

Unit 2: Historical Overview

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Key figures and places of Jewish, Christian and Muslim history
- Importance of Orthodox Eastern Christianity for Middle East Christians
- Muslim perspectives on Muhammad, the founder of Islam
- Muslim perspectives concerning the recording and use of the Qur'an
- Jerusalem as a holy city to three faiths

Identify

- Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael
- Monotheism
- Palestine, Jerusalem
- Moses, Exodus
- Patriarch, Orthodox Eastern Church
- Islam, Muslim, Muhammad, Mecca, Medina
- Umma
- Qur'an, hijrah, Kaabah, Karbala, Husayn ibn Ali
- Sunni, Shia
- Khadija
- Palestine

Realize

- Long-standing influence of religion on culture
- Differing Muslim/Western interpretations of historical events
- Continuing influence of colonization on the Middle East
- Nostalgia many Arabs feel for their past history

- Interconnectedness of much Jewish, Christian and Islamic history

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Before discussing the major religious traditions of the Middle East--the history and important locations central to Judaism, Christianity (Orthodox) and Islam--mention of three principles, each essential to our overall understanding of world cultures and religions, is necessary. Middle East religions amply demonstrate the importance of each. These principles apply to religion/culture in general and Middle East religions in particular:

- 1. Old Religions Die Hard** If confused concerning present cultural-political-religious issues, look to the past. Nothing hangs on as long or as powerfully as religious traditions. Understanding the past is important to understanding the present.
- 2. Religious Traditions Become Blended Over Time** In the process of forced conversions, arbitrary boundary shifts, intermarriages and passage of time, adaptation occurs. Religions blend.
- 3. Faith is Never Pure...The Effect of Culture Must be Added**

Economic, political, nationalist, environmental and ethnic composition factors strongly influence the flavor of a religious tradition and expression.



I. Judaism

Judaism possesses a history going back over forty centuries. As the oldest of the religions of the book, it is the cradle, the forerunner from which Christianity and Islam began.

Key figures and places of Jewish history (and subsequently for Christian and Muslim history) include:

1. Abraham This patriarchal figure is the father of the Jewish faith, the champion of **monotheism** (belief in one god), and the one with whom God made a special covenant (contractual agreement). Born in **Ur of the Chaldees** (near present day An Nasiriyah, Iraq), Abraham migrated to Palestine, traveling within the **Fertile Crescent** (rich farming area located on the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, shaped like a half circle) with stops near Babylon, Harran (near Urfa [Edessa], Turkey), Aleppo and Hamath (Halab and Hamah, Syria), and Shechem (Khirbat Balatah, Israel). Due to famine in the land of **Canaan** (present day Palestine), Abraham also traveled to Egypt seeking food.

2. Isaac As part of the covenantal agreement, God promised Abraham and his wife **Sarah** a son. Their ancestry would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. They would live in their own land--Palestine. When Sarah seemed unable to have children, Abraham followed the custom of the day in taking a servant woman to bear him children. The servant woman **Hagar** bore a son **Ishmael**, much to the displeasure of Sarah. Eventually Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

3. Jacob This son of Isaac experienced a name change to Israel. The descendants of Abraham took on the name Israelites since Jacob's time.

4. Moses The Israelites traveled to Egypt to escape famine (Jacob's son Joseph being a key figure in their survival). Eventually, these Jewish descendants became slaves in Egypt. Moses, active some four hundred years after Jacob, led the children of Israel out of Egypt

(the Exodus). While wandering through the Sinai Peninsula, God gave Moses the ten commandments near Mt. Sinai (close to present day Gebel Musa, Sinai Peninsula).

5. David This king of Israel (northern Palestine) and Judea (southern Palestine) was founder of the royal Davidic dynasty. King David wrote many of the Old Testament Psalms, led conquests over the Canaanites, and is a leading figure in Jewish history. Jerusalem, the city of David, became capital of the nation of Israel during David's reign.

