muhammad made his followers face Jerusalem when they prayed, turning their backs on the pagan Kabah. The economy of the Quraysh depended on pilgrims coming to the Kabah, the most important worship center in Arabia, and spending money to gain the favor of their favorite god or goddess. Muhammad's preaching against this was damaging the income of the Quraysh.

***Eternal Life.*** Along with Christians and Jews, Muhammad preached that God would, ultimately, judge all humans. At the Last Judgment, they would be judged on the degree to which they followed the imperatives of the Quran, especially those that called for care of the poor and redistribution of wealth, not on their wealth or social status. The Quraysh believed that there was no such thing as life after death, no heaven or hell, and that only those things that would increase personal wealth and power in this life were of any value. The only ethic that mattered was loyalty to the tribe and its general values. So, Muhammad's emphasis on life after death, heaven and hell, and the Final Judgment was seen as a direct attack on both the revered traditions and the rampant capitalism of the Quraysh.

***A New Ethic.*** Muhammad preached a significantly higher level of social responsibility than had ever been heard in the Arab world before. He called for moral reform covering the just treatment of the disadvantaged, orphans, the poor, the hungry, debtors, widows, travelers, slaves and other unfortunates. He called for the same loyalty and communal support that had been the hallmark of Arab tribal tradition to be extended to all followers of Allah, regardless of tribal membership. And, he called for tolerance of Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians because they were also "People of the Book" who had received revelation similar to what he had received. This insulted the traditions of the Quraysh as well as threatening their historic tribal structures, power base, and economic systems.

The Quraysh opposition to Muhammad intensified rapidly. They imposed a boycott on the small Muslim group, forbidding either intermarriage or commerce with them. The Muslims were not able to buy food and many of their businesses were ruined. After two years of the boycott, it was lifted but, almost immediately, Muhammad's uncle and protector, Abu

Talib, died leaving the prophet in danger of being killed by the Quraysh.

At about this time, a delegation from the agricultural town of Yathrib, 250 miles north of Mecca, came to see Muhammad. The assortment of Arab and Jewish tribes that lived together in Yathrib were constantly at war with one another and they had heard that Muhammad's new religious philosophy contained ideas that might help them end the strife. When an assassination attempt on Muhammad failed in 622, the group of Muslim families decided to immigrate to Yathrib. This immigration is identified by Muslims as the beginning of the Islamic era because it was in Yathrib (renamed "Medina" which means "The Prophet's City") that Muhammad was finally able to fully implement the ideals of the Quran. Because of this, the year 622 is year one on the Islamic Calendar.

In Medina, Muhammad was successful in bringing most of the conflicting tribes together into a single Muslim community through both the power of his religious message and his administrative and political skills. He immediately built a simple mosque where, every Friday, he preached standing on a tree trunk. All of the activities of the Muslim community – secular, social, sacred, military, political and economic – came under the authority of Muhammad and the Quranic ideal. Everyone belonged to the one community regardless of their tribal affiliation, no one could attack anyone else, and everyone pledged to protect one another. It was revolutionary and it brought peace to the troubled area.

Back in Mecca, however, the leaders of the Quraysh were greatly threatened by the development of this new "super tribe" especially when the Muslims, needing more economic resources, turned to the honored Arabic tradition of "ghazu," raiding other tribes for booty and livestock. Because of the recent hostilities from the Meccans, their rich caravans became the primary target. In March of 624, a bitter battle ensued between a Meccan army protecting a major caravan and the Median forces led by Muhammad himself and, even though the Meccan force was much larger, it was severely defeated by Muhammad's superior military leadership.

Over the next year, clashes between the Meccan and Median armies continued until the Battle of the Trench when 3,000 Muslims severely defeated an invasion force of 10,000 Meccans, again because of Muhammad's superior military leadership. Following this decisive victory, many of the smaller northern Arab tribes gradually joined the Muslim community under the leadership of Muhammad and in just a few years,

this Muslim community became the dominant force in Arabia.

However, even though the Quran allows for warfare as a means of defending the faithful, it teaches that war is so awful that Muslims must do everything possible to restore peace as quickly as possible. Therefore, after his stunning defeat of the Meccans, Muhammad set out to bring peace to the land. He announced that daily prayers would now be done facing Mecca instead of Jerusalem and he set out with 1,000 unarmed followers to make the traditional religious pilgrimage, the hajj, to the Kabah in Mecca. This led to a peace treaty between the Muslim community and the Quraysh and dozens more small Arab tribes converted to Islam and joined the Muslim community.

In 630, the Quraysh violated the treaty and attacked one of the smaller tribes belonging to the Muslim community and, in retaliation, Muhammad marched on Mecca with a huge army. The Quraysh surrendered without a single drop of blood being shed. The Muslims entered Mecca, destroyed all the idols around the Kabah, and rededicated it to the worship of the one God, Allah.

Two years later, at age 68, Muhammad died of natural causes just ten years after the beginning of the Islamic era. In this decade, virtually all of Arabia had converted and become part of the Muslim community. Some of this happened through creative political alliances, some through marriages in which Muhammad added to his growing harem of wives, and some through military force. However, the dominant thing that united the Arabs – and would eventually unite the largest and longest lasting empire the world had ever known — was the compelling attractiveness of the Islamic faith.

Jesus encountered conflict and gave up his life as a sacrificial Savior of humankind. Muhammad encountered conflict and rose up as a great religious, political and military Savior of humankind. These two deeply religious men of God brought about more change in the world than all of the other leaders throughout history combined.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. *Why do you think the preaching of both Jesus and Muhammad so threatened the power structures of their time?*
2. *Do you believe that Jesus had the power to prevent his crucifixion?*
3. *Do you think Muhammad was less of a religious man because he responded militarily to the attacks on the Muslim community?*