

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Origins, Art, and Ideas

Key Ideas: Religions of the Book

- Monotheistic: one God created and rules the universe (all develop within polytheistic societies).
- Word of God is revealed in writing: Hebrew Scriptures/Bible, Christian Bible, Islamic Qur'an.
- Build on beliefs and traditions of one another.
- Religious art objects are used for teaching purposes: to recall stories, to teach specific lessons, and to guide devotional practice.
- All three incorporate elements from other cultures (Greek, Roman, Near Eastern).

Judaism: Origins and Ideas

- Abraham travels to Canaan (c. 1800 BCE), the land promised to God's chosen people. Story told in the Torah.
- God reveals his laws (Ten Commandments) through Moses, which are placed in the Ark of the Covenant (13th c. BCE).
- Twelve tribes unify and build temple in Jerusalem (11th-10th c. BCE). First temple destroyed 587 BCE (Neo-Babylonians); rebuilt 538 BCE (under Persians).
- After series of conquerors, Israel comes under Roman rule (63 BCE, later called Palestine by Romans).
- Roman (future) emperor Titus destroys second Temple (70 CE); period of dispersal into other lands (diaspora).
- Jewish people await the arrival of the Messiah, "the anointed one."

Jewish Art and Culture

- Very little art survives from the early period; a few wall paintings in Roman catacombs and excavated synagogues (Syria) reveal beliefs and practices.
- Early art and architecture reflect traditions from Rome (fresco, mosaic) and the Near East (strong outlines, flat colors).
- Synagogues are sites of worship, learning, and social gatherings.
- Precious objects are made to celebrate the major events of the Jewish calendar: Sabbath, Passover, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Purim, Sukkot, etc.

Dura-Europus, Syria, house-synagogue paintings

Rome, Jewish catacomb paintings

Maon, Israel, synagogue floor mosaics

Ritual objects: Harold and Mickey Smith Judaica gallery

terms/names/places

Yahweh/Jehovah

Abram of Ur (Abraham)

Mount Sinai

Ark of the Covenant

menorah/Hanukkah lamp

shofar – ram's horn

lulav – sheaf of palm, myrtle, and willow branches

etrog – citron box

dreidel – top

Christianity: Origins and Ideas

- Jesus Christ, identified as the Messiah by his followers, born as a Jew in land subject to Roman rule.
- Jesus's public ministry is directed toward Jews and Gentiles. Preaches "good news" of salvation for all who believe.
- Christians believe Jesus is God in human form; after a short ministry, he is executed by the Romans and ascends into heaven.
- Follower Paul and other disciples establish Christian church and bring Jesus's teachings to surrounding non-Jewish world.
- Christianity "legalized" and becomes Roman state religion by 4th c. CE; Constantine permits religious tolerance; gives Christianity his support.

Christian Art and Culture

- Early imagery presents Christ as "good shepherd" and commemorates the faithful.
- Works of art created to teach stories from the Christian Bible (story of Jesus told in New Testament Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).
- Early art and architecture reflect traditions from Rome (fresco, mosaic, basilica or central plan).
- Images change as understanding of relationship between God and humans changes.
- Large churches built to be filled with works of art.

terms/names/places

catacombs

basilica plan: atrium, narthex, nave, clerestory, apse, transept

Byzantine Empire

- Western Roman Empire collapses 476 CE (sacked by Germanic peoples).
- Eastern Empire flourishes in 6th c. with capital at Constantinople (formerly Byzantium).
- Extensive use of mosaics (influence of Greek and Roman world) to represent splendor of rulers who preside over church and state.
- Figures shown as formal and static within timeless, supernatural world; rulers take on holy status.
- Muslim Ottoman Turks reclaim Constantinople in 1453, rename it Istanbul. Eastern church leadership moves to Russia.

terms/names/places

Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora

Hagia Sophia/Aya Sofya (Holy Wisdom)

San Vitale, Ravenna

Coptic Christianity

- Christian community founded by apostle Mark in Alexandria, Egypt, around 42-62 CE.
- Coptic world includes Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Christians.
- Modeled on aspects and rituals of ancient Egyptian religion: ankh, ancient Egyptian symbol of eternal life, adopted as their cross; retain resurrection rituals associated with Osiris.
- Christian monasticism, so important to Medieval Europe, had beginnings among the Copts.
- Arabs conquer Egypt in 7th c., many Copts convert to Islam.

Egypt, *Sanctuary curtain with a Latin cross*, tapestry weave, 5th-6th c. CE 83.126

Islam: Origins and Ideas

- Muslims (“believers”) are followers of Islam (“submission to God”), established by the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632 CE), the last in a series of prophets sent by God.
- Sacred book is the *Qur’an/Koran*: the word of God as revealed/recited by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad. It took about a decade from the death of Muhammad to compile the divine revelations into book form.
- Muhammad begins his teachings 7th c. CE in Mecca. Persecution forces him north with followers in 622 CE. Eventually controls Western Arabia.
- From these beginnings up to 15th c., Islam spreads from Atlantic to Indian Ocean, across Central Asia as far as Samarqand, to deserts of Africa. Islamic culture absorbs and integrates aspects of other cultures along the way.
- Islamic peoples preserved much of the knowledge of Greco-Roman tradition, which had been lost to Europe until the Middle Ages.
- Islamic lands were center of trade between East and West: silk, textiles, spices, and exquisite art objects. Islamic civilization prospers between collapse of Roman/Byzantine Empire and rise of European nation-states.

