The Bible and the Talmud

Originally the Old Testament (Bible) contained all the teachings and laws that Jews were expected to follow. As the years passed, new situations and living conditions arose for which no provision was made in the Bible. Rabbis, or religious teachers, interpreted the laws and made new decisions to fit the new situations. After several hundred years all these decisions were put together in volumes called the Talmud. The observance of these laws is what kept the Jews together for almost 2,000 years even though they were scattered all over the world.

Islam—The Religion of the Middle East and North Africa

In the Middle East and North Africa most of the people are Muslims, that is, people who are believers in the religion known as Islam. Islam is more than a religion, however. It is a way of living, affecting almost every aspect of a person’s life.

Mohammed—Founder of Islam

Islam was founded by Mohammed* in the 7th century. Mohammed was an Arab merchant who lived in the city of Mecca in Arabia. The people of Mecca worshipped many different gods, but Mohammed, who had frequent contacts with Christians and Jews, came to believe in only one God, Allah. Mohammed tried to spread his ideas to the people of Mecca, but they would not accept them. In the year 622, Mohammed was driven from Mecca and fled to Medina. Muslims call this flight the Hegira, and that year is considered to be the year one of the Muslim calendar. In Medina the people accepted Mohammed as their leader. Here Mohammed built the first mosque and continued to preach his religion. From here the religion spread to the rest of Arabia and, within a century after Mohammed’s death, to distant parts of the world. Mohammed was recognized as the Prophet, or messenger of God.

Mohammed called his religion Islam. Islam means “submission to God,” that is, living according to God’s will. After Mohammed’s death, all his teachings were collected and put together in one book called the Koran. The Koran is the holy book of the Muslims. They believe that the words in it were spoken to Mohammed by God. Every aspect of life is regulated by the teachings in the Koran. The Koran is the most important book used in Muslim schools.

Mohammed’s Teachings—The Ideas of Islam

Mohammed taught that there is only one God, Allah. In this Mohammed was influenced by the monotheism of the Jews and the Old Testament. He also taught that God rewards people who act according to his laws and punishes those who disobey them and that there are angels who intercede for men. Muslims are taught to believe in the prophets

*Also spelled Muhammad
of Allah, of whom Mohammed is considered the most important. The Koran speaks of the Day of Judgment when Allah will reward all people with either everlasting bliss or punishment.

Mohammed set up rules that all Muslims must follow. These are known as the Five Pillars of Islam.

1. Muslims must repeat every day in Arabic, “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.”
2. A Muslim must pray five times a day. When praying, the person must turn towards Mecca, the holy city.
3. Muslims are required to give charity to the needy.
4. Muslims are supposed to fast (go without food or drink) from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan. Fasting is considered to be the best means of atoning for one’s sins.
5. It is the duty of every Muslim to try to make a trip to Mecca at least once. This religious trip is called a pilgrimage. Every year, thousands of Muslims from different parts of the world travel to Mecca to fulfill this duty.

Throughout Muslim history, the pilgrimage has been an important unifying force, uniting Muslims from many different countries. In Mecca, as well as while traveling to and from Mecca, the pilgrims have exchanged ideas, information, agricultural and other products, and seeds. This has helped to maintain a common Islamic culture among the many diverse people who are Muslims.

Each Muslim city has at least one mosque, or temple of worship. Every morning the Muslim is awakened by a call to prayer from the mosque. Every adult male must attend the Friday noon service. There are no statues or images (pictures of people or animals) in the mosque.

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, emphasized kindness and forgiveness, respect for parents, protection of the weak, and charity towards the poor. Mohammed taught that all men who followed Islam were brothers. “Know ye that every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim, and that ye are now one brotherhood.” All Muslims were considered equal before the law.

Muslims believe that theirs is the only true religion. However, they honor Moses and Christ and other figures in the Bible as prophets of the one God. Jews and Christians are called “People of the Book” and are given a special place in the Islamic religion. A careful study of Islam will reveal that many of its ideas and practices have their roots in Judaism and Christianity.

The religious beliefs that Muslims share have brought Muslims all over the world closer together. These beliefs have been carried over into the modern world and into present forms of government.

