

## The Abrahamic Faiths – A Short Introduction

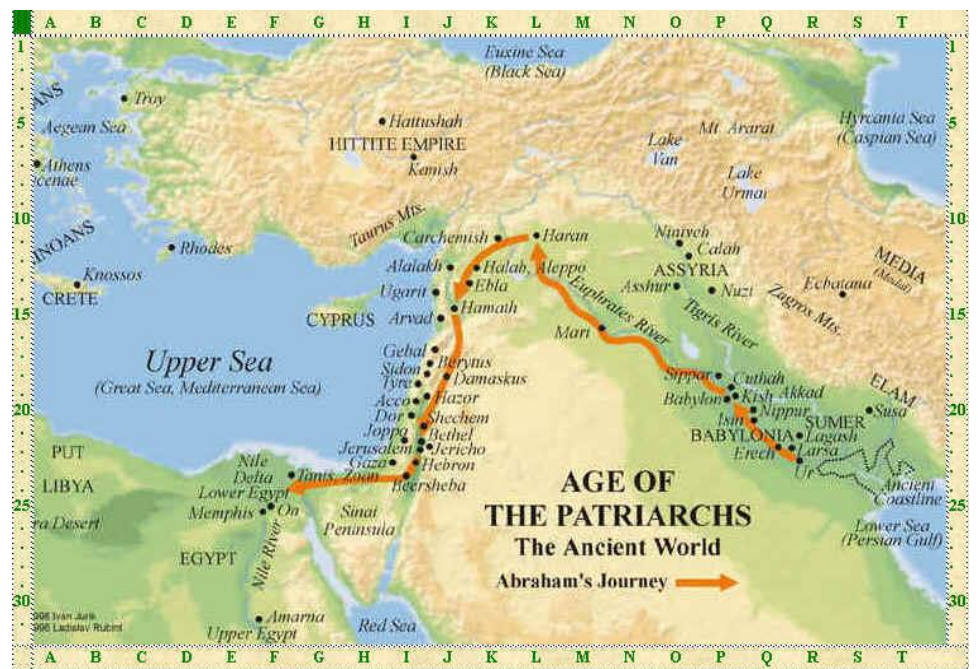
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### WHAT ARE THE ABRAHAMIC FAITHS?

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are known as the Abrahamic faiths, because they all began with a man named Abraham, the father of all three religions. If you practice one of these religions, you are probably familiar with Abraham – also called Abram, or Ibrahim – but you may be surprised to learn that his story is central to all three religions, not just your own. In fact, the Abrahamic faiths share the same (or almost the same) beliefs about their origins. Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike believe in the same God, the same creation story, and the same early history of the people and their faith. In the United States, people are sometimes caught off guard by this information. Americans may be aware that Jews and Christians share some of the same beliefs, but unless you yourself practice Islam (or you are unusually well-informed), you may never have heard that Muslims also share similar beliefs. Before going any further, let's discover what those beliefs are.

### THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

Abraham's life began in a place called Ur, on the shores of the Euphrates River in ancient Sumer (present-day Iraq). Later, he moved with his family to Canaan (KAY-nan, an ancient name for present-day Israel). Historians disagree about exactly when, but much of the archaeological evidence suggests this was around 1900 or 2000 BCE (about 4000 years ago). At this time, most humans around the world practiced some form of polytheism (believing in many gods, as the ancient Indians and Egyptians were doing by this time) or pantheism (belief that nature and humans are part of a larger, divine whole – a common belief among indigenous populations in parts of Africa and the Americas at this time).



According to the scriptures (or holy books) of the Abrahamic faiths, however, there is only one true God – and this is the revolutionary belief that originated with Abraham himself. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are monotheists who believe that Abraham made a covenant (or agreement) with God. The deal was that Abraham would teach his descendants to worship only one God, and in return, God would make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars. Abraham would be "the father of many nations." Through his descendants, he would start a new, monotheistic religion.

