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
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.
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 dowry, 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.