

READING #1

The Hebrews

The *Hebrews*, whose descendants became known as *Israelites* and later as *Jews*, lived in the region of Canaan—present-day Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon. What historians know of Hebrew civilization comes partly from their sacred writings, the Hebrew scriptures, which Christians have traditionally referred to as the Old Testament. In addition, archeologists have unearthed a great deal of information about the Hebrews. According to Hebrew scriptures, Canaan was founded by *Abraham* who left Mesopotamia to settle there in approximately 2000 B.C.E. Today, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all trace their religious heritage to him.

A severe drought in Canaan forced some Hebrews to migrate to Egypt where they were later enslaved for several centuries. According to Hebrew scriptures, about 1300 B.C.E., the Hebrews were led out of Egypt by *Moses* and eventually returned to Canaan. Moses also introduced the *Ten Commandments*, a code of conduct that became very influential in areas dominated by Christianity.

Monotheism Like most other groups, the early Hebrews were polytheistic. However, they were one of the first groups to adopt *monotheism*, a belief in only one deity.

Division and Diaspora Over the following centuries, the Hebrews divided into two separate kingdoms, which weakened their power. The two kingdoms were conquered by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and the descendants of Abraham were enslaved for the second time in their history. Now known as Israelites, many fled or were driven out of their homes. This movement was the beginning of the *Jewish Diaspora*, the spreading of Jews throughout the Mediterranean world and the Middle East. Jews were able to

Aryan Religious Traditions The *Vedas*, Sanskrit for “knowledge,” are a collection of Aryan religious hymns, poems, and songs. The *Rig-Veda* is the most famous; it sheds light on ancient Indian society, particularly the conflicts that occurred between the Dravidian and the Aryan peoples. The *Rig-Veda* outlined proper priestly (*brahmin*) behavior, which included performing several daily rituals honoring the gods. These responsibilities placed brahmins in a position of authority in Indian society. The importance of the Vedas in Indian spiritual life had waned a bit by 500 B.C.E. as Vedic knowledge began to meld with the spiritual contributions made by Dravidians.

Aryan and Dravidian Beliefs Many aspects of the Aryans’ language, religious traditions, and social organization continue today in South Asia. Their interactions with indigenous peoples of India, particularly the Dravidians, also had a lasting impact on Indian society.

The late *Vedic Age* (800–400 B.C.E.) was marked by the Aryans’ growing awareness of Dravidian beliefs. The interaction of both traditions came to fruition in the *Upanishads*, a collection of religious thought that illuminated several new religious concepts: *brahma*, *dharma*, *karma*, and *moksha*.

Brahma is an overarching, universal soul that connects all creatures on Earth. Each individual human being is not a separate entity; his or her individual soul is not the essence of truth or reality. An individual soul is not terribly important; one must try to escape a cycle of life and death and join

the universal soul, brahma. In order to escape the seemingly endless cycle of birth and rebirth, one must perform righteous duties and deeds, known as one's dharma. This dharma then determines one's karma, or fate, in the next life. If someone's soul carries a heavy karmic burden, then one could perhaps be reborn as a lower-class person or even in a lower life form.

Conversely, a person who performs good deeds throughout life is believed to have good karma, which in turn may help his or her soul in a future life. A soul's ultimate goal should be to attain *moksha*, or eternal peace and unity with brahma. Believers can attain moksha through intense meditation and the casting off of worldly pleasures.

The *Upanishads* is a foundational text for the set of religious beliefs that later became known as Hinduism. It is historically significant because it reflects the blending of Aryan and Dravidian religious values, and also because it reflects the social structures of Ancient India.

Buddhism During Jain's lifetime, a young member of the warrior class, a kshatriya, sought a different path toward salvation. *Siddhartha Gautama* was unfulfilled with the life he led among the pampered young elite. In about 530 B.C.E., he became aware that suffering plagued the human race, and he set out on a quest to discover why. Gautama left his family and became an *ascetic*, someone who rejects worldly pleasures and lives a life of self-denial. According to legend, as he meditated for days underneath a bodhi tree, he came to several realizations that he called *enlightenment*. Afterwards, Gautama called himself Buddha, or "the enlightened one," and his disciples came to be known as Buddhists.

Buddhist doctrines are summarized in the *Four Noble Truths*: (1) all life involves great suffering; (2) all suffering stems from desires for worldly pleasures and material things; (3) suffering can end when one eliminates all of one's earthly desires; and (4) desire can be eliminated by following Buddhism's eight-fold path. This path requires an individual to meditate, reflect, and refrain from the pursuit of earthly pleasures. The goal is, over time, to detach oneself from worldly affairs. Detachment leads to enlightenment, which leads to a peaceful state in the afterlife known as *nirvana*. Reaching nirvana would mean ending the cycle of birth and rebirth, and the pain that goes with it.

Christianity

Into this Jewish community emerged the figure of *Jesus*, who challenged traditional religious leaders and was regarded as a troublemaker by Roman officials. Followers of Jesus spread his teachings throughout the Roman world. By the end of the first century C.E., *Christianity* was emerging as a

distinct form of Judaism and was on its way to becoming a separate religion altogether. Christianity was most popular among the urban poor, slaves, and women throughout the empire. Like the mystery cults and the philosophies of Epicureanism and Stoicism, Christianity appealed to people hungry for answers about the harshness of life and hopeful of an afterlife. The intellectual, political, and religious ferment of the first century C.E. was fertile ground for Christian teachings.

