



# ISLAM: A HISTORY - 1

"In the name of Allah..."

## Introduction

*In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.*

These words are called the exordium, or passage, which is the start of every sura, or chapter, (except the ninth) in the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. It is recited often, including every time a Muslim eats or drinks, begins a journey, and enters a building. Though this simulation is about the history and culture of the Arabs, it is impossible to understand it without understanding the influence of Islam. Today with more than a billion believers, Islam is the world's second largest religion. Only Christianity is larger. Prophet Muhammad has been called the most influential man in history. With this much influence, the religion of Islam cannot be ignored.

**Arabia** The area in southwest Asia, between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, is called the Arabian Peninsula. The people who live there are known as Arabs. Largely a desert region, the peninsula stretches for about a million and a quarter square miles. Some areas, such as Yemen, feature well-watered fertile mountains in its interior.

**Bedouins** Before and after the establishment of Islam, many Arabs were Bedouins, or nomads of the desert. Bedouins lived in tents woven from goat or camel hair and spent most of their time traveling in the desert in search of good grass and water for their herds of camels, sheep, and goats. Bedouins also staged raids on other desert peoples and fought over pastures and wells. Arabs also were farmers, craftsmen, and merchants. Today, Bedouins are but a small minority of the Arab population, as most Arabs live in cities and surrounding urban areas.

**Religion** Before God revealed His message to Prophet Muhammad, the Arabs worshiped many gods. They believed spirits dwelled in rocks and trees. Arabs sometimes made statues of their gods. Each Arab town and tribe believed in different gods and basically did what they thought was right. There were organized religions in this region, however. Judaism and Christianity had been present in Arabia for several centuries. Jews and Christians had participated in many caravans and their influence was strong throughout the Arabian peninsula. This was Arabia in 570, the year in which the Prophet Muhammad was born.

**Muhammad—the prophet of Islam** Prophet Muhammad was born in 570 in Makkah which is located about halfway down western Arabia near the Red Sea. During Prophet Muhammad's time, it was an important trading stop between the Arabian Sea



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and the Mediterranean Sea. Prophet Muhammad's father died a few months before he was born. When Prophet Muhammad was six, his mother died, and he was raised by his grandfather and eventually by his uncle, Abu Talib. As a young man, Prophet Muhammad traveled in trading caravans between Makkah and Syria.

**Angel Gabriel directs Prophet Muhammad** When Prophet Muhammad was 25, he married Khadija, a rich widow. Prophet Muhammad became very successful in the caravan business and was known for his honesty and wisdom. Prophet Muhammad, however, was troubled by the drinking, gambling, and corruption in Makkah and other Arabian cities. While meditating in a cave in the desert, he had a vision of an angel. He was told by the angel Gabriel to be the apostle of God and to "warn" the people. From this date, around 610, Prophet Muhammad spent the rest of his life preaching the faith of Islam. At first people laughed at him, but eventually Prophet Muhammad became an important religious leader in the region. In 622 he migrated to Medina, a central event in the establishment of Islam. Eight years later he led an army into Makkah; the city surrendered without bloodshed. He destroyed the idols inside the ancient Kaaba. Makkah was now the center of Islam, and Prophet Muhammad was the leader. God's revelations were written down over a period of 23 years which today constitutes the Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims. When Prophet Muhammad died in 632, Islam was a religion about to shake the foundations of the Asian, African, and European worlds.

# ALLAH

... submission to God ...

**Muslims** There are more than one billion Muslims—the fastest growing group in the world today. More than 40 Islamic countries have populations with between 70% to 100% Muslims. Africa has the largest number of Muslims; followed by India. The biggest predominantly Muslim country is Indonesia. Only about 18 percent of the world's Muslim population is Arab. Although Muslims from many different countries speak different languages, they all recite prayers and read the Qur'an in Arabic. Traditional Islamic customs and names are shared in different countries.



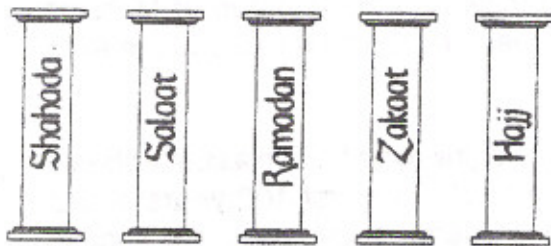
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**Islam** The word Islam in Arabic means "submission to God." People who believe in Islam are called Muslims. Just as Christians and Jews believe the Bible is the word of God, Muslims believe the word of God, or Allah, is written down in the Qur'an, the holiest book of Islam. The Qur'an is a book of teachings of Allah whose word Muslims believe was revealed to Prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years. In the Qur'an are listed all the details of how to become a good Muslim. Also important for every Muslim is the Hadith, the remembered sayings and traditions of Prophet Muhammad. The Hadith, written during Islam's first two centuries and compiled in various collections, gives further direction to all Muslims as a guide to conduct, behavior, and a proper way of life.