II. Christianity

1. Jesus Jesus is the central figure in Christianity. Born of Mary, Christians believe Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, God himself.

2. Disciples The 12 disciples (early followers of Jesus) helped spread the gospel (good news of Christ) throughout Palestine.



Early disciples and followers of Jesus include Peter, a hardheaded former fisherman whose life was transformed by Jesus; John, the beloved disciple and author of the gospel of John and Revelation; Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus with a kiss; and Mary and Martha, sisters who were friends of Jesus. Jesus raised Lazarus, their brother, from the dead.

3. St. Paul This apostle's (an apostle being a follower of Jesus who actually saw the Lord and proclaimed his gospel) letters and missionary travels did much to spread the Christian message throughout Asia Minor.

4. Constantine In A.D. 313, this Roman emperor converted and made Christianity a legal religion within the empire. **Constantinople** (present day Istanbul), on the site of the ancient Greek city **Byzantium**, became an official center for Christendom. Early creeds of the church focused on doctrinal issues associated with the nature of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

5. Orthodoxy Of importance in understanding Christian groups within the Middle East (and the present day conflict in Bosnia) is the development of Orthodoxy.

Most Middle East Christian groups classify themselves under the Orthodox umbrella.

In the fifth and sixth centuries, the Roman empire split in two, with Constantinople being the head of the **Eastern** (Byzantine) empire, Rome becoming the center of Western rule. In 1054, a controversy between the heads of Church in Constantinople (the **Patriarch**) and Rome (the **Pope**) led to a major split--the **Great Schism**. The Western branch became known as Roman Catholic, the Eastern as Orthodox. This division continues even today.

III. Islam



The name *Islam* means obedience or peace through submission to the will of God. *Muslim* (obedient one) identifies the name given to followers of Islam.

1. Muhammad Born in Mecca (present day Makkah of Saudi Arabia), Muhammad was orphaned when young. At the time, Mecca was on a spice route, located midway between the Jewish city of Yathrib (Medina--city of the prophet Muhammad [present day Al Madinah]) and Christian Najran (in present day southeast Saudi Arabia). Though Muhammad engaged in secular pursuits, (he was a camel driver, trader, father and husband), community leaders respected him, calling him "Trusted One." Lawlessness of the peoples and worship of many area gods troubled Muhammad.

Dr. Kamil Said, professor of Islamic studies at the Naval Postgraduate School, gives the following outline concerning Muhammad (NS 4300, p. 9):

a. Muhammad was not a revolutionary, but rather, the contrary.

"He preferred to compromise, to transform, to adapt, and finally to incorporate. He knew how to wait for the favorable occasion and seize it."

b. He did not consider his mission as superseding those of his predecessors, but to complete and revitalize the earlier religions.

c. He did not look upon himself as superior to any of the former prophets.

d. He did not demand that Jews and Christians should renounce their version of monotheism.

e. He looked upon himself as liberator and protector of other religions.

f. Muhammad emphasized faith. He denied his ability to perform miracles.

g. Circumstances transformed Muhammad from being a religious teacher in Makka to a ruler in Al Madina. At Al Madina, Muhammad established the Muslim Umma, (nation); gave allegiance to Islam priority over any other relations; established brotherhood among the Muslims; made the individual responsible for the protection and security of society; gave women rights

which were denied her...; made learning obligatory to man and woman; protected private ownership; and gave all members of society equal rights.

2. Qur'an God revealed this Muslim holy book to Muhammad during the last twenty-two years of his life. Jibril (Gabriel) delivered the first revelation on Mount Hira near Mecca.

Muhammad began proclaiming the message, "...there is no god but God." In 622, while facing resistance in Mecca, Muhammad moved with his followers to Medina. This move, known as the **hijrah** (migration), marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

Dr. Said (NS 4300, pp. 11, 12), records the following concerning the Qur'an. It serves as a:

- manual of prayer.
- ethical and religious code.
- source of useful maxims of practical value.
- source of spiritual truth, philosophy, and religious knowledge.
- basic law governing Islamic society.



