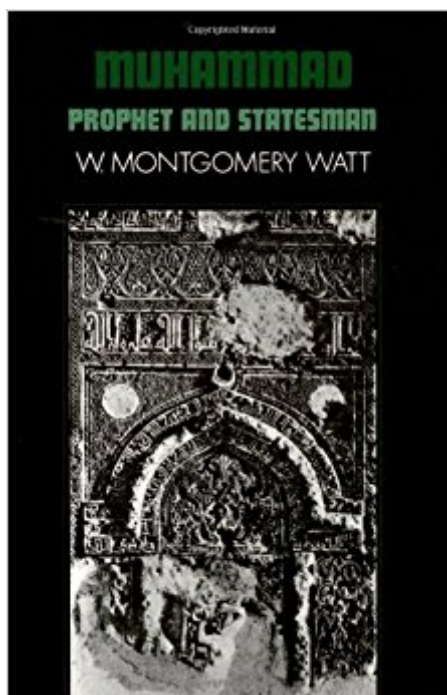


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# Muhammad: Prophet And Statesman (Galaxy Book, 409)



## Synopsis

A short account of the life and achievements of one of the great figures of history, this volume also serves as an excellent introduction to one of the world's major religions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If you're looking to gain an understanding of the life of Muhammad, grab this book. Watt presents a prose description of Muhammad's life, backed by sound, comprehensive study. It is actually enjoyable reading, almost like a story, yet completely historically accurate. (Or as much as we can be.) Watt does not make either extreme mistake of simply accepting the traditions of the Hadith or the Qur'an as absolute truth; or of looking only at Western denigrations of Islam. Rather, he appears to recognize historical truths in the Qur'anic traditions, and in Western and Eastern scholarship. If you've been trying to learn about Islam and have spent time looking over the Qur'an, this is \*the\* book to turn to get that background on Muhammad and "flesh" him out. Watt shows a human, beyond the traditions and myths, that changed his world, and then the rest of the planet.

Like most Muslims, I have studied the Prophetic biography from Muslim sources that present the life of Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) as a moral, ethical, and spiritual guide for everyday behavior. However, now that I am studying Islam in a western institution I thought it would be necessary to read an objective, academic account on the life of the Islam's final prophet. I chose W. Montgomery Watt's abridged biography, Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman,

because it is known as the standard introduction to Seerah (i.e. the life and times of the Prophet Muhammad) in western academia. Doctor Watt (d. 2006 CE) was a historian, a priest of the Scottish Episcopal Church, and a professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Edinburgh. When I read that he was once referred to as the last orientalist I knew I would be engaging a text that would challenge the historicity of many aspects of the Seerah I had accepted as uncontested truths. First published in 1961, the 240-page work is an abridgment of his two longer works, *Muhammad at Mecca* and *Muhammad at Medina*. Many of the questions that are raised in this book may well be addressed in the larger volumes. It follows a chronological order to help readers gain a clearer picture of Muhammad ﷺ's (peace and blessings be upon him) life and achievements. Doctor Watt makes interesting observations about the authenticity of Seerah sources. He holds that the primary source for the Seerah is the Qur'an, but because it is fragmentary as a historical record it presupposes knowledge of the general outline of Muhammad ﷺ's (peace and blessings be upon him) life. Also, he notes that the historical reliability of hadith literature, which is mainly concerned with legal or theological issues, is highly criticized by western scholars. However, he accepts that the material in the early biographies, such as Ibn Ishaq's (d. 768 CE) *Seerah* and al-Waqidi's (d. 822 CE) *Maghaazi*, is to be accepted as true. At times, however, I was left confused about how Doctor Watt decides which accounts in the Seerah are factual and which are mythical. While casting the famous meeting with Bahira the monk as mere legend, he writes about the historically controversial incident of the Satanic verses with great certainty. As a general observation, reading the Seerah through a hermeneutic of suspicion requires mental and emotional adjustment for Muslims who are accustomed to receiving the account through a hermeneutic of acceptance. Due to many events being put on trial, one can easily disregard this work as another piece of Islamophobic propaganda aimed to smear the character of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). However, Doctor Watt is critical of both Muslim idealization and European denigration and writes that both approaches are inadequate ways to understand the Prophet. He writes, "In the modern world, where contacts between Christians and Muslims are closer than ever before, it is urgent that both should strive to reach an objective view of Muhammad's character." He calls for practical consideration and scholarly zeal to cultivate the study and spread of more accurate information on the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). Ultimately, he views the Prophet as possessing four qualities that ensured the success of the early Muslim community. First, the Prophet's (peace and blessings be upon him) astute vision enabled him to introduce a framework of ideas that remedied the social issues of 7th century Arabia.