As Abraham grew older, and his wife Sarah (or Sarai) gave birth to no children, the scriptures tell that God's promise to Abraham seemed increasingly unlikely. So Sarah suggested that Abraham father a child with her "handmaid" (servant, or possibly slave), Hagar (or Hajar). Abraham and Hagar did have a son, named Ishmael (or Ismael). However, God then allowed a miracle: Sarah became pregnant, at the age of 90, and gave birth to Abraham's second son, Isaac. The Bible says that Sarah was jealous of Hagar and Ishmael, because as the oldest son, Ishmael would inherit from Abraham, even though Hagar was not Abraham's real wife. Sarah wanted her own son, Isaac, to have Abraham's inheritance. According to the story, Hagar and Ishmael were

thus cast out into the desert on their own. They only survived because God miraculously intervened to save them, just as they were about to die of thirst. This story appears in the scriptures of all three faiths: the Jewish Tanakh the Christian Bible, and the Muslim Qur'an.

There is another important story about Abraham and his son. Jews and Christians believe this story is about the second son, Isaac, but Muslims believe the story is about the first son, Ishmael. According to the scriptures, God ordered Abraham to kill his son, in a sacrifice that would prove Abraham's faith. Abraham and his son went up to the mountaintop together, but Abraham didn't explain why. They prepared an altar for the sacrifice, and then, with great sorrow, Abraham prepared to kill his own son to show how much he loved God.



At the last second, Abraham spotted a ram in the bushes, and God allowed him to sacrifice the animal instead of killing his beloved son. Abraham had passed God's test of faith. This story also appears in the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur'an.

Abraham's two sons – Isaac, who was born second and did receive his father's inheritance, and Ishmael, the firstborn who was cast out – are important to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. This is because of the covenant they believe Abraham made with God, that Abraham would be the father of many nations. Each faith believes that God's promise came true through one or the other of these sons. Jews and Christians, on the one hand, believe themselves to be descended from Isaac, Abraham's second son. Muslims, on the other hand, believe themselves to be descended from Ishmael, the firstborn son who was cast out into the desert.

### WHY THREE SEPARATE RELIGIONS?

If you practice Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, you may know many more stories about Abraham's descendants, who are believed to be God's chosen people. And yet, you probably also know that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are quite different from one another today. So how did they diverge? What are the differences?

### The History of the Jews

For about two thousand years after Abraham's death, neither Christianity nor Islam yet existed. The only monotheists were Jews. During this time, the Jews continued practicing their faith more or less as Abraham had agreed in his covenant with God. This faith came to be known as Judaism. The laws, history, and beliefs of Judaism were set down in the Tanakh, or Hebrew Bible. (The name "Tanakh" is an acronym formed from the initial Hebrew letters of the scriptures' three sections. These are the Torah, or "Teaching"; Nevi'im, or "Prophets"; and Ketuvim, or "Writings" – hence TaNaKh).

From time to time, these scriptures tell that Jews broke their agreement with God by worshipping other gods. Whenever this happened, God punished them by allowing Canaan (remember, this was where they lived, in what is now Israel) to be taken over by enemies. Often, the Jews suffered greatly under these enemies: their

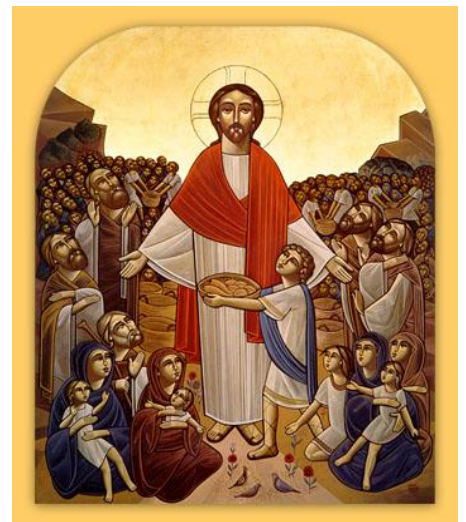


temples were destroyed, and they were killed or sold into slavery. In the picture to the right, triumphant Romans who have just destroyed the Jewish temple carry off its riches and sacred objects for themselves. Attacked so often over the years, the Jews were again and again forced to leave their homes, dispersing and settling in other places. This is called the Jewish diaspora (dee-AS-pur-ruh, meaning dispersal). Being repeatedly attacked and forced to leave turned Jews into constant outsiders over the centuries, which is an important part of Jewish history and identity.

Under these circumstances, where could Jews find hope? Over hundreds and thousands of years, men called prophets (messengers from God) had predicted the arrival of a Messiah, or savior, who would free the Jews and be their king. The difference between Jews, Christians, and Muslims begins with differing beliefs about the Messiah.