Concerning the recording of the Qur'an:

- Many of the revelations were committed to memory.
- A large number of chapters were written on parchment, palm leaves and smooth stones.
- Being unschooled, the Prophet himself did no writing.
- He entrusted most of what had been recorded to his scribe Zayd ibn Thabit.

- Shortly after the death of the Prophet, Abu Bakr commissioned Zayd to codify the revelations.
- The first copy of the Qur'an was completed a little before the death of Abu Bakr in 634.
- Abu Bakr passed this copy on to his successor Omar, who later turned it over to his daughter Hafsa, one of the Prophet's widows.
- In 657, and by order of Uthman the third Caliph, Zayd, with the aid of three Quarayshite scribes, completed the final text which was declared the official codex for all Muslims.
- The main copy was kept with the Caliph in Al Madina, while three others were sent to Basra, Kufa, and Damascus.
- The Qur'an is translated today (1984) into 51 languages.

3. Kaabah Already in Muhammad's day, this object, located in Mecca, received religious admiration. The Qur'an identifies it as an object made by Abraham and Ishmael.

The Kaabah is a shrine of worship, the most sacred place in Islam.

4. Jerusalem This city possesses significance for Muslims in that it contains the location where Abraham offered up his son Isaac on the altar (Mt. Moriah). It also is the traditional setting of the "remote place" of Muhammad's night journey mentioned in Qur'an 17:1.

5. Muhammad's Successors

Sunni/Shia leadership divisions determine what leaders followed Muhammad. Sunni followers believe authority rests in a leader chosen by the community (Sunnah) of those who follow the ethical/religious Muslim path.

Abu Bakr, Muhammad's friend, became the first Sunni successor (632-634). Umar (634-644) led Muslim conquest of most of the Middle East. Under Uthman's

leadership (644-656), codification of the Qur'an came about.

Shia practitioners believe Muhammad intended for his own blood line to follow him in leadership. Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was the first Imam (leader of prayers for the faithful) from 656-661. Ali's eldest son Hasan abdicated to his younger brother Husayn ibn Ali.

In a struggle against an Umayyad leader (over whether the murder of Uthman should be avenged), Husayn, his 70 followers and all but one son died. This event on the day of Ashura (October A.D. 680) took place on the battlefield of Karbala in present day Iraq.

Khadija was Muhammad's first, most important wife, thought by many to be the first convert to Islam. Fatima, Ali's wife and Muhammad's daughter, is held in high regard, especially by Shia followers.

6. Perspectives The Prince of Wales, in an address entitled "Islam and the West" provides a helpful perspective on the history of Islam. After discussing the closely bound ties of Muslim and Western history, Prince Charles points out the differences in outlook towards the Crusades, and the outcome of the date 1492. To Americans, 1492 is the discovery of Columbus. To Muslims, it is the date when Granada fell, signifying the end of eighth centuries of Muslim civilization in Europe.

Operation Desert Shield/Storm/Farewell's Joint Forces Commander (Saudi Arabian), General Khaled Bin Sultan, described the conflicts felt within Arab states in siding with Allied Forces against Saddam Hussein. Due to feelings of the past--the post-colonial, arbitrary carve-up of the Arab world, creation and support of the state of Israel--many saw the real threat not with Iraq but the West.

"Many Arabs also feel an understandable nostalgia for the distant past when their civilization and power were unrivaled."

--General Khaled Bin Sultan, Desert Warrior, p. 169.

Vocabulary List: Historical Overview

Abraham Patriarchal figure, the father of the Jewish faith who championed monotheism

Exodus Term to describe the exit of the Israelites from Egypt

Hagar (HAH-jehr) Servant woman of Abraham who gave birth to Ishmael

Hijrah (HIJ-ruh) Move, in 622 A.D., of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina. This date begins the Islamic calendar.