Peter and Paul One of the people particularly important in spreading the ideas of Jesus and shaping Christianity was *Peter* (died in 64 C.E.) He knew Jesus and was one of his first followers. Peter eventually came to Rome and is today regarded by the Roman Catholic Church as the first pope.

According to the Bible, *Paul* was a Jew who had a sudden, dramatic conversion to Christianity while traveling on a road leading into Damascus.

Though born during the lifetime of Jesus, Paul probably never met him. Paul spread the gospel according to Jesus around the Mediterranean by preaching at many of the great Hellenistic cities such as Ephesus and Corinth. Educated in the Hellenistic tradition of argument and teaching, Paul inspired other preachers as well before he died around 65 C.E.

Features of Emergent Christianity One trait of early Christianity was a focus on living simple lives isolated from society. This allowed members to concentrate on worship and reflection. Over time, some of these people joined together to form *monasteries*, buildings or collections of buildings where people devote their lives to the practice of a religion.

A second trait was *martyrdom*, a willingness to die rather than give up one's beliefs. Romans allowed people to worship their own gods, but they required people to respect the deities of the official state religion. Christians refused to do this, and thousands were imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Despite persecution, Christianity grew stronger. In 313 C.E., the Roman Emperor *Constantine* declared the religion to be legal in the *Edict of Milan*. Constantine became the first Christian emperor. In 330 C.E., he moved the seat of government to Constantinople. Under subsequent Roman emperors, the Christian religion became the official religion of the empire. (Test Prep: Outline the developments of Christianity up to the Byzantine Empire. See pages 131–134.)

A third trait of early Christianity was the appearance of written accounts about the development of the religion. These included four documents describing the life of Jesus, now known as the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They also included several letters written mostly by Paul to early fellowships, advising the members and commenting on the teachings of Jesus. Together, the Gospels and the letters form the core of what is now called the New Testament, a significant part of the Christian Bible.

Muhammad and Islam

Muhammad was born into the Bedouin world in 570. He became a caravan manager. In the course of his work, Muhammad regularly came into contact with Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Muhammad married a rich widow in Mecca and settled there. Over the course of many years, he experienced revelations that he attributed to an angel of the deity he referred to as Allah. These revelations were later collected by those who had heard his message in the *Quran* (also spelled *Koran*, meaning “recitation”). Muhammad criticized polytheism, tribal loyalties, and commercial practices in his society. He called for social justice, including alms for the poor.

The Spread of Islam Slowly at first, Muhammad's ideas spread through his preaching. According to tradition, it took Muhammad three years to gather 30 people to follow Allah. Muslims, those who accepted Muhammad's teachings, viewed him as a great prophet, the final one in a line that included Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. But Muslims did not, and do not today, worship Muhammad as divine. This contrasts with the position of Jesus in Christianity, who is considered divine by almost all Christians.

Muhammad's teaching led to conflict with Mecca's existing leaders. They rejected the idea that Muhammad was the agent of the one true deity and began to persecute his kin and those who worshipped Allah. Due to the persecution, Muhammad and his followers fled the city in 622 and escaped to *Medina* (the flight is called the *Hegira*). There he formed the first Muslim community. Muhammad returned ten years later to conquer Mecca and declare the building housed the sacred black stone there—the *Ka'aba*—a shrine of Islam.

During Muhammad's lifetime, most of the Arabian Peninsula was united under Islam. Conditions in Arabia contributed to the rapid spread of Islam. A drought, combined with the desire of the rulers of Islam to extend their trade routes, encouraged the new converts to move out of the Arabian Peninsula. As they moved, they carried their faith with them and introduced it to others. Islam was also expanded through military conquest. But after an area was conquered, Islamic rule was relatively tolerant: No one was forced to convert to the faith. If conquered peoples paid a tax, they could become exempt from military service. The strong allegiance among Arabs to Islam and the egalitarian nature of the religion attracted many new converts.

Core Theological Principles of Muhammad Islam emerged as the third great world religion to come from Southwest Asia. Like the other two, Judaism and Christianity, Islam was a monotheistic faith that honored Abraham and other prophets. Because of these similarities, followers of Islam showed great respect toward these other *People of the Book*. Core theological principles of Islam include: the ideas of salvation and hope of an afterlife; the importance of submission to the will of Allah (the one true God); and a belief in the Quran as the sacred book providing guidance and laws for the followers.

Islam in Practice To put these principles into practice, Muslims have a core set of obligations that have become known as the *Five Pillars*:

1. Believing in only one God—Allah
2. Praying five times daily
3. Giving alms to the poor
4. Fasting during the month of *Ramadan*
5. Making a pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime

Another principle of Islam, and the most controversial one today, is the concept of *jihad*, or struggle to strive in the way of Allah and to improve both oneself and society. While many Muslims view *jihad* as an inner struggle, some have interpreted it as a requirement to go to war to preserve and extend Islam.

Shariah Developed by Muslim scholars after the death of Muhammad, the Islamic code of law called *shariah* outlines behavioral requirements for daily life. For example, it requires morality and honesty, and bans gambling, eating pork, and drinking alcohol. Polygyny is permitted in some circumstances, but Muhammad attempted to limit the practice to four wives. Also, Muslims were cautioned not to enslave Muslims, Christians, or Jews. Countries that in recent years have based their laws on *shariah* include Iran, parts of Nigeria, Afghanistan, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen.