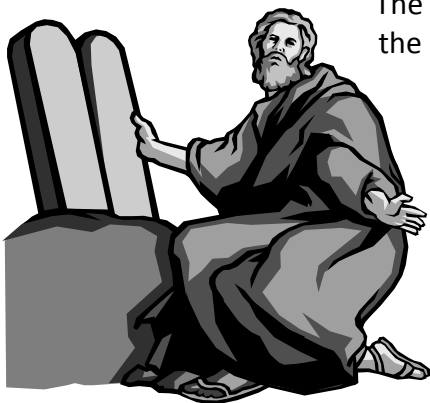
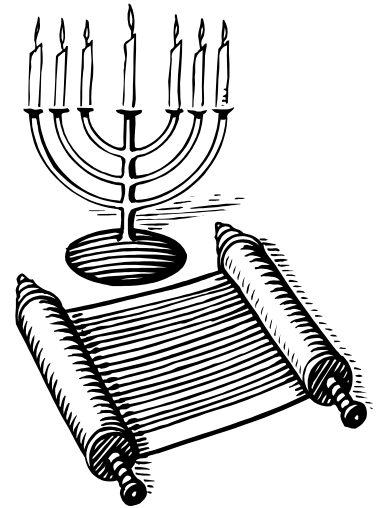


Religions of Southwest Asia

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have their origins in the lands that make up the countries of the Middle East (Southwest Asia). Though these three religions have much in common, historically there has been a great deal of religious conflict in this part of the world. Today, Israel is the only country in the area that is mostly **Jewish**. All of the other countries in the region are mostly **Muslim**, although most also have a Christian minority. There are further divisions within all three religions. Muslims are divided into a number of **sects**, or groups. The most important are the **Sunni Muslims** and the **Shia Muslims**. Christians have many different denominations, which include **Protestants, Catholics**, and various **Orthodox** sects. Different groups are found among Jews as well, including those who are **Orthodox** and those who are **Reform**. Religion has played a big role in the history and politics of Southwest Asia.

JUDAISM

Judaism is a **monotheistic** religion, meaning its followers believe in only one God. Judaism traces its origins back to **Abraham**, a Hebrew man born in Mesopotamia in approximately 2000 BC. Even though the society in which he lived was **polytheistic**, meaning they worshipped many gods, Abraham became one of the first people to profess the belief in a single God. The **Torah**, the first five books in the Hebrew Scriptures, says that God made a covenant (*agreement*) with Abraham, promising to make him the head of a new nation if he would dedicate himself and the Hebrew people to the worship of one God. Abraham left Mesopotamia and eventually went to the land of **Canaan** (part of the present day state of Israel) on the Mediterranean coast, which he believed God had promised to him and to his descendants. Here the Hebrews lived, worshipping **Yahweh**, the God they believed would protect them for their faithfulness. At a very old age, Abraham and his wife **Sarah** had a son, **Isaac**. Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson **Jacob**, are seen as the patriarchs (*founders*) of the Hebrew nation. Jacob's twelve sons, in turn, are viewed as the ancestors of the **Twelve Tribes of Israel**.



The Hebrew people lived in an area surrounded by more powerful kingdoms, and the Bible says that around 1300-1200 BC the Hebrews were forced into slavery in Egypt. After years of suffering, **Moses** took them into the Sinai desert to escape capture and led them out of slavery. This escape is known as the "**Exodus**" and is remembered each year by the celebration of **Passover** in the Jewish religious calendar. While wandering in the Sinai Desert, the Jewish faith teaches that God renewed his covenant with the Hebrew people, revealing to Moses the **Ten Commandments** at Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments formed the basic beliefs of the Jewish faith. After many years they were able to return to Canaan where they lived in

twelve generally self-governing tribes. They gradually extended their territory to the south along the Jordan River. The largest of these tribes was that of **Judah**, from which the names **Judaism** and **Jews** developed.



Around 1000 BC, the Hebrew people united in the kingdom of Israel under a series of kings – **Saul, David, and Solomon**. David established his capital in the city of Jerusalem, and Saul later built a great temple there and dedicated it to the one true God of the Jewish people. Struggles with more powerful neighbors continued however, and eventually the kingdom was divided with Judah in the south and Israel in the north. A period of Babylonian rule followed, ended by a revolt of the Maccabeus in 167 BC, which restored Hebrew control of the area. Independent rule in the area was ended finally by a **Roman** takeover. Roman rule greatly impacted the Hebrew people, for many Jews were taken captive and other Jewish people were forced out of the lands around Jerusalem. This was the beginning of “**The Diaspora,**” or the scattering of Jews to other parts of the world. The Romans also destroyed the first Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. Only a portion of the Western Wall of the Temple was left standing. The importance of Jerusalem and of the remaining western wall of the Temple continued to be central to the Jews during the long centuries of the Diaspora. Even though the Romans had taken over their ancestral lands and renamed it **Palestine**, the Jewish people believed that the lands of ancient Israel and Judea remained part of the covenant they had made with God.