Jihad—Holy War

Another important idea of Islam is the duty of jihad, or holy war. A key belief in Islam is that the world is divided into two parts. One is “the land of Islam” (dar al-Islam) which consists of all the lands that are Muslim. The other is the “war territory” (dar al-harb), the non-Islamic lands. It is believed that every Muslim has the duty to expand the frontiers of Islam until the entire world has been won. A war that is fought against the “enemies” of Islam is considered a holy war. It is also believed that anyone who dies while fighting for
The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is holy to Moslems because according to tradition Mohammed ascended to heaven from this spot. It is holy to Jews as well because the Dome marks the site of Solomon's Temple and it is believed to be the site where Abraham prepared Isaac for sacrifice.

The Great Mosque of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, filled with pilgrims. The stone building in the center is the Kaaba that contains a sacred black stone. It is toward Mecca, Islam's holiest city, that Moslems throughout the world turn five times each day and pray.
Islam will go straight to heaven. Centuries ago, one of the principle duties of the Caliph (the leader of the Muslim world) was to expand the territory of the Islamic world. It was this duty that resulted in the spread of Islam to many different parts of the world. In recent years, especially in the 1980s, the idea of jihad was used by Arab terrorists, as well as some of the Muslim governments (especially Iran) to attack the United States and Israel as the “enemies” of Islam. During the 1990–1991 Gulf crisis, Saddam Hussein called on the Iraqi people to fight in a jihad against the United States and its allies.

Muslims: Sunnis and Shi’ites

Muslims are divided into two sects or groups—Sunni Muslims and Shi’ite Muslims. Approximately 85 percent of all Muslims are Sunnis and 15 percent are Shi’ites. Shi’ites are found mainly in Iran, where they account for 91 percent of the population. Shi’ites are also in the majority in Iraq, and are found in large numbers in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf states.

The two groups split soon after the death of Mohammed. Since then (more than 1,300 years) relations between the two groups have often been bloody. Civil wars have been fought and Shi’ites have often suffered persecution by the Sunnis.

The division between Shi’ites and Sunnis developed over the question of who should succeed Mohammed as leader of the Muslim community. When Mohammed died in 632, leaving no male heir, possible successors, or Khalifahs (caliphs), were named by several different groups. One group, known as the Shia, claimed that Allah and Mohammed had chosen Ali as the legitimate successor. Ali was a cousin of Mohammed and the husband of Mohammed’s daughter, Fatimah.

However, Ali did not succeed in becoming caliph at first. Three others were chosen as caliph before him. Finally in 656, Ali was proclaimed the fourth caliph. Five years later he was assassinated.

In 680, Husein, the son of Ali and grandson of Mohammed, refused to recognize the new caliph. Husein was declared caliph by his Shi’ite supporters. In the war that followed, Husein and his supporters were massacred by the caliph’s troops when they refused to surrender. This massacre marked the beginning of the Shi’ites as a religious sect. The great division made in Islam has never healed.

The Shi’ites came to believe that true religious guidance could come only from Mohammad’s heirs because Mohammed had transmitted a secret interpretation of the Koran to them. These people were chosen as imam, or religious leaders of the community. In time, the imams were believed to be infallible and without sin. Shi’ites believe that it is from the imam that they receive the original light of Mohammed’s revelation. This is very different from the Sunni Muslims, who believe that they receive all their religious guidance from the Koran, Muslim traditions, and the holy law.

The Position of Women

Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their wealth to support women.

—The Koran
The position of women in Islamic society is a sensitive subject that arouses much controversy among Muslims. Islamic law seems to assert openly the superiority of men over women. However, some Muslims deny this and insist that Islam merely recognizes the different roles of men and women.

According to Islamic law (the Koran), a man may marry up to four wives at one time, but if a woman takes more than one husband at a time, she is subject to the severest penalties in this world and the next. In court, a man’s testimony has twice the value of a woman’s. When parents die, the daughters’ share of the inheritance is half that of the sons’.

Under Islam, women may not reveal their person to anyone except their husband or close relatives. This is why many Muslim women veil themselves from head to foot when they leave their homes. Even at home, women live in separate quarters known as the harem.