Husayn Ibn Ali (hoo-SAYN ibn-AH-lee) Blood relative of Muhammad, killed in the battle at Karbala. His death is an important event within the Shia community.

Ishmael (ISH-may-uhl) Muslims believe Abraham was ready to offer this son upon the altar at Mt. Moriah

Islam (is-LAHM) Obedience or peace through submission to the will of God

Jerusalem The city of David, the capital of the nation of Israel during his reign

Kaabah (KAH-bah) Object in Mecca, thought by Muslims to be constructed by Abraham and Ishmael. It is a shrine of worship, the most holy place in Islam.

Karbala (KAR ba-luh) Site of battlefield in present day Iraq. Muhammad's blood relative Husayn ibn Ali and seventy followers died by the hands of the Umayyads (Damascus Muslims).

Khadija (kha-DEE-jah) Muhammad's foremost wife, thought by many to be the first convert to Islam

Mecca (MAK-kuh) Place of Muhammad's birth. Location of the Kaabah

Medina (ma-DEE-nuh) City Muhammad escaped to after troubles experienced in Mecca. Muhammad is buried here.

Monotheism Belief in one God

Moses Leader of the Israelites from the land of bondage in Egypt

Muhammad (moo-HAM-mad) The last of the Islamic prophets. The founder of the Islamic faith.

Muslim (MOOS-lim) Obedient one...one who submits

Orthodox Eastern Following the 1054 A.D. split of the Christian Church, those who saw Constantinople as the main church center became known as this term.

Palestine Land of Canaan, area of present day Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip

Patriarch Head of the church in Orthodox Eastern Christianity

Qur'an (QOOR-ahn) Holy book revealed by God to the prophet Muhammad

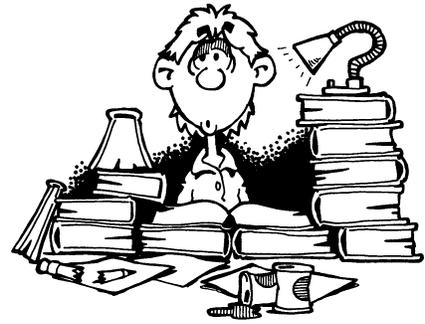
Sarah Wife of Abraham who gave birth to Isaac in her old age

Shia (SHEE-uh) Followers of Islam who believe Muhammad's successors should be direct bloodline descendants

Sunni (SOON-nee) Followers of Islam who believe Muhammad's successors should be chosen by consensus of the community

Umma (OOM-muh) Nation...peoplehood of Islam

Review Quiz: Historical Overview

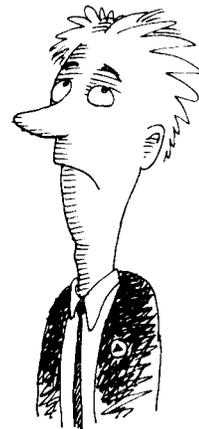


Part 1--Matching Place the letter of the correct answer in front of the person or place listed.

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|-------------------------|---|
| 1. _____ Moses | A. Patriarchal figure, the father of the Jewish faith who championed monotheism. |
| 2. _____ Medina | B. Servant woman of Abraham who gave birth to Ishmael. |
| 3. _____ Karbala | C. Blood relative of Muhammad, killed in the battle at Karbala. His death is an important event within the Shia community. |
| 4. _____ Hagar | D. Muslims believe Abraham was ready to offer this son upon the altar at Mt. Moriah. |
| 5. _____ Ishmael | E. The city of David, the capital of the nation of Israel during his reign. |
| 6. _____ Kaabah | F. Object in Mecca, thought by Muslims to be constructed by Abraham and Ishmael. It is a shrine of worship, the most holy place in Islam. |
| 7. _____ Husayn ibn Ali | G. Site of battlefield in present day Iraq. Muhammad's blood relative Husayn ibn Ali and 70 followers died by the hands of the Umayyads (Damascus Muslims). |
| 8. _____ Abraham | H. Muhammad's foremost wife, thought by many to be the first convert to Islam. |
| 9. _____ Palestine | |
| 10. _____ Jerusalem | |
| 11. _____ Muhammad | |
| 12. _____ Mecca | |
| 13. _____ Khadija | |
| 14. _____ Sarah | |