**Five Pillars of Faith** Central to being a faithful Muslim is the Five Pillars of Faith—or five important duties of a faithful Muslim.

- **Shahada** Profession of one's faith publicly that there is only one God, and Muhammad is his prophet
- **Salaat:** Prayer five times daily facing Makkah
- **Zakaat:** Charity or alms for the poor
- **Ramadan:** Fasting during the ninth month of the Islamic Calendar
- **Hajj:** Pilgrimage (religious journey) to the city of Makkah (in present-day Saudi Arabia) once during a Muslim's lifetime if he/she is financially and physically able to do so. During the Hajj, Muslims are required to visit the ancient shrine of the Kaaba. The Kaaba is a large cubelike structure in the center of the courtyard of the Holy Mosque in Makkah. The Kaaba, originally built by Adam as the first building to glorify God, was later rebuilt by Abraham and his son Ismail. Muslims circumambulate around the Kaaba, beginning at the corner in which the Black Stone is placed. It is the most sacred shrine of Islam.

### Five Pillars of Faith



**Other religions** The religions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism have many similarities. All three believe in only one God, heaven and hell, in many of the same moral standards, and in many of the same historical figures such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Christianity has split into three main divisions: Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. In a similar fashion, there is a division in Islam—the Sunni and Shi'a sects. Even though Christians, Jews, and Muslims have fought battles and wars throughout history, Muslims believe Christians and Jews are "People of the Book" or people deserving respect for their religious beliefs.



**Islamic Empire** From the time of Prophet Muhammad's death in 632, Islam's leaders were called caliphs or successors. Like Prophet Muhammad, the early caliphs were inspired by their faith in Islam. When a caliph died, however, disputes would arise over who would succeed him. When Ali, Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, was killed in 661, Mu'awiyah I, the new caliph, moved the capital from Medina to Damascus, in present-day Syria. This was the beginning of the first great empire period called the Umayyad Dynasty.

### Umayyad Dynasty 661 to 750

**Umayyad Dynasty** The Umayyad Dynasty lasted from 661 to 750. The Umayyad caliphs continued to expand the Umayyad empire to include Afghanistan, Turkestan, North Africa, most of Spain, and parts of southern France. While some caliphs raised taxes and lived more like kings than religious leaders, they expanded Arab culture to include many new innovations. They made Arabic the official language, minted the first Arabic currency, set up postal routes, and built and improved irrigation canals. They encouraged the arts and built beautiful mosques in Damascus and Jerusalem. Damascus became the cultural center of Islam and flourished as a center of trade, government, and religion. The Umayyads, however, had economic and social problems which led to their downfall. At about this time, Muslims divided among themselves and split into two main groups—the Shi'a and the Sunnis. In 750, a group of Muslims overthrew the Umayyads and became the new rulers of the Arab empire.

### Abbasid Dynasty 750 to 1258

**Abbasid Dynasty** The new rule came to be known as the Abbasid Dynasty. It lasted from 750 to 1258. The first 100 years of this dynasty is known as the first Golden Age of Islam, the second being the period when the Moors ruled Spain from 711 to 1492. Under the Abbasids, Muslim cities became great centers of learning and art. In 762, the second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur, moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad. Baghdad became the new capital and economic center of Islam and the Arab world.

The Islamic world changed under the Abbasid rule. The name Arab came to mean any subject of the empire who spoke Arabic—not just people from Arabia. This new Islamic empire began to



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absorb the traditions and cultures of the many different people now a part of the Islamic world. Centered around Baghdad, trade became international. The Abbasid caliphs, like many successful tradesmen, lived like Persian kings and became very rich and powerful. Banks opened, luxury items became more in demand, and the arts and learning flourished under their rule. Interest in Greek science and philosophy increased. Games such as backgammon and chess became popular.

**Contributions** Between the eighth and 14th centuries, Islamic scholars contributed much to the world's knowledge of medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. Islamic art and architecture are some of the most beautiful in the world, while Arab and Persian literature and poetry is world renowned for its style and beauty. Since trade was the most important business of early Arabia, caravans brought more closely together the cultures of Europe and Asia. Today the Arab world controls the vast majority of the world's oil supplies—thus influencing the world's economy more than any other single region.

**Conclusion** So why study Islam? It is important to have knowledge of such an important region and people. Early Muslims perfected the number system originally from India that we use today, including the concept of zero. They are known as the Arabic numerals. Through them we also were introduced to paper that originated in China, and it was they who introduced rhythmic music, rhyming poetry, different courses at meals, and table manners. Today, many Muslim countries supply the world with energy resources, such as oil and natural gas. Once we understand the immense contributions that have been made by Muslims throughout history, and that our economic and industrial life depends to a great extent on their sources of energy, we will come to realize that it is vital for us individually and as a nation to understand the people whose resources we depend on. Only by studying the history, religion, and contributions of a people can we

make intelligent decisions as a people and country. Because so much of our lives is directly affected by the Muslim world, it is important to understand how it is directly affected by Islam.

