

# The Princess of Quraish

## Islam's First Convert

Westerners may discuss Islam, with conversations that turn to the role of women in society, but there is one woman who is rarely mentioned by those outside the Muslim faith: Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, the wealthy and influential first wife of the Prophet Muhammad and the first convert to Islam.

Most of the information we have about Khadijah comes from the histories written about the Prophet after his death in 632 C.E. Khadijah was born into a family of wealthy traders belonging to the tribe of Banu Quraish in sixth-century Arabia. Her mother, Faimah bint Za'idah, was the daughter of a distant relative of Muhammad. Well respected for her virtuous character and high breeding, she was known as *Ameerat-Quraysh* (Princess of Quraish) and *al-Tahira* (the Pure One). In a decidedly male-dominated society, she was the most powerful and successful business

woman in Mecca, an important trading and pilgrimage center. Widowed twice, her hand was sought by many a man of the day.

Hearing of Muhammad's reputation as an upright young man, Khadijah hired him to manage her trading business when he was twenty-two. She proposed marriage to him in 595 C.E. when he was twenty-five. Scholars dispute the age of Khadijah at the time of her marriage to Muhammad, but tradition holds that she was forty years old at the time.

When Muhammad reported his visions of the angel Gabriel, Khadijah was the first to embrace him as the Prophet, making her the first convert to what is now the world's second-largest faith. She continued to support him financially after he had chosen to lead a

contemplative life.

Khadijah gave birth to two sons and four daughters, although Sunni and Shi'a Muslims disagree about whether all four daughters were from her marriage to Muhammad. Khadijah died around 620 C.E.. Although Muhammad had subsequent wives—11 in all—he did not take them until after Khadijah's death. (Some experts have speculated that this was stipulated in Khadijah's marriage contract.)

Although some scholars believe Khadijah's influence on the life of the Prophet has been downplayed in favor of more passive roles for Muslim women, she remains an important figure to millions of Muslims. Islamic tradition holds her up as an example of right living. To many, she embodies the ideal: a woman who is strong yet supportive, independent yet faithful.

Whatever her legacy, the Prophet's decision to accept her offer of marriage was no accident. ❧

By Christine Felton

