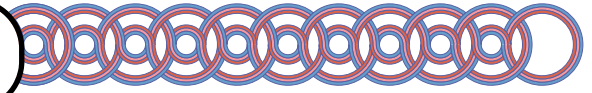


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# Introduction

## The Semitic Religions

When we speak about the Semitic religions, we are referring to Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The word *Semitic* describes the people who came from the Middle East and their languages. Arabs and Jews are both Semitic. Christianity is a Semitic religion because it originated in the Middle East.

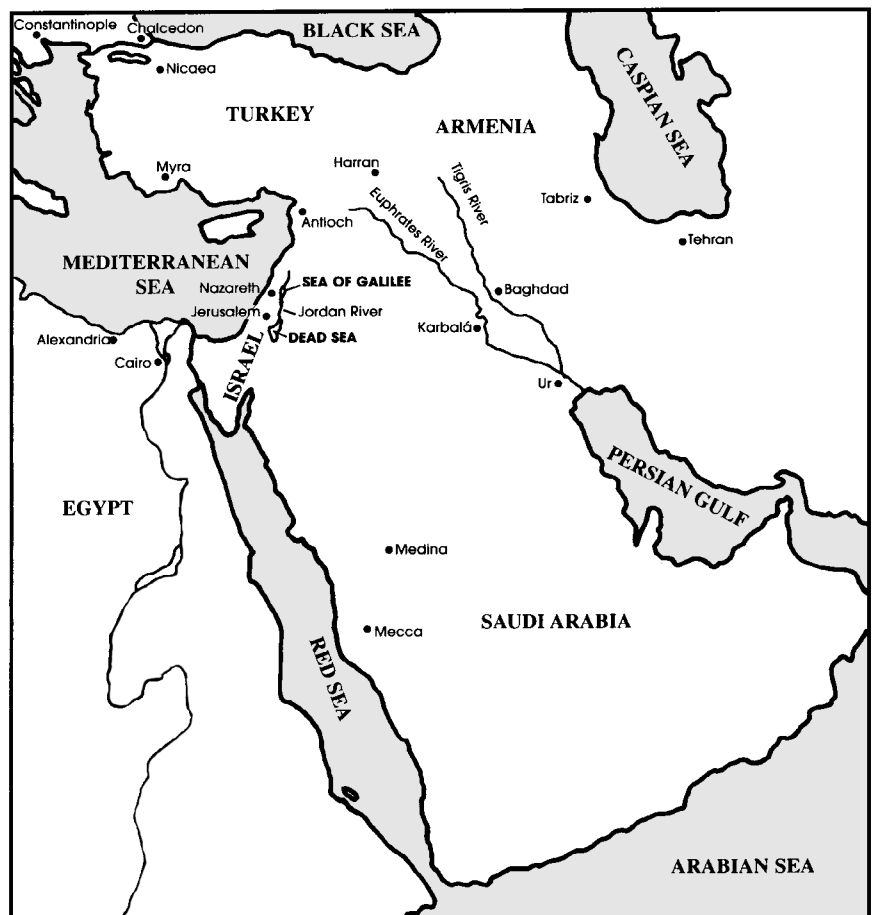
Another feature Semitic religions share is monotheism. The prefix *mono* means one while *theism* means 'belief in God or gods'. So although these religions differ greatly, they each believe in only one God. Later, you will be reading about polytheism, or the belief in more than one God.

Look at the map below of the Middle East. The writings of the Hebrew Bible originated in the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. As you will see, both Judaism and Christianity are rooted in these writings. This area is now the modern state of Israel. Its capital, historic Jerusalem, is sacred to all three Semitic religions.

Now, find the cities of Mecca and Medina in the Arabian Peninsula. The prophet Mohammed was born in Mecca, now the world centre of Islam. Every year, millions of Muslims, members of Islam, make pilgrimages to this sacred city. Medina is where Mohammed set up the first Muslim state. These cities are now part of Saudi Arabia.

## About Date References

The abbreviations BCE, BC, AD, and CE are common terms used to reference time. (In this series, BCE and CE are used.) Some students may not be familiar with one or more of these terms. Use page 47 to introduce or review the abbreviations with students.