- I. Place of Muhammad's birth. Location of the Kaabah.
 - J. City Muhammad escaped to after troubles experienced in Mecca. Muhammad is buried here.
 - K. Leader of the Israelites from the land of bondage in Egypt.
 - L. The last of the Islamic prophets. The founder of the Islamic faith.
 - M. Land of Canaan, area of present day Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.
 - N. Wife of Abraham who gave birth to Isaac in her old age.
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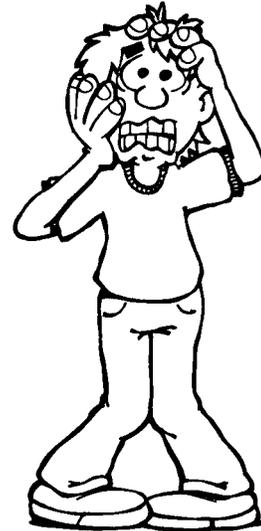
Part 2--Matching Place the letter of the correct answer in front of the terms. Not all of the lettered items can be used.



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|--------------------|--|
| 1. _____ Muslim | A. Term to describe the exit of the Israelites from Egypt. |
| 2. _____ Patriarch | B. Move, in A.D. 622, of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina. This date begins the Islamic calendar. |
| 3. _____ Qur'an | C. Obedience or peace through submission to the will of God. |
| 4. _____ hijrah | D. Belief in one God. |
| 5. _____ Sunni | |
| 6. _____ Shia | |
| 7. _____ Exodus | |

8. _____ Monotheism
9. _____ Orthodox Eastern
10. _____ Umma
11. _____ Islam
- E. Obedient one...one who submits.
- F. Following the 1054 A.D. split of the Christian Church, those who saw Constantinople as the main church center became known by this term.
- G. Land of Canaan, area of present day Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.
- H. Head of the church in Orthodox Eastern Christianity.
- I. Holy book revealed by God to the prophet Muhammad.
- J. Followers of Islam who believe Muhammad's successors should be direct bloodline descendants.
- K. Followers of Islam who believe Muhammad's successors should be chosen by consensus of the community.
- L. Nation...peoplehood of Islam.
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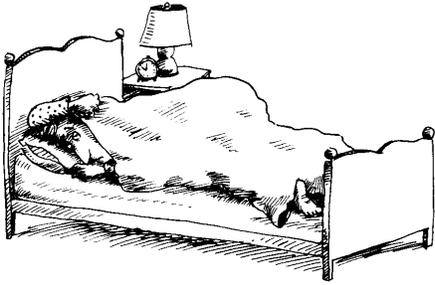
Part 3--Multiple Choice Place the letter of the most correct answer in the space provided.



1. _____ is a key figure for the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths.
- A. Saul of Tarsus
B. Abraham
C. Abel

2. _____ Much of the Fertile Crescent is located in present day
- A. Iran.
 - B. Iraq.
 - C. Egypt.
3. _____ Abraham migrated to
- A. Turkey.
 - B. Ethiopia.
 - C. Palestine.
4. _____ Abraham was the father of two sons we know of, Isaac and
- A. Job.
 - B. Elijah.
 - C. Ishmael.
5. _____ Moses led the Israelites from Egypt, an event known as the
- A. hijra.
 - B. exodus.
 - C. crusades.
6. _____ _____ is a holy city for Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
- A. Jerusalem
 - B. Baghdad
 - C. Cairo
7. _____ Present day Istanbul, on the site of ancient Greek Byzantium, was also known as _____, the head of the Eastern empire.
- A. Rome
 - B. Constantinople
 - C. Athens
8. _____ According to Dr. Kamil Said, which of the following best describes Muhammad?
- A. A revolutionary
 - B. A completer and revitalizer of earlier religions
 - C. A literate, well read individual