The Western Wall (Jerusalem) - the only remaining portion of the original Jewish temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is a religious movement that grew out of Judaism during the time of Roman rule in Palestine. The founding figure in Christianity is **Jesus**, a man who was born in Bethlehem in Judea to a Jewish family in about 4 BC. Tradition holds that he lived a modest life in the city of Nazareth as a carpenter until he began to attract attention as a teacher and preacher when he reached the age of about 30. While he followed Jewish law and belief, he spoke of a more personal relationship with God, focusing on both the love of God and the generous treatment of neighbors and acquaintances. He had a number of followers who became known as his **disciples**, and their writings provide much of what is known about the life and teachings of Jesus. The first four books of the **New Testament** are made up of these writings. They are known as the **Gospels**.

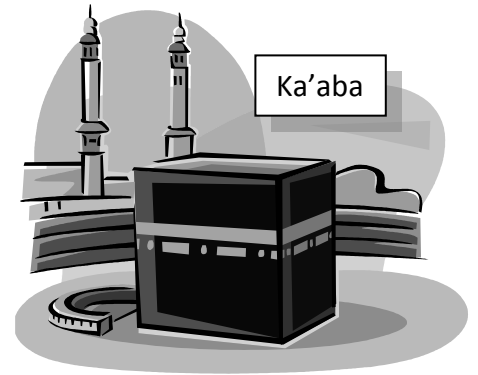


Many among both the Romans and the Jewish leaders worried about the attention Jesus attracted among the common people. Some of his followers went so far as to claim that he was the long awaited **Messiah**, or “**savior of man.**” Jewish leaders claimed Jesus encouraged such beliefs and was therefore guilty of crimes against Jewish teachings. The Roman ruler, **Pontius Pilate**, saw him as a threat to his authority and that of the Roman Empire. As a result, Jesus was sentenced to death by **crucifixion**, a form of execution in those days in which a person either was tied or nailed to a cross and suspended there until dead.

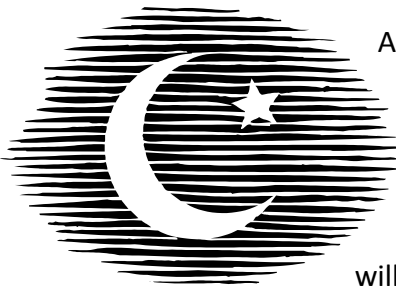
After his death, Jesus' followers believed that he had risen from the dead and walked among them again before going to heaven. They continued to call him the Messiah or the Greek word "**Christos**," which was shortened to "**Christ**." They called him the "Son of God." Word of Jesus' rising from the dead began to spread quickly and along with his teachings became the basis for a new religion called **Christianity**. His followers emphasized this new religion's willingness to take in all who wished to believe. They angered the Romans, as they refused to worship Roman gods and goddesses. Many of the early Christians were put to death by Roman authorities in the years following the time of Jesus, but the religion continued to have growing appeal among many who did not like Roman rule and who wanted a religion that emphasized both Old Testament teachings of the Jewish Torah and the loving and forgiving God described by Jesus in the New Testament. By the 300s AD, Christianity had spread to most parts of the Roman world. In fact, in 313 AD, the **Roman Emperor Constantine** officially ended the harsh treatment of Christians and made Christianity a religion approved by the empire. This further helped to spread the religion.

ISLAM

Islam is a religion that began in the city of **Mecca** in the Arabian Peninsula in the 600s AD. Mecca was a trading center located along a main route on the Red Sea coast connecting the Byzantine Empire with the shipping and trading centers coming from the Indian Ocean and the Far East. As a stop on the trade route, many different people visited the city of Mecca. In the center of town stood a rectangular building, the **Ka'aba**, which held several hundred different idols, or statues of gods, inside. Meccans believed the building had originally been built by Abraham and his son Ishmael to honor God for saving them from dying in the desert. Over the centuries, however, statues of many other idols and gods were placed in the building.



In 570 AD, an Arab man named **Muhammad** was born in the city of Mecca. Orphaned at an early age, he was taken in by his uncle and trained to become a merchant. He married an older woman and took over her caravan business, becoming a respected member of the Mecca community.