Five Pillars/Practices of the Faith

- *Shahada* – profession of faith: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet”
- *Salat* – ritual prayer, 5 times per day: call to prayer heard throughout a Muslim city
- *Zakat* – almsgiving/charitable giving
- *Sawm* – fasting (no food, drink sexual relations) during Ramadan from dawn to sunset, 9th month of Islamic lunar calendar (when Muhammad received the first revelation of the Qur’an)
- *Hajj* – pilgrimage once during lifetime to the Ka’ba in Mecca if have money and physical ability

Islamic Art and Culture

- Works of art made for religious practices and settings as well as secular purposes
- Objects made by and for Islamic peoples of many cultures; incorporates diverse traditions (not art of a specific era, place, or people; Muslims made art for Christians, Jews, and Hindus; Asian and European cultures, and vice versa)
- God is unique and cannot be represented in figural form; humans and animals can only be created by God (prohibition against representing the human form comes out of *interpretation* of Qur’an)*
- God is worshipped without intercessors (no saints)
- Little or no narrative in the Qur’an to depict
- Qur’an is a guide to political, social, and cultural matters: Islam is a religion and a way of life

*Eventually the lack of figural representation became law. Islamic leaders saw an implication of idolatry in figural imagery: representation ensnares the mind, gives the world a reality it doesn’t possess; abstraction corresponds to a contemplative state where the mind/spirit can roam.

Metalworking (G243)

Hispano-Moorish, *Lion statuette*, 11th-12th c., gold, 72.12 – luxury goods produced for the ruling class

Ceramics

Iran (Persia) or Uzbekistan, *Large Bowl*, 10th century, earthenware with a white slip ground under a clear glaze with reddish, dark brown, and gold slip-painted décor, 2003.98.2

Iran, *Bowl*, 10th-11th century, earthenware with a white slip ground under a clear glaze with reddish and brown slip-painted décor, 2002.89.2

Iraq, *Bowl*, 9th century, earthenware with overglaze cobalt-blue designs, 32.32.3-5

Book Arts: Calligraphy

Iran (Persia), Abbasid dynasty, *Page from the Koran*, 10th c., 51.37.7 (not on view)

Iran (Persia), Abbasid dynasty, *Page from the Koran*, 10th c., 51.37.3 (on view)

terms/names/places

Allah – “the one who is God”

Mecca, Medina

arabesque – design using rhythmic patterns of scrolling and interlocking foliage, tendrils, or lines; often combined with other elements

calligraphy – “beautiful writing”

Muhammad: the last of the prophets sent by God to establish and clarify the Islamic faith. Muslims believe that Islam dates back to the creation of the world, before Muhammad was born, but the Islamic religion began historically with the birth of Muhammad in Mecca in 570 CE. Before Muhammad, God sent the prophets Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Noah, David, and Jesus to summon people away from rebellion and sin.

Qur’an/Koran: Muslim holy book. The word of God as revealed/recited by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad in 610 CE. It took about a decade from the death of Muhammad to compile the divine revelations into book form. Muslims believe the Qur’an had been kept with God since the beginning of time until he revealed it to his Prophet. Each word is believed to be an actual utterance of God. It is not only a source of divine revelation but also a guide to political, social, and cultural matters.

Sunni: follower of the *sunnah*, or actions, of Muhammad under the four caliphs (Abu Bakr, known as “best qualified man,” Umar, Uthman, and Ali). Sunnis are the largest group of Muslims and considered to be mainstream traditionalists. After the assassination of Ali, they aggressively expanded the empire and located the capital in Damascus (in present-day Syria).

Shi’ite/Shi’a: *Shi’atu Ali* (party of Ali ibn Abi Talib); believed that the best-qualified caliph was Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali, based on words spoken about him in the Qur’an. After Ali’s death, they split off from Sunnis. Shi’ites exalt their leaders, or *Imams*, as divinely inspired to interpret truths of the Qur’an. They are second-largest group of Muslims.

Sufi: follower of Sufism, Islamic mysticism, which arose at the turn of the seventh century. More a movement than a sect. Sufis seek an intense personal relationship with God through chanting, drumming, and ecstatic dancing. Sometimes called “whirling dervishes;” dancing is a way to forget themselves and all worldly things, thereby raising their awareness of God. Sufi orders can be Sunni or Shi’a.

Jihad: “Holy War” or “struggle”; requires Muslims to defend Islam whenever it is threatened. Jihad is most commonly used to explain violent episodes: Muslims believe that if they are threatened with death they should sacrifice themselves for the sake of Islam, for to do so is a path to heaven. However, jihad also means “struggle” and does not necessarily refer to physical violence; it can refer to one’s inner struggle or the spiritual efforts to further the spread of Islam.