Second, his wisdom as a statesman allowed him to implement a political strategy that had advantages well into the future. Third, his skill in appointing competent leaders as deputies and military leaders ensured future sustainability of his political strategy. Fourth, his incredible trust in God and firm belief that God had tasked him with the mission of conveying the Qurʾān inspired him to achieve all that he did in his life. Every work of Seerah seems to have a quality that distinguishes it from other accounts. Martin Lings (d. 2005 CE) work is known for having a poetic style with a lot of genealogical information. Tariq Ramadan's work is known for contemplating the wisdoms behind key events in the Seerah. What distinguishes Doctor Watt's book from other Seerah works? The most salient characteristics of his account are as follows. First, unlike Lings, there aren't as many names mentioned in this Seerah. Only the main characters of a particularly event are mentioned. This made it easier for me to understand what actually happened. Second, the biography seems to avoid the Divine as much as possible. This was the most unique characteristic for me since all Muslim narratives of the Seerah assume God and the metaphysical as the driving forces behind events. Watt claims simply that, "involved in the conception of Muhammad's special mission was the receiving of revelations or messages from God." It is important to note that because he is working under the western academic framework, he cannot make the faith-based claims that Muslim biographers do. At least this is how I have understood western academia. I believe it is for this reason that alleged miracles in the Seerah are briefly mentioned if not completely erased. In the case of the night of ascension, which only receives three lines of text, he fails to explain one of the most powerful sources of inspiration for Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and his early followers. When explaining how the sequence of the Qurʾān was decided he alleges that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) rearranged and even omitted verses in the Qurʾān. This is incredibly problematic since Muslims claim to have sound narrations of the angel Gabriel coming down from the heavens to teach him the correct order. Because the metaphysical claims of the Seerah are ignored, the book mainly looks into the political and strategic implications of events. Doctor Watt essentially claims that Muhammad's (peace and blessings be upon him) new religion, Islam, borrowed heavily from Christianity and Judaism. According to him, the Prophet aimed to model Islam after these traditions by instituting elements such as the fast of Ashoora, making the direction for prayer originally towards Jerusalem, and holding Friday prayers that are modeled after pre-Sabbath preparations. Doctor Watt fails to at least acknowledge the Qurʾān's claim that it confirms the Abrahamic traditions of the past and in many cases corrects obfuscations. I do, however, appreciate his analysis on how Islam

incorporates pagan practices by giving them a new significance. For example, the old practice of lapidation of stone pillars during the pilgrimage was newly interpreted as the stoning of devils and so rendered harmless and unchanged. Additionally, Doctor Watt's thoughts on why the Medinans invited Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) to lead them is quite unique and brilliant. After explaining the state of constant conflict and lack of leadership, he writes, "Much of the attraction of inviting Muhammad lay in the fact that he would be neutral and would be able to decide their disputes impartially." I find this analysis very convincing while still acknowledging that Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) truly convinced the Medinans of his message. Another distinguishing trait of this Seerah is its understanding of the various marriages of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). Doctor Watt refutes western claims that these marriages were done for licentious reasons, but stresses the strategic advantages that many of the marriages possessed. It made me rethink the role of marriage in 7th century Arabia and how pivotal his marriages were in securing political power. There are many more interesting takes on the Seerah that are worth examining. In the end, Doctor Watt admits that, "The religious aspect was almost certainly always uppermost in his [Muhammad's] thoughts, and the motive which drove him on was the desire to fulfill God's command to spread Islam." Somehow or other, though he thought in terms of religious ideas, he must have been aware of the political realities. This much I have no problem accepting. I greatly enjoyed reading this work as it challenged many aspects of the Seerah Muslim authors rarely entertain. I highly recommend this book to those who have domain knowledge of the Seerah and are looking for a more critical, yet balanced, account of the life and times of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him).

In 1953 Watt published "Muhammad at Mecca" and in 1956 "Muhammad at Medina", in which he discussed critically and with much detail the career of Muhammad. He indicates that while the present work is essentially an abridgment of the two previous books, he has adhered more strictly to the chronological order. Though this may have produced a slight change of emphasis, he points out that there is no fundamental change in the views presented. This book is not simply a selection of passages from the earlier books; it is a work covering the same ground in a different manner. It is written in a style which can be appreciated by the intelligent reader whose interests are not those of the specialist. Consequently, it is not supplied with the wealth of detail very properly included in the previous volumes, for this book is more of an introduction to the life of Muhammad. Watt takes up a middle position between the over-critical attitude of some earlier Western writers and the rather

uncritical views of some Muslim writers. The sources, as those who have read the earlier books know, have been thoroughly investigated, and the result of this study has been to reject much of the skepticism which has been prevalent among Western writers without accepting all the material at face value. Watt strongly upholds Muhammad's sincerity during the whole of his career against the view often held in the West that he deteriorated after he went to Medina. His development as a political leader is no indication of deterioration, for, as Watt says, "for Muhammad the religious community was a body of people associated with one another in the whole of their lives, that is, was also a political unit". Regarding the criticisms made by the Meccans, Watt rightly argues that Muhammad objected to the accusation of his being under the influence of the jinn because poets, soothsayers and sorcerers were believed to draw their inspiration from this source. He believed that his inspiration came from God, and therefore he refused to be looked upon as a poet inspired by the jinn. Even some Muslims have not always understood the point of this objection, for they have argued that Muhammad disapproved of poetry. But the question was not about poetry as such, but about the source of inspiration. "Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman" is written in an admirable, dear, and interesting style, and the reader can be assured that it is not only an interesting book to read, but it's also based on sound scholarship, two characteristics which are not always combined.

This book was exactly what I was looking for. It is a historical perspective of Muhammad that addresses both the political and religious nature of his life. What I really liked was how I would be questioning some aspect of his argument and two paragraphs later Watt would deal with those questions. Watt is also really good at outlining his points and conclusions so they are very easy to follow. It's definitely a sympathetic view of Muhammad, but I really enjoyed it.

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