### The History of the Christians

A man named Jesus created the first major split among the monotheistic faiths, by founding Christianity. Archaeological and written evidence suggests that Jesus was born c. 33 BCE, in the Galilee region of what is now Israel. During Jesus' own lifetime and over a few centuries that followed, some Jews – and many outsiders – came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the man who had been promised by God as their savior. People who believed this became Christians, people who believe in Jesus Christ. Others believed Jesus was a fraud, and remained Jews.



According to the New Testament of the Christian Bible, which relates the stories of Jesus and his followers, Jesus was the Son of God, miraculously born to a virgin, Mary. As Jesus grew into adulthood, he began travelling around the region, preaching that he was God's Son. Jesus preached a message of love and justice that favored the poor and weak, and threatened those in power, especially the Romans. Christians also believe that he performed miracles, such as raising people from the dead, feeding thousands with just a few loaves of bread (pictured to the right), or walking on water.

Regardless of their religious beliefs, most historians do agree that the historical figure of Jesus was very popular in his own time. People – especially the poor – worshipped him and believed he truly was the Son of God. According to the Bible, Jesus was crucified – tortured and executed by being nailed to a wooden cross – because he had so angered those in power, including leaders of the Jewish people. But after three days, according to the Christian faith, Jesus was resurrected (he rose from the dead), proving with this miracle that he really was God's Son.



The yellow badge Jews were forced to wear can be seen in this marginal illustration from an English manuscript.

Christians believe that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies of the Messiah, but Jews themselves do not. For Jews, Jesus was a fake, and this is the cause of the split between Judaism and Christianity. In the centuries after Jesus' death (and resurrection, according to believers), Christianity became a popular religion, while Judaism stayed comparatively small. This is because Christians believe in trying to convert outsiders, sharing with others their belief that Jesus was the Son of God. Jews, on the other hand, do not generally try to convert anybody. (According to the Jewish faith, either you are one of God's Chosen people, or you aren't). Christianity also grew as a religion when it was adopted by the Roman Empire, and the Roman Catholic Church in



turn became rich and powerful throughout Europe. In the Middle Ages and at other points throughout history, Christians (who are often in the majority) have sometimes accused Jews (usually the minority) of being the ones who plotted to have Jesus killed. This belief has led to centuries of anti-Semitism – racism, hatred, and discrimination against Jews.

### The History of the Muslims

The last split between the Abrahamic faiths occurred c. 613 CE, with a man named Muhammad, who was born in the city of Mecca in present-day Saudi Arabia. Because his story is most recent, it is most thoroughly documented by religious scholars and historians. As a young man, Muhammad worked as a camel driver between Syria and the Saudi Arabian peninsula. Soon he built a career managing caravans (groups of traveling traders), and came into contact with people of many nationalities and faiths, including Jews and Christians. Muhammad is reported to have had a loving and happy marriage with his wife Khadija. Although it was common in that time and place for men to have many wives, Muhammad had no other wife than Khadija until her death. In the modern Muslim world, the respectful relationship between Muhammad and Khadija is

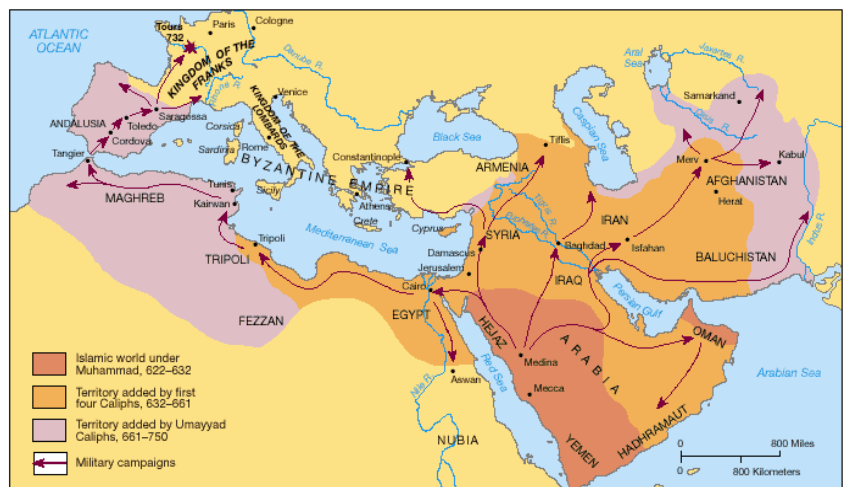
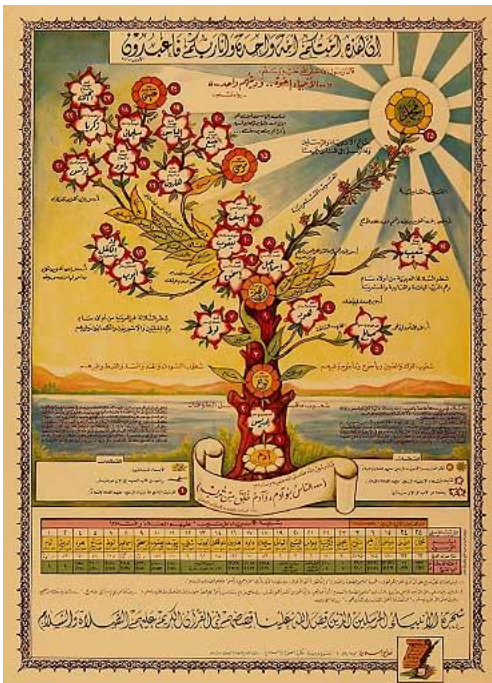
important. It demonstrates that, despite the present-day oppression of women in some Muslim communities, this was never a true Islamic teaching.

