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Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time

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Bookshelves—and shelves holding audiobooks—present an increasingly wide array of options to listeners seeking to augment their knowledge of Islam's early days. Profiles of the Prophet Muhammad in particular range from the blatantly fawning to the openly hostile. In *Muhammad: Prophet for Our Time*, author Karen Armstrong narrates her own text, painting a sympathetic portrait of the founder of Islam that will catch listeners' attention regardless of their predilections. Armstrong is also the author of the bestselling *A History of God* and *History of Jerusalem.*

From the economic, political, and social context of pre-Islamic Arabia to Muhammad's life (from around 570 CE to 632 CE), Armstrong offers a rich survey of almost every aspect of Muhammad's life. She does not shy away from the most controversial issues regarding Muhammad's life and teachings. Armstrong speaks about his often political marriages to multiple women—including his union with the girl Aisha, who would become his favorite wife. She addresses the oft-misunderstood early Islamic relationships with Jews in western Arabia. And she confronts directly notions about Islam's supposedly inherent inclinations toward violence and misogyny. In tackling the latter areas, Armstrong highlights Muhammad's opposition to the aggression of pre-Islamic Arabia and—as odd as it seems looking back today—the benefits to the era's widows and orphans of Islam's sanction of polygamy. In most cases, she cites early Islamic sources to present the issue's facts (as best they can be ascertained), adding perspective based on her knowledge of comparative religions.

Some of the audiobook's most worthwhile moments derive from Armstrong's facility with Arabic, which allows her to explain important terms and their nuances. One example is her discussion of "jihad," a word that connotes not simply "holy war" (as many Western observers assert) but also "struggle" or "effort." For Muslims, this frequently is an internal endeavor more than a literal fight with non-Muslims. Likewise, her pronunciation of the tribes, locations, and personal names of the time reward the reader in a way that other narrators would have difficulty matching. Armstrong does, however, leave part of Muhammad's life less than adequately addressed: his relationships with his primary companions, especially his cousin and son-in-law

Ali.

Although *Muhammad* may not appeal to those wanting to hear a disparagement of his life and legacy, it will please people interested in an efficient and entertaining overview of Islam's early days and the key role of its Prophet. Some may see Armstrong as an apologist for one of history's most divisive figures, but her clear expertise on Muhammad—and his setting—will disarm all but the most partial listeners.