

# Origins of Islam: Abraham and the Ka'bah

Islam is the youngest of the Semitic religions. It was founded by the prophet Muhammad who was born in 570 CE. By 630 CE, Islam was an established faith spreading throughout Arabia. Followers of Islam are called Muslims, which means "one who submits (to) Allah." Allah is the Arabic name for God. Islam means "submission to God." The map on page 94 shows the spread of Islam during Muhammad's lifetime.

The roots of Islam, however, go all the way back to Abraham around 2000 BCE. You may remember Abraham as the father of the Jewish religion. Interestingly, Muslims also regard Abraham as the forefather of their religion.

According to both the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) and the Koran (the Islamic holy scripture), Abraham had fathered a son before the birth of Isaac. The boy was Ishmael, whose mother was Abraham's servant, Hagar. Abraham's wife, Sarah, was childless and became jealous. So God told Abraham to bless the child and to send him and his mother south into the desert.

They wandered the desert until they ran out of water. Hagar rested Ishmael on the sand and then searched desperately between two high rocks. She ran back and forth seven times. Finally, resting on one of the rocks, she heard an angel's voice tell her not to be afraid. Miraculously, water spouted from where Ishmael's heels touched the sand. This became the famous well, Zamzam, where the city of Mecca was born.

Toward the end of his life, Abraham traveled into Arabia to visit Ishmael. Muslims believe that God told Abraham to build a holy sanctuary at Zamzam. This site was called the Ka'bah, meaning "cube." It is also known as the House of God. The Ka'bah is about forty feet (12 m) in height, width, and length. The door is seven feet (2.1 m) from the ground and must be entered by a moveable staircase. Curtains and carpets cover most of the outside of the Ka'bah.

Inside the sanctuary are some silver and gold lamps. But the most important object is an oval black stone about seven inches (18 cm) in size. Muslims believe that this stone was given to Abraham by an angel. They say the stone was white but turned black with the kisses of worshippers seeking forgiveness. According to the Koran, God instructed Abraham to tell all worshippers of Allah to make a pilgrimage to the Ka'bah.

As you will see, the Ka'bah plays a central role in the history of Islam. You will learn more about its significance later in this chapter on Islam.