In his late 30s, Muhammad became increasingly drawn to the spiritual life. One day in 610 CE, according to Islamic teachings, Muhammad was meditating in a cave when an angel appeared before him and revealed the word of Allah (Arabic for “the God”). The angel told him he had been chosen as Allah’s prophet. Over the remaining 23 years of his life, Muslims believe, Muhammad wrote down what the angel continued to reveal to him – the literal words of Allah. These would become the Qur’an, the holy scripture of Islam.

According to the Qur’an, the religion of the Jews and Christians is the same as that revealed to Muhammad by the angel, and Allah is God of them all. Muhammad referred to Jews and Christians as fellow “People of the Book.” However, the Qur’an says that the faith of Jews and Christians is only partial, and they should convert to Islam and

recognize Muhammad as the last and greatest prophet. The “prophet tree” to the left shows the Biblical Adam at the bottom of the trunk, the father of humanity and the first prophet. This is followed by names of other prophets in the Abrahamic faiths, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. The tree is crowned by Muhammad, the large flower at the top right.

Muhammad began preaching in Mecca, commanding Arabs to worship and submit to Allah, the one true God. In Arabic, the word Islam means “to submit.” Muhammad’s followers became known as Muslims, meaning “those who submit to God.” In his first three years of preaching, Muhammad gained only 40 followers, including his wife Khadija. His hometown of Mecca was a merchant town, yet Muhammad preached against



The Spread of Islam. The rapid spread of Islam created within a century a unified cultural and economic zone from India to the Atlantic Ocean within.

materialism (the belief that belongings are more important than spiritual values). Thus, Muhammad's teachings threatened the Meccan way of life. He and his followers were violently attacked or thrown in prison. In 622 CE (today, the first year of the Muslim calendar), Muhammad escaped to a town now known as Medina, which was more friendly to his teachings. At this time, many Jews were living in Medina, and their beliefs may have influenced Muhammad's teachings.

Over the remainder of his life, Muhammad gained many followers. He was able to conquer Mecca, and much more territory besides, by military force. By the time of his death in 632 CE, Muhammad and his followers had conquered or converted nearly all of the Arabian peninsula for Islam. Within 100 years, Islam had reached the Atlantic Ocean to the West, and the borders of China to the East. This success was largely due to the military and political abilities of several caliphs, or Islamic political leaders, who led the Muslim people following Muhammad's death.

**Questions for Analysis (Please write the questions and answers in your comp book)**

- 1) What are the three Abrahamic faiths?
- 2) How are polytheism and pantheism different?
- 3) What story is believed to be about Isaac in Christian and Jewish tradition, but about Ishmael in Muslim?
- 4) What is the "Jewish diaspora?"
- 5) What part of the Bible is about Jewish faith? Christian faith?
- 6) What causes the split between Jewish beliefs and Christian beliefs?
- 7) What is the discrimination of Jews called?
- 8) Islam refers to Jews and Christians as what?
- 9) What was Muhammad's profession prior to being visited in this dream? Why is this important?
- 10) What is the holy city of the Islamic faith called?