9. _____ In Mecca, Muhammad was primarily a religious teacher. In Medina, he focused more on
- A. protection and security of society; brotherhood amongst Muslims.
 - B. categorizing all the Surahs of the Qur'an.
 - C. material ideology as the impetus for revolution.
10. _____ Jibril (Gabriel) delivered the first revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad on Mt. Hira, near
- A. Medina.
 - B. Jerusalem.
 - C. Mecca.
11. _____ The 622 A.D. move of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina is known as the migration or
- A. exodus.
 - B. hijrah.
 - C. trail of tears.
12. _____ The _____ is a shrine of worship, the most sacred place in Islam.
- A. Kaabah
 - B. Jerusalem temple
 - C. Mount of Olives
13. _____ Sunni followers of Islam believe authority rests in a leader
- A. chosen by the community (Sunnah).
 - B. who descended directly from Muhammad.
14. _____ On the battlefield of _____ in present day Iraq, Husayn ibn Ali and his 70 followers were killed by a rival Islamic leader in A.D. 680 (Day of Ashura).
- A. Baghdad
 - B. Karbala
 - C. Armageddon
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Part 4--True or False Place a T or an F in the blank provided.

1. ____ Faith is seldom pure, economic, political, nationalistic, governmental and ethnic factors must be added.
2. ____ Few traits hang on as long or as powerfully as religious traditions.
3. ____ Judaism is the oldest of the religions of the book.
4. ____ Many Middle East Christian groups fall under the Orthodox umbrella.
5. ____ Patriarchs are the heads of the Orthodox Eastern Churches.
6. ____ After the Great Schism, the Eastern branch of the church became known as the Roman Catholic.
7. ____ The historic relationship between Islam and the West has often been characterized by mutual hostility.
8. ____ There is still much pain and continued suspicion as a result of early 20th century colonialization in the Middle East.
9. ____ Muhammad demanded that Jewish and Christian personnel renounce their ideas of monotheism.
10. ____ The prophet Muhammad wrote down most of the revelations of the Qur'an.
11. ____ Prior to Muhammad, there was no Kaabah in Mecca.

12. _____ Shia followers of Islam believe authority rests in a leader who is in a bloodline relationship to Muhammad.

13. _____ Khadija was Muhammad's foremost wife, thought to be the first convert to Islam.



"Applaud Small Feats"

Sources Used in Historical Overview

Alexander, Pat, ed., Eerdman's Handbook to the World's Religions, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1994). This text arranges pictures, articles and charts in a visually appealing fashion.

Furno, Richard, "Peoples of the Middle East" Map, (National Geographic Society Map, Washington, D.C., Jun 1972).

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Smith, Jonathan, ed., The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, (New York: HarperCollins, 1995). A readable, well organized and thorough (1,152 pages) up-to-date guide on world religions. Contains a user-friendly pronunciation guide.



Resources for Further Study

Alexander, Pat, ed., Eerdman's Handbook to the World's Religions, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1994). This text arranges pictures, articles and charts in a visually appealing fashion.

Arabian Seafarers: In the Wake of Sinbad, (Film for the Humanities and Sciences), Video, FFH 4086, Aiso Library.

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- Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402-9325, phone (202) 783-3238 or
- National Technical Information Service, 5285 Port Royal Road, Springfield, VA 22161, phone (703) 487-4630 or
- Document Expediting (DOCEX) Project, Exchange and Gift Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540-4200, phone (202) 707-9527.

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