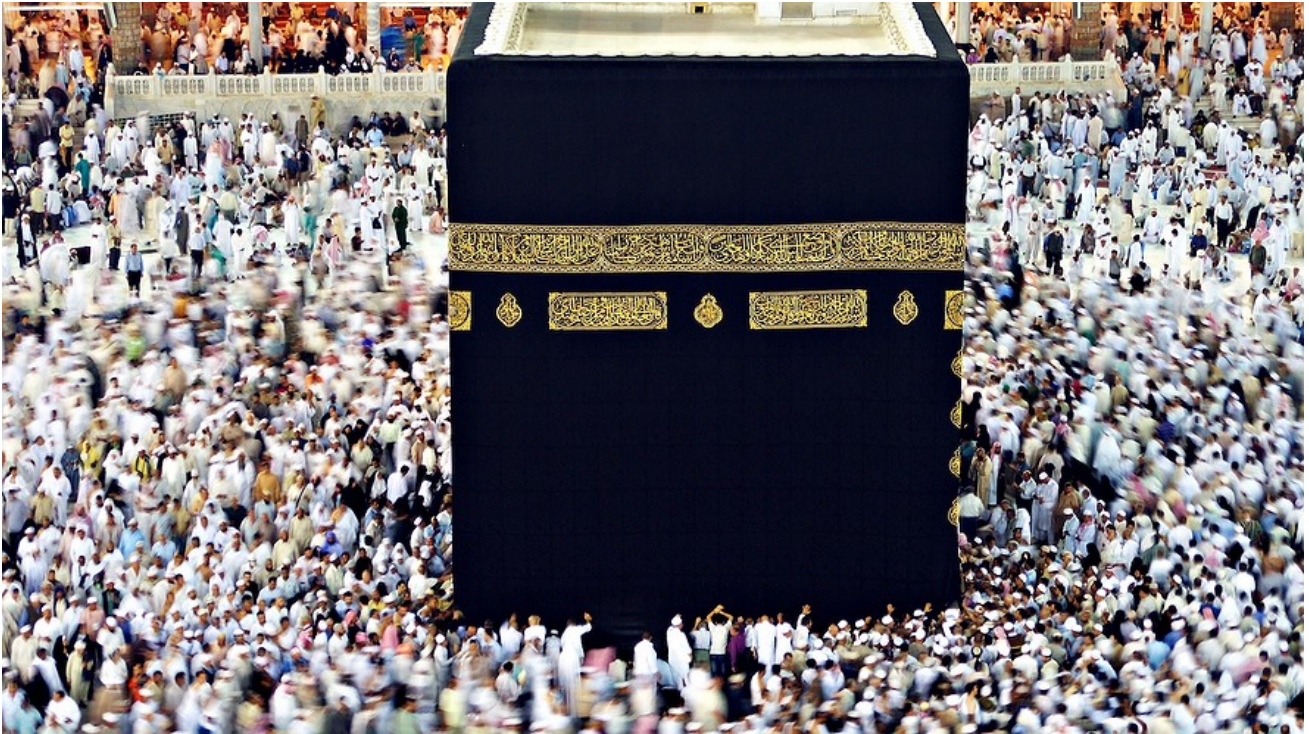


# An Introduction to Muhammad and the Faith of Islam

By UShistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.22.17

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The Great Mosque of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. It is the most holy site in Islam. The Kaaba is in the middle. It was believed to have been built for God by Abraham. Photo by: Basil Soufi

In A.D. 610, a man named Muhammad was meditating alone in a cave. He received a religious vision that laid the foundations for a new religion: Islam.

Muhammad was born around A.D. 570 in the city of Mecca. Mecca is located in present-day Saudi Arabia. Both of Muhammad's parents died before he was 6. He was raised by his grandfather and uncle. His family was poor but involved in the city's politics.

Muhammad spent part of his childhood living with a Bedouin family. Bedouins were traveling herders who lived in the harsh Arabian desert. Muhammad's experiences among these people most likely had a strong influence on the religion he would go on to begin.

In his 20s, Muhammad began working as a merchant. Soon he married his boss, a rich woman named Khadijah. Over the next 20 years, he became a wealthy and respected trader, traveling throughout the Middle East. He and his wife had six children: two boys (who did not live into adulthood) and four girls. By the time he was 40, he began having religious visions that would change his life.

## **A revelation of faith**

While meditating in a cave on Mount Hira, Muhammad had a sudden vision. He came to believe that he was called on by God to be a messenger and teacher of a new faith: Islam.

Islam, which literally means "submission," included ideas from Judaism and Christianity. It respected the holy books of these religions and its great leaders, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others. Muhammad called Abraham "Khalil" ("God's friend") and identified him as one of Islam's founding fathers. Muhammad believed that he himself was God's final messenger. Muslims, Jews and Christians all worship the same god, but Muslims call him Allah. Allah means "The God" in Arabic.

There are Five Pillars of Faith that are central to the Islamic belief system. They are:

1. There is only one God: Allah.
2. Followers of Islam are expected to pray five times each day while facing Mecca.
3. All Muslims are expected to pay a yearly tax to help the poor and needy.
4. For the entire month of Ramadan, Muslims must not eat, smoke or drink anything from sunrise to sunset.
5. All healthy Muslims must make a journey (hajj) to Mecca at least once in their lifetimes. Mecca houses Islam's holiest site, the Kaaba.

## **Jihad better explained**

Belief in jihad is also common among many Muslims. Although the exact meaning is difficult to express in English, jihad is most accurately translated as "struggle."

For most Muslims, jihad is a personal struggle against evil. This struggle takes place in people's hearts and minds.

There is another kind of jihad, however, that is more of an armed struggle. Some Muslims support this idea in cases of self-defense, but there is an even smaller group that thinks Muslims should wage war against all non-believers. This idea of jihad has led to acts of terrorism. Only a very small group of Muslims believe this. The majority of Muslims are peaceful and do not support terrorism.

## **From Mecca to Medina and back**

Muhammad's message was especially well received by poor people and slaves. Many people of other religions were opposed to his message, though. This opposition only seemed to make him more determined. After years of publicly promoting his ideas, he became so disliked that some began plotting to kill him.

In A.D. 622, fearing for his life, Muhammad fled to the town of Medina. This flight from Mecca to Medina became known as the Hegira or Hijra. It is Arabic for "flight."

In Medina, the local people welcomed Muhammad and his followers. There, Muhammad built the first mosque, an Islamic temple, and began to work to separate Islam from Judaism and Christianity.

Whereas his followers had originally prayed while facing toward Jerusalem, he now had them face toward Mecca. He continued to have visions from Allah, and through these visions, he came up with a poetic text called the Quran, which contains the most important ideas of Islam.

Muhammad fought a number of battles against the people of Mecca. In A.D. 629, he returned to the city with an army of 1,500 believers and entered the city unopposed and without bloodshed. Before his death two years later, he had built a small empire.

Unfortunately, Muhammad did not pick someone to lead Islam after he died. The struggle over leadership that followed his death has divided Muslims to this day, creating a division in Islam between the Sunnis and Shiites, the two major Muslim groups.

Still, the followers of Muhammad built a vast Islamic empire in the 12 centuries that came after his death, making Islam one of the primary religions in the world.