Origins of Islam

If YOU lived there...

You live in a town in Arabia, in a large merchant family. Your family has grown rich from selling goods brought by traders crossing the desert. Your house is larger than most others in town, and you have servants to wait on you. Although many townspeople are poor, you have always taken such differences for granted. Now you hear that some people are saying the rich should give money to the poor.

How might your family react to this idea?

Building Background

For thousands of years, traders have crossed the deserts of Arabia to bring goods to market. Scorching temperatures and lack of water have made the journey difficult. However, Arabia not only developed into a thriving trade center, it also became the birthplace of a new religion.

Life in a Desert Land

The Arabian Peninsula, or Arabia, is located in the southwest corner of Asia. It lies near the intersection of Africa, Europe, and Asia. For thousands of years Arabia’s location, physical features, and climate have shaped life in the region.

Physical Features and Climate

Arabia lies in a region with hot and dry air. With a blazing sun and clear skies, summer temperatures in the interior parts of the peninsula reach 100°F (38°C) daily. This climate has created a band of deserts across Arabia and northern Africa. Sand dunes, or hills of sand shaped by the wind, can rise to 800 feet (240 m) high and stretch across hundreds of miles!

Arabia’s deserts have a very limited amount of water. What water there is exists mainly in scattered oases. An oasis is a wet, fertile area in a desert. Oases have long been key stops along Arabia’s overland trade routes.
Two Ways of Life
To live in Arabia's harsh deserts, people developed two main ways of life. Nomads lived in tents and raised herds of sheep, goats, and camels. The animals provided milk, meat, wool, and leather. The camels also carried heavy loads. Nomads traveled with their herds across the desert in search of food and water for their animals.

Among the nomads, water and land belonged to tribes. Membership in a tribe, a group of related people, offered safety from desert dangers.

While nomads moved around, other Arabs lived a more settled life. They made their homes in oases where they could farm. These settlements, particularly the ones along trade routes, became towns.

Towns became centers of trade. There, nomads traded animal products and herbs for goods like cooking supplies and clothes. Merchants sold spices, gold, leather, and other goods brought by caravans.

**READING CHECK** Categorizing What two ways of life were common in Arabia?

---

**Close-up**

**Life in Arabia**

The city of Mecca in Arabia is shown here as it might have looked in the late 500s. Nomads from the desert and merchants from distant lands came to trade in Mecca. As a result of this trade, many Meccan merchants became very wealthy.

Nomads traveled across Arabia, moving their animals as the seasons changed.

Towns were centers of trade for both nomads and townspeople. They traded goods like food and cloth.

**ANALYSIS SKILL** **ANALYZING VISUALS**

Which figures in this image do you think are nomads? Which are townspeople? How can you tell?
A New Religion

In early times, Arabs worshipped many gods. That changed, however, when a man named Muhammad brought a new religion to Arabia. Historians know little about Muhammad. What they do know comes from religious writings.

Muhammad Founds Islam

Muhammad was born into an important family in the city of Mecca around 570. As a small child, he traveled with his uncle’s caravans. Once he was grown, he managed a caravan business owned by a wealthy woman named Khadijah (ka-DI-jah). At age 25, Muhammad married Khadijah.

The caravan trade made Mecca a rich city, but most of the wealth belonged to just a few people. Traditionally, wealthy people in Mecca had helped the poor. As Muhammad was growing up, though, many rich merchants ignored the needy.

Concerned about these changes, Muhammad often went to the hills to pray and meditate. One day, when he was about 40 years old, he went to meditate in a cave. According to religious writings, an angel spoke to Muhammad, telling him to “Recite! Recite!” Muhammad asked what he should recite. The angel answered:

“Recite in the name of your Lord who created, created man from clots of blood! Recite! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, Who by the pen taught man what he did not know.”

—From The Koran, translated by N. J. Dawood

Muslims believe that God had spoken to Muhammad through the angel and had made him a prophet, a person who tells of messages from God. The messages that Muhammad received form the basis of the religion called Islam. In Arabic, the word Islam means “to submit to God.”

Muslims, or people who follow Islam, believe that God chose Muhammad to be his messenger to the world. They also believe that Muhammad continued to receive messages from God for the rest of his life. Eventually, these messages were collected in the Qur’an (kuh-RAN), the holy book of Islam.

Muhammad’s Teachings

In 613 Muhammad began to talk about his messages. He taught that there was only one God, Allah, which means “the God” in Arabic. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is monotheistic, or based on the belief in one God. Although people of all three religions believe in one God, their beliefs about God are not the same.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Line</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginners of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>575</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muhammad is born.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ANALYSIS SKILLS**

**READING TIME LINES**

How many years did Muhammad spend spreading his message before he died?
Muhammad's teachings also dealt with how people should live. He taught that all people who believed in Allah were bound together like members of a family. As a result, he said, people should help those who are less fortunate. For example, he thought that people who had money should use that money to help the poor.

**Islam Spreads in Arabia**

At first Muhammad had few followers. Slowly, more people began to listen to his ideas. As Islam spread, Mecca's rulers grew worried. They threatened Muhammad and even planned to kill him.

A group of people living north of Mecca invited Muhammad to move to their city. So in 622 Muhammad and many of his followers went to Medina (muh-DEE-nuh). The name Medina means “the Prophet’s city” in Arabic. Muhammad's departure from Mecca is called the hegira (hi-JY-ruh), or journey. It is so important a date in the history of Islam that Muslims made 622 the first year of the Islamic calendar.

Muhammad became a spiritual and political leader in Medina. His house became the first mosque (MAHSK), or building for Muslim prayer.

As the Muslim community in Medina grew stronger, other Arab tribes began to accept Islam. Conflict with the Meccans, however, increased. In 630, after several years of fighting, the people of Mecca gave in. They accepted Islam as their religion.

Before long, most people in Arabia had accepted Muhammad as their spiritual and political leader and become Muslims. Muhammad died in 632, but the religion he taught would soon spread far beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

**Reading Check** Summarizing How did Islam spread in Arabia?