

From "Islam: A History"

*In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate.*

These words are called the exordium, or passage, which is the start of every chapter, or sura, in the Qu'ran (Koran), the holy book of Islam. This expression is a creed for every Muslim. Today with 1.57 billion believers, Islam is the world's second largest religion. Only Christianity, with a little over two billion followers, is larger. Muhammad, the founder of Islam, has been called the most influential man in history. With this much influence, the religion of Islam cannot be ignored.

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.

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. But Bedouins also staged raids on other desert peoples and fought over pastures and wells. Arabs were also farmers, craftsmen, and merchants.

Arabs worshipped many gods. They believed that spirits dwelled in rocks and trees. Arabs sometimes made statues or idols 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 it is believed that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was born.

Muhammad was born between 560 and 570 in Mecca (Makkah) which is located about halfway down western Arabia near the Red Sea. During Muhammad's time, it was an important trading stop between the Arabian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Muhammad's father died a few

months before he was born. When Muhammad was six, his mother died, and he was raised by his grandfather and eventually by his uncle, Abu Talib. As a young man, Muhammad traveled in trading caravans between Mecca and Syria. His early life was undoubtedly influenced by Christian and Jewish traditions which later strongly influenced his own ideas about religion.

When Muhammad was 25, he married Khadija, a rich widow. Muhammad became very successful in the caravan business and was known for his honesty and wisdom. But Muhammad was troubled by the drinking, gambling, and corruption in Mecca and other Arabian cities. While meditating in a cave in the desert, he had a vision of an angel. When he awoke, Muslims believe, he was told by the angel Gabriel to be the apostle of God and to "warn" the people. From this date, around 610, Muhammad spent the rest of his life preaching the faith of Islam. At first people laughed at him, but eventually 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 Mecca, captured the city, destroyed the idols around the ancient Kaaba, and dedicated the holy Black Stone to God. Mecca was now the center of Islam, and Muhammad was the leader. His visions were written down over a period of 23 years, eventually to become the Qu'ran (Koran), or holy book of Islam. When Muhammad died in 632, Islam was a religion about to shake the foundations of the Asian, Africa, and European worlds.

The word Islam in Arabic means "submission to God." People who believe in Islam are called Muslims- or sometimes Moslems. Muslims believe the word of God, or Allah, is written down in the Qu'ran (Koran), the holiest book in Islam. The Qu'ran is a book of teachings of Allah whose word Muslims believe was revealed to Muhammad over a period of 23 years. In the Qu'ran 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 from the time of Muhammad. The Hadith, written during Islam's first two centuries and compiled in various collections, gives further direction to all Muslims.