## Abraham and the Kaaba

Islam is the youngest of the Semitic religions. It began in 630 CE when Muslims believe that Mohammed (born in 570 CE) began receiving revelations from God. Followers of Islam are called Muslims, which means 'one who submits (to) Allah'. Allah is the Arabic name for God. Islam means 'submission to God'. The map on page 12 shows the spread of Islam during Mohammed's lifetime.

The roots of Islam, however, go all the way back to Abraham around 2000 BCE. You may remember Abraham as the father of the Jewish religion. Interestingly, Muslims also regard Abraham as the forefather of their religion.

According to both the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible) and the Koran (the Islamic holy scripture), Abraham had fathered a son before the birth of Isaac. The boy was Ishmael, whose mother was Abraham's servant, Hagar. Abraham's wife, Sarah, was childless and became jealous. So God told Abraham to bless the child and to send him and his mother south into the desert.

They wandered the desert until they ran out of water. Hagar rested Ishmael on the sand and then searched desperately between two high rocks. She ran back and forth seven times. Finally, resting on one of the rocks, she heard an angel's voice tell her not to be afraid. Miraculously, water spouted from where Ishmael's heels touched the sand. This became the famous well, Zamzam, where the city of Mecca was born.

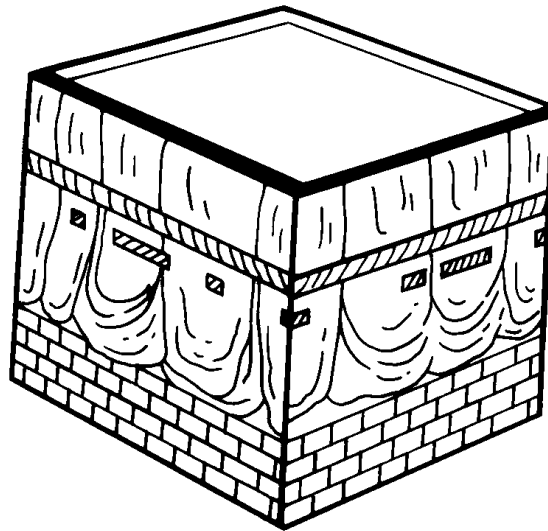
Toward the end of his life, Abraham travelled into Arabia to visit Ishmael. Muslims believe that God told Abraham to build a holy sanctuary there. This site was called the Kaaba, meaning 'cube'. It is also known as the House of God.

# Origins of Islam

## Abraham and the Kaaba (cont.)

The Kaaba is about twelve metres in height, width and length. The door is about two metres from the ground and must be entered by a moveable staircase. Curtains and carpets cover most of the outside of the Kaaba.

Inside the sanctuary are some silver and gold lamps. But the most important object is an oval black stone about eighteen centimetres in size. Muslims believe that this stone was part of the original structure built by Abraham. They say the stone was white but turned black with the kisses of worshippers seeking forgiveness. According to the Koran, God instructed Abraham to tell all worshippers of Allah to make a pilgrimage to the Kaaba.



As you will see, the Kaaba plays a central role in the history of Islam. You will learn more about its significance later in this chapter on Islam.

## The Early Years

Mohammed ibn Abd Allah, commonly known as Mohammed, was born in the city of Mecca in 570 CE. At the time, Mecca was a busy marketplace crowded with residents and nomads buying and selling goods. Not a great deal is known of Mohammed's early life. Both his mother and father were dead by the time he turned six. He was first cared for by his grandfather, but when he passed away, Mohammed's uncle, Abu Talib, raised him. Abu Talib was the head of the Hashim clan, one of many clans making up separate Arabic tribes.

It is believed that as a young adult Mohammed worked as a caravan trader. He travelled the Arabian Peninsula with his uncle, making contact with various cultures and religions, including Judaism and Christianity. Because idol worship had come to dominate Mecca, this contact was important. The Kaaba itself housed many idols, including those representing the three main goddesses.

At the age of twenty-five, Mohammed was working for a widow named Khadijah who was a wealthy merchant. Though he was much younger, she admired his intelligence and maturity so much that she proposed to him. They married, and in the fifteen years that followed, Mohammed lived a comfortable life. He continued travelling, encountering different faiths and customs.

But Mohammed was not interested in riches. In Mecca, powerful merchants controlled both the flow of goods and the religious life. As the gap between the rich and the poor widened, Mohammed began to question his life and the world around him.