Those who deny that Islam enforces women’s inferiority claim that wearing a veil in public protects women from unwanted advances; women are secluded because they need protection in their role as wives and mothers; women inherit only half as much as their brothers because men are charged with the care of the family. They also stress that husbands are charged with the proper care of their wives. “Be sure to treat your wives well” Mohammed ordered. Moreover, the spiritual equality of women is emphasized throughout the Koran.

Islam established practices regarding women that were quite advanced for their time. It made the education of girls a sacred duty and established a woman’s right to own and inherit property. It outlawed female infanticide (the killing of girl babies), a common practice in many parts of the world centuries ago.

However, as a result of Islamic law and customs, Muslim women have not played an important role in history. Although some women exercised influence from the harem, examples of women attaining real power and importance are rare.

In traditional Islamic marriages, young people do not choose their marriage partners. Marriages are arranged by the parents. Negotiations between the two families are carried out by kinsmen (relatives). They must agree upon the dower, the amount of money that the groom pays to the bride’s father. They must also agree upon a sum to be paid in case the husband dies or divorces his wife. The bride must provide the furniture and everything else needed to set up a home. In parts of the Islamic world the preferred marriage is between cousins on the father’s side.

According to the Koran, a husband may divorce his wife by simply making a public declaration three times. Traditionally, the principal cause for divorce has been childlessness, especially the lack of sons. However, it is very difficult for a woman to get a divorce and she must obtain her husband’s consent. In case of divorce, custody of the children goes to the husband. The woman retains the property that she brought to the marriage.

This situation began to change in the 20th century as Muslims came in contact with Europe and America. Western ideas encouraged a freer role for women outside the home. Women started attending universities and pursuing careers as doctors, engineers, teachers, social workers, and more. They became active in politics. Many governments, recognizing the talents of women, encouraged women to play a more active role in their countries.

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Women’s Rights
Since the 1980s

Laws were passed in many countries giving women specific rights. Today, women hold relatively high positions in a number of Muslim nations.

Since the 1980s, however, some of these gains have been reversed. The Muslim world as a whole is becoming more religious. In some countries, Muslim fundamentalists (religious extremists who want to return to the true teachings of Islam) have gained power. They reject Western values and have revised laws to take away the legal rights that women recently won. This is especially true in Iran, but it has also happened in Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, and other countries. In Iran, until the 1979 revolution, women in the cities wore Western clothes and had a lifestyle similar to women in Europe and America. Now, women wear veils in public and their rights have been greatly restricted. In Sudan, the military government that seized power in 1989 refused to allow women to leave the country without permission from a husband, father, or brother. In Saudi Arabia, long the most conservative Islamic country, women are forbidden to wear Western clothes or appear without a veil in public; they are forbidden to drive and may travel only if accompanied by a husband or male blood relative.

In Saudi Arabia in November 1990, a group of 47 women gathered in a parking lot. They dismissed their chauffeurs and drove through the streets of downtown Riyadh in an orderly procession. The presence of American soldiers, especially female, in Saudi Arabia had encouraged the Saudi women to press for change in the restrictions placed on them. Within minutes the police arrived to arrest the women.

A government commission found that the women had not committed a crime since there was no specific prohibition in the Koran against driving. But the women were advised not to repeat the experiment. Unfortunately the incident did not end here. Six of the women were suspended from their jobs as university professors after organized bands of students staged angry protests. Leaflets were passed out at mosques during Friday prayers accusing the women of undermining Saudi morality. Some of the women received threatening phone calls after their names, addresses, and phone numbers were printed and distributed. Finally the Saudi government issued a statement declaring that “driving by women contradicts the Islamic traditions followed by Saudi citizens.”

Early History of the Middle East

River Valley Civilizations

The first great civilizations in the world developed along the banks of rivers. Historians believe that there were four cradles of civilization and that two of these were in the Middle East. (The other two developed in India and China.) One was in Egypt, in the Nile Valley. The other was in Mesopotamia (known as Iraq today) between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. From the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia civilization spread northward and westward, eventually reaching Europe and America.

Conditions in the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia favored agriculture. The great rivers annually overflowed their banks, depositing a rich layer of soil. This fertile, well-watered soil produced abundant harvests. These in turn made possible a large increase in population. Cities and villages arose.

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