Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, was born in this commercial and religious center around 570. Orphaned as a child, he came under the guardianship of his uncle, a leader of the Quraysh tribe, which dominated Mecca and controlled access to the Ka’ba. Muhammad became a trader, married, had children, and seemed comfortable and happy. But he sought something more: he would sometimes leave home, escaping to a nearby mountain to pray.

“In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring / Recite in the name of your lord who created – / From an embryo created the human / Recite your lord is all-giving.”

Thus began a series of searing words and visions that, beginning around 610, came to Muhammad during his retreats. The key word was God, one God (the Arabic word for God is Allah). The key command was to “recite.” Muhammad obeyed, and later, as these recitations were written down and arranged—a process that was completed in the early seventh century—they became the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. The Qur'an is understood to be God’s revelation as told to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel, and then recited in turn by Muhammad to others. Its first chapter—or sura—is the fatihah, or Opening:

In the name of God
the Compassionate the Caring
Praise be to God
lord sustainer of the world
the Compassionate the Caring
master of the day of reckoning