

The Old Woman who Threw Rubbish

www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources

Keywords

Islam; Values and Issues: patience, mercy, compassion, empathy, forgiveness.

Notes for teachers

This much-loved story has been told by Muslims across the world for generations. Although it has no roots in the authoritative Islamic sources of the life of Muhammad, the story illustrates the importance of Muhammad as a moral and ethical exemplar for Muslims.¹

The story teaches us that we should be patient and steadfast in the face of adversity. If we are wronged, we should endeavor to show compassion and understanding towards the wrongdoer rather than seek vengeance. The story urges an approach to conflict which goes beyond simply ‘turning the other cheek’. It encourages us to build connections and relationships with those who wrong us and those with whom we might disagree.

In addition to the moral dimensions of the story, ‘The Old Woman Who Threw Rubbish’ could be used as a means of providing a little context to the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The story is set in Mecca, the Arabian city in which Muhammad was born and raised. Traditional sources date Muhammad’s birth to 570 CE but it was not until the year 610 CE that Muhammad received his first revelation from God in the mountains outside Mecca.

Tradition suggests that Muhammad’s relationship with the population of Mecca became more and more difficult as his prophetic career unfolded. Many Meccans did not like Muhammad’s Islam because it presented a significant challenge to

¹ Alongside the Qur’an, the *Sunnah* (‘habit’ or ‘usual practice’) of Muhammad represents the foundation on which Islamic law and theology is based. The primary source for the *Sunnah* of Muhammad is the *Hadith*, reports describing the words, actions or habits of Muhammad, as witnessed by those who knew him. Some *hadith* are generally accepted to be more reliable than others, with six main collections considered *sahih* or ‘authoritative’ in the Sunni tradition.

either their business interests or their religious affiliations. Indeed, Muhammad and his companions were forced to leave Mecca in the year 622 CE as their lives were in serious danger. This *hijra* ('migration') to the nearby city of Yathrib (now Medina) is seen as a highly significant event in the history and development of the early Muslim community, so much so that 622 CE marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Why might the woman in the story have disliked Muhammad?

Did Muhammad have the right to retaliate and should he have done so?

Why did Muhammad decide to knock on the woman's door?

Why was the woman so impressed by Muhammad's actions?

Application to other contexts

How do you feel when someone does something bad to you?

Do you usually retaliate, or do you try to forgive?

In the long run, is it better to forgive or to retaliate?

Are there some things that cannot, or should not, be forgiven?

Reflecting on wider issues in Islam

How important are Muhammad's deeds and actions to Muslims across the world?

What sources might Muslims use to learn more about Muhammad and the way he lived his life?

In the story, Muhammad embodies the principles of patience, mercy and compassion, all of which are essential attributes of God in Islam (see the first verse of all but one of the Qur'an's 114 chapters for example). What other words are used to describe God and his attributes in the Islamic tradition?

Sources / Further Reading

On Muhammad:

Brown, J., *Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Cook, M., *Muhammad*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

On Sunnah and Hadith:

Shepard, W. E., *Introducing Islam*, Oxon: Routledge, 2014, pp84-90.

Encyclopedia of Islam: <https://tinyurl.com/ll98ah9>

The Old Woman Who Threw Rubbish

There lived an old woman in Mecca who did not like the Prophet Muhammad much at all. Every day as Muhammad passed the old woman's house on his way to pray, she would throw rubbish out of her window onto his head.

Yet Muhammad would never complain. He would simply continue on his journey as if nothing had happened.

This continued, day after day, until one day, Muhammad passed by the old woman's house and, to his surprise, no rubbish landed on his head. Muhammad looked around to see where the old woman was. When he couldn't see her he became concerned so he went to the front door of the woman's house and knocked.

"Come in" said a weak and feeble voice.

When Muhammad entered, he found the old woman in bed looking scared. Was Muhammad going to shout at her or punish her for throwing rubbish on his head every day?

"Don't be scared" said Muhammad, "I'm not here to shout at you".

Muhammad quickly realised that the old woman was very ill and unable to leave her bed. He therefore set about cleaning her house and making sure she had everything she needed to be comfortable.

The old woman was so impressed by Muhammad's behaviour that she decided never to throw rubbish on his head ever again.