

## Born in the Middle East: Christianity

Followers of Christianity are called **Christians**. They believe in one God, the same one that the Jewish people believe in. They believe that Abraham is a very important figure. Christians also believe that God made an agreement (a **covenant**) with Abraham that said his descendents would be God's chosen people in exchange for faith and obedience. These people—called the Hebrews in ancient times—would live in a promised land called Canaan, which is now modern day Israel. The chosen people are called the Jews.

Christians base their religions on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, known as **Jesus Christ**. Jesus was a Jew who was born around 4 BC near Jerusalem. During his life he traveled around northern Palestine teaching about a new covenant between God and the Jews. Those who followed Jesus' teaching broke away from the other Jews. These followers became known as Christians, worshipping in a way that focused on Jesus' teachings.

The Christian idea of God is called **Trinity** because they believe God has three parts: God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Christians believe that Jesus was part of God, died on a cross, rose from the dead, and then ascended to heaven to be with God the Father. The Christian holy book is called the **Bible** and is divided into two parts: **Old Testament and New Testament**. The Old Testament contains a history of the law and the prophets—stories of the ancient Hebrews. The New Testament contains stories of Jesus' life and letters of early Christians.

The goal of Christianity is to achieve salvation or eternal life with God. Christians follow Jesus' teachings about living a moral life and participate in **sacraments**, or sacred ceremonies. Some Christian groups participate in many sacraments, but all groups recognize baptism (introduction to Christianity) and communion (sharing of a sacred meal).

Christianity requires only people who are specially trained carry out Christian ceremonies and be in charge of sacraments. Christian leaders (called **pastors, ministers, or priests** depending on the group) lead worship in holy buildings called **churches**. The most important service happens on Sunday. During the service, the people experience sacraments, recite beliefs, pray, read from their holy book, and hear a religious speech (a sermon) related to Bible readings.

Christianity has three main groups: **Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant**. All Christian groups consider **Jerusalem** the holiest city because that is where they believe Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead.



**Symbol of Christianity:**

## Born in the Middle East: Judaism

Followers of Judaism are called **Jews**. These people believe in one God. **Abraham** is an important figure in the history of the Jews. He lived in the Middle East about 4,000 years ago at a time when people believed in many gods. However, Abraham believed in only one, all-powerful God. Jews believe that God made an agreement (a **covenant**) with Abraham that said his descendants would be God's chosen people in exchange for faith and obedience. These people—called the Hebrews in ancient times—would live in a promised land called Canaan, which is now modern day Israel.

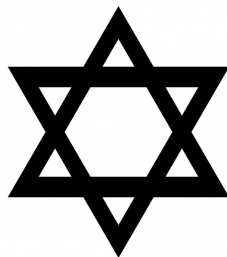
Jews base their religion on their holy book written in Hebrew. The most important part of the book is called the Torah. Jews believe that about 3,000 years ago, God gave the **Torah** to Moses, Judaism's most important prophet. Besides the history of the Hebrew people, the Torah includes 10 main laws, called **commandments**. These commandments tell the followers of Judaism how to worship and live a moral life. There is also a Jewish spoken law, that helps the Jews understand traditions in modern day life.

The goal of Judaism is to live a good life according to the laws of the Torah. Followers of Judaism are also supposed to pass on Jewish traditions to their families. An example of this combination is the Torah law that requires Jews to keep the Sabbath day (**Shabbat**) holy. From Friday evening until Saturday evening, Jews must rest and pray. Shabbat begins with a traditional family meal.

On Friday evening and Saturday morning, Jews gather to pray at a holy building called a **synagogue**. During the service a teacher, called a **rabbi**, leads the people in prayers, readings from the holy book, and gives a sermon.

The Torah's laws guide many aspects of Jewish religious and social life. For example, the Torah commands all Jews to fast (not eat or drink) during the holiday of **Yom Kippur**. This holiday is a day that Jews set aside for being sorry for bad acts, or a day of atonement. The Torah outlines that Jews can only eat foods that are *kosher*, because they meet the requirements about clean preparation of food. They do not eat pork, shellfish, or meat prepared with dairy products.

There are three main divisions of **Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed**. All three divisions have a special reverence for the city of **Jerusalem** because it is the sacred city of the prophets.



**Symbol of Judaism:**

## Born in the Middle East: Islam

Followers of Islam are called **Muslims**. They believe in one God, the same one that the Jewish and Christian people believe in called **Allah** in Arabic. They believe that Abraham is a very important figure. Muslims also believe that God made an agreement (a **covenant**) with Abraham that said his descendants would be God's chosen people in exchange for faith and obedience. Abraham had two sons, one named Isaac and one name **Ishmael**. Muslims believe that the Hebrews are descendants of Isaac and Muslims are descendants of Ishmael.

Islam is based on God's teachings and the example of the life of **Muhammad**. Muhammad was born around 570 AD in **Mecca**, located in modern day Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that when Muhammad was 40 years old he had a vision where an angel gave him a message from God. The message was revealed over the next 23 years and later written down in the Muslim holy book. During the time, Muslims learned to accept all the Hebrew messengers of God's word including Jesus and Moses. However, they do not believe that Jesus was part of God. Muhammad is considered to be God's final prophet and through Muhammad God made Mecca the center and holiest city of Islam. After Muhammad's death, God's teachings revealed through Muhammad were written down in the **Koran (Qur'an)**—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 teachings God made to Muhammad, including many of the ideas from the history and law of the ancient Hebrews, 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 life with God.

To achieve salvation, Muslims participate in five basic practices called the "**five pillars**". The pillars include a declaration of faith, prayer, giving to charity, fasting, and a pilgrimage to Mecca. The Koran also describes a way of life that describes ways that are allowed (*halal*) and ones that are not (*haram*). These acts include dietary laws, which do not allow the eating of pork or 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 service, an **imam** (prayer leader) leads prayers, reads from the Koran, and gives a sermon. Muslims choose a person of good character and religious knowledge as their imam. However, the imam has the same relationship with God as any other Muslim.

The two major divisions of Muslims are **Sunni and Shia**. The groups share most beliefs, but differ mainly over the issue of leadership in the Muslim community. Muslims also hold **Jerusalem** sacred as the city of the prophets and where Muhammad ascended into heaven. They also believe the city of **Medina** is important.



**Symbol of Islam:**