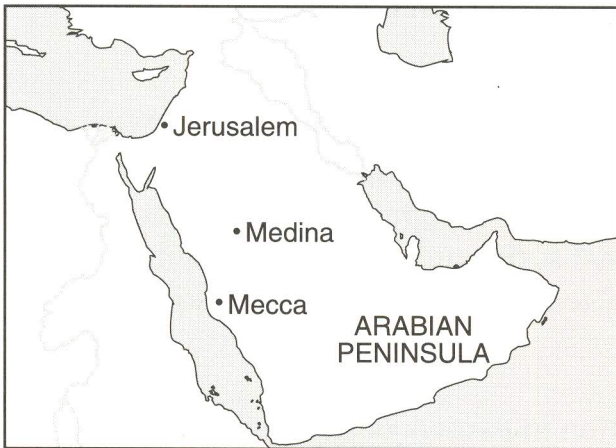




Information About Islam



Arabian Peninsula in A.D. 530

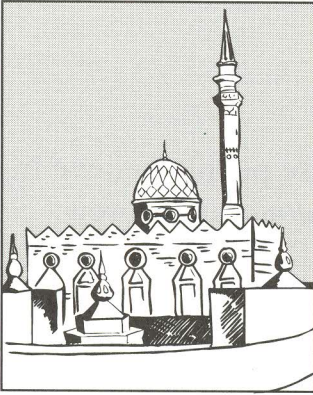
Followers of Islam are called Muslims. These people believe in one God—the God of Abraham, called *Allah* in the Arabic language. Abraham lived in the Middle East about 4,000 years ago at a time when most people believed in many Gods. Abraham believed that only one all-powerful God had created the world. Muslims believe that God made an agreement, or *covenant*, with Abraham. This agreement said that Abraham and the future generations of his family—his *descendants*—would be God’s chosen

people in return for their faith and obedience. Abraham had a son named Isaac by his wife Sarah. He also had a son named Ishmael by his wife Hajar. Muslims believe that the Hebrews, or Jews, descended from Isaac, and that the Arabs descended from Ishmael.

Islam is based on God’s teachings and the example of the life of Muhammad. Muhammad was born in Mecca, located on the Arabian Peninsula, around A.D. 570. Muslims believe that when Muhammad was 40 years old, he had a vision. In this vision, the angel Gabriel appeared and told him to repeat a message from God. God’s message was revealed over the next 23 years. During this time, Muslims learned to accept all the Hebrew messengers of God’s word, or *prophets*, including Moses and Jesus. However, Muslims did not believe that Jesus was divine (God-like), and they felt that God’s chosen people had not properly followed the prophets. Muslims consider Muhammad to be God’s final prophet. They believe that through Muhammad, God made Mecca the center of Islam, and its holiest city. After Muhammad’s death, God’s teachings, as revealed to Muhammad, were written down in the Koran—the holy book of Islam.

Arabic is the sacred language of Islam. Though the Koran has been translated into many languages, it is used for religious purposes only in its Arabic form. The Koran contains the





Exterior of a mosque

revelations (teachings) God made to Muhammad. These revelations include many of the ideas from the history and law of the ancient Hebrews and their prophets, as well as the story of Jesus' life. The Koran outlines the goal of Islam: living according to God's guidance, which will be rewarded with *salvation*, or eternal (never ending) life in paradise with God. The opposite is *damnation*, or eternal suffering in hell.

To achieve salvation, Muslims must participate in five basic practices. These practices are known as the "five pillars," and they are found in the Koran. The first is *shahada*, a public declaration of faith, which is the recitation of the Islamic basic beliefs, or *creed*. The second is *salat*, or prayer. Muslims pray five times a day at specific times, always facing Mecca. The third is *zakat*, or giving to the needy. Islam requires a Muslim to give approximately 2.5 percent of his or her wealth to charity. *Siyam*, or fasting, is the fourth pillar. For 30 days—during the month of Ramadan—Muslims cannot eat, drink, or have sexual relations from dawn to sunset. The final pillar requires each Muslim who is able to make a *hajj*, or journey, to Mecca once in his or her life. The Koran also describes a way of life that contains *halal*, acts that are allowed, and *haram*, acts that are forbidden. These acts include dietary laws, which do not allow the eating of pork or the drinking of alcohol.

Muslims worship in a holy building called a *mosque*. Prayers held on Friday at noon are the most important. During the Friday worship service, an *imam*, or prayer leader, leads prayers, reads from the Koran, and gives a religious speech, or *sermon*. Muslims select a person of good character and religious knowledge as their imam. However, the imam has the same relationship with God as any other Muslim. Muslims also hold Jerusalem sacred as the city of prophets. They believe it is the place where Muhammad met the other prophets and ascended to heaven.

The two major sects of Muslims are the Sunni and the Shi'i. The sects share most beliefs, but differ mainly over the issue of leadership in the Muslim community.