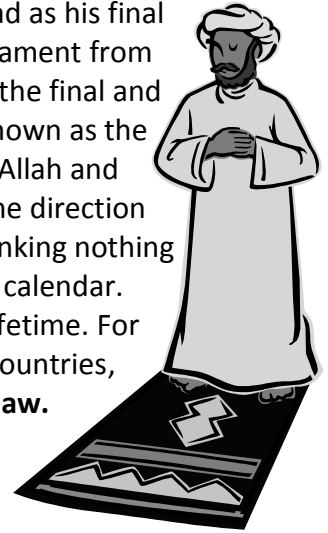
At the age of forty, while spending an evening in one of the cool caves in the hills around Mecca, Muhammad began to hear the voice of the angel Gabriel, calling on him to tell the word of God to the people. After much worry and after talking to his wife, Muhammad decided the voice was real, and he began to tell others in Mecca about what he had heard. He told people they needed to rededicate themselves to the worship of one God, whom he called **Allah**. Those who were willing to agree to his belief and practice Islam became known as a "**Muslims**," or "**ones who submit**" to the will of God. Similarly, the word Islam means "surrender to God". Many in Mecca worried that Muhammad's teachings would hurt their trade by angering those who worshipped other gods, and some of his followers began to face threats and violence.

To escape these threats, in 622 AD, Muhammad and his followers moved about 200 miles north to Yathrib, a city Muhammad renamed **Medina**, which means "the city of the prophet." This flight to Medina later came to be known among Muslims as the "**Hijrah**," and the date serves as the first year of the Islamic calendar. The people of Medina came to accept Muhammad as both a political and a religious leader, and many joined the new religion of Islam.



Muhammad returned to Mecca as the head of an army in 630 AD and the city surrendered rather than face a war. One of his first acts on entering Mecca was to go to the Ka'aba and remove all the idols. Muhammad then dedicated the building to Allah, the one God. Mecca and the Ka'aba remained central to Muslim worship.

After Muhammad's death, his followers collected the teachings from the angel Gabriel into the **Qur'an**, the holy book of Islam. Muslims believe there is only one God, and they view Muhammad as his final prophet, or messenger. Much of the Old Testament from Judaism and the New Testament from Christianity are also included in the Qur'an, so Muslims see the Qur'an and Islam as the final and complete word of God. All Muslims believe they must meet five basic obligations, known as the **Five Pillars of Faith**. The first is called **Shahada**, the belief that "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet." The second is **Salat**, or praying five times a day facing the direction of Mecca. **Zakat**, or charity to the poor is the third, followed by **Sawan**, eating or drinking nothing during the daylight hours of the month of Ramadan, the tenth month in the Muslim calendar. The final Pillar is to make the **Hajj**, or pilgrimage to Mecca, sometime during one's lifetime. For Muslims, the Quran offers a handbook for leading a respectable life. Some Muslim countries, such as Iran, base their legal code on the law of Qur'an, a system known as **shariah law**.



After Muhammad's death, the religion of Islam spread rapidly throughout the Arabian Peninsula and parts of the Persian and Byzantine Empires. Muslim armies were able to easily conquer areas where these older empires had weakened over the years. Many people welcomed the Muslims and converted to Islam, finding it a simple and direct religion.

Sunnis & Shi'as (Shiites)

After Muhammad died there was disagreement about who should lead the Muslim community. The question was settled for a time by agreeing to place power in the hands of four men who had been friends of Muhammad in his lifetime. They ruled one after the other, and they were known as the "**Four Rightly Guided Caliphs**." The word "**Caliph**" means leader or ruler. When the last of these men died, a new argument arose over who should lead the Muslim community. One group thought leadership should go to whoever was most able to keep the Muslim community together. These people thought that the leader of Islam should be elected. They came to be known as the **Sunni Muslims**, those who saw themselves closely following Muhammad's example. Another group felt leadership should go to a direct descendant of Muhammad. They wanted to choose one of Muhammad's grandsons, the children of his son-in-law Ali, for leadership. They became known as the **Shia Muslims**. A battle for control soon followed, resulting in the death of one of Muhammad's grandsons and the transfer of power to Sunni supporters.

These divisions in the Muslim community remain today, though there is little difference in their basic religious beliefs. The Sunni Muslims have always been in the majority, making up about 85% of those who call themselves Muslims today. The Shia Muslims have always been a minority, but they are a major portion of the populations of a number of countries today including **Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon**. Iran is over 90% Shia.

