

**SS7G8 The student will describe the diverse cultures of the people who live in Southwest Asia (Middle East).**

a. Explain the differences between an ethnic group and a religious group.

An **ethnic group** is a group of people who share cultural ideas and beliefs that have been a part of their community for generations. The characteristics they may have in common could include a language, a religion, a shared history, types of foods, and a set of traditional stories, beliefs, or celebrations. These things make up a common culture shared by those in a particular ethnic group.

An example of an ethnic group from Southwest Asia is the Kurds. This group lives in a mountain region that spans Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Kurds speak Kurdish, and most are Muslim. Kurds do not have their own homeland or government. They are a minority group ruled by the country where they live.

A **religious group** shares a belief system in a god or gods, with a specific set of rituals and literature. People from different ethnic groups may share the same religion, though they may be from very different cultures. Religion has been important to the history of Southwest Asia. Christianity, Islam, Judaism were started in this region. People who follow Judaism are called Jews. Followers of Christianity are called Christians. Followers of Islam are called Muslims.

1. Which do Kurds share as part of their ethnic group?

- A. the Kurdish language
- B. they live in the same country
- C. self-rule in the land of Kurdistan
- D. the ability to move freely to other countries

2. Which are the three main religious groups of Southwest Asia?

- A. Hinduism, Islam, Judaism
- B. Christianity, Islam, Judaism
- C. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam
- D. Christianity, Islam, Shamanism

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b. Explain the diversity of religions within the Arabs, Persians, and Kurds.

Southwest Asia is home to many different ethnic groups who share similar religions. The Arabs of Southwest Asia believe themselves to be descendants of Abraham in the Bible, through his son Ishmael. They make up the majority of those who live throughout the region known as Southwest Asia, though there are many differences among them. Most Arabs practice the religion of Islam and call themselves Muslims.

Those who call themselves Muslims are further divided, as some call themselves **Sunni Muslims**, while others are **Shia Muslims**. Many Arabs are **Christians**. Most Arabs, whether they are Muslim or Christian, speak the Arabic language.

**Persians** are those who live in the modern country of Iran. The Persian people are descended from a different group than those who are Arabs and Jews. Their ancestors were Indo-Europeans, from Central Europe and Southern Russia.

The country of Persia became known as Iran after World War I. Persians, or Iranians, speak Farsi,

a language that uses the Arabic alphabet but is actually a different language. They practice Islam, but most belong to the Shia group of Muslims. About 15 percent of the Muslims in the world are Shia. The other 85 percent are Sunni Muslims.

The Kurds are an ethnic group that lives in several different countries in Southwest Asia. Most Kurds are found in the mountainous areas where Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq come together. The Kurds see themselves as a distinct ethnic group from others in the area. They speak their own language, known as Kurdish, and have a separate history, literature, music, and set of traditions. Many Kurds hope to have a nation of their own some day, a hope that has caused conflict with the countries in which Kurdish people live. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslim, though there is a small minority who are Shia Muslims.

3. Which ethnic group is most numerous in Southwest Asia?

- A. Jews
- B. Kurds
- C. Arabs
- D. Persians

4. What modern country is the home to those who call themselves Persians?

- A. Iran
- B. Iraq
- C. Israel
- D. Syria

5. What is the religion of most Persians?

- A. Judaism
- B. Christianity
- C. Shia Muslim
- D. Sunni Muslim

6. What is the religion of most of the Arabs in Southwest Asia?

- A. Judaism
- B. Christianity
- C. Shia Muslim
- D. Sunni Muslim

7. What is the religion of most of the Kurds?

- A. Catholicism
- B. Christianity
- C. Shia Muslim
- D. Sunni Muslim

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**c. Compare and contrast the prominent religions in Southwest Asia (Middle East): Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.**

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have their origins in the lands that make up the countries of Southwest Asia. Though these three religions have much in common, historically there has been a great deal of religious conflict in this part of the world. Today, Israel is the only country in the area that is mostly Jewish. All of the other countries in the region are mostly Muslim, although most also have a Christian minority. There are further divisions within all three religions. Muslims are divided into a number of sects, or groups. The most important are the Sunni Muslims and the Shia Muslims. Christians have many different denominations, which include Protestants, Catholics and various Orthodox sects. Different groups are found among Jews as well, including those who are Orthodox and those who are Reform. Religion has played a big role in the history and politics of Southwest Asia.

## **JUDAISM**

Judaism is a monotheistic religion, meaning its followers believe in only one God. Judaism traces its origins back to Abraham, a man born in Mesopotamia in approximately 2000 BC. He was one of the first people to profess the belief in a single God, even though the society in which he lived worshipped many different gods. The Torah, the first five books in the Hebrew Scriptures, says that God made a covenant (agreement) with Abraham, promising to set him as the head of a new nation if he would dedicate himself and the Hebrew people to the worship of one God. Abraham left Mesopotamia and eventually came to the land of Canaan (part of the present day state of Israel) on the Mediterranean coast, which he believed God had promised to him and his descendants. Here the Hebrews lived, worshipping Yahweh, the God they believed would protect them for their faithfulness. At a very old age, he and his wife Sarah had a son, Isaac. Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob, are seen as the patriarchs, or founders, of the Hebrew nation. Jacob's twelve sons, in turn, are viewed as the ancestors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

The Hebrew people lived in an area surrounded by more powerful kingdoms, and the Bible says that around 1300-1200 BC the Hebrews were forced into slavery in Egypt. After years of suffering Moses, who took them into the Sinai desert to escape capture, led them out of slavery. This escape is known as the "Exodus" and is remembered each year by the celebration of Passover in the Jewish religious calendar. While wandering in the Sinai desert, the Jewish faith teaches that God renewed his covenant with the Hebrew people, revealing to them the Ten Commandments. After many years, they were able to return to Canaan where they lived in twelve generally self-governing tribes. They gradually extended their territory to the south along the Jordan River. The largest of these tribes was that of Judah, from which the names Judaism and Jews developed.

Around 1000 BC, the Hebrew people united under a series of kings, Saul, David, and Solomon, in the kingdom of Israel. David established his capital in the city of Jerusalem, and Saul later built a great temple there and dedicated it to the one true God of the Jewish people. Struggles with more powerful neighbors continued however, and eventually the kingdom was divided with Judah in the south and Israel in the north. A period of Babylonian rule followed, ended by a revolt of the Maccabees in 167 BC, which restored Hebrew control of the area. Independent rule in the area was ended finally by a Roman takeover, and the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD. Only a portion of the Western Wall of the Temple was left standing. The Jewish people were forced out of the lands around Jerusalem and for many generations lived in what was called "The Diaspora," or the scattering of the Jews to other parts of the world. The importance of Jerusalem and of the remaining western wall of the Temple continued to be central to Jews during the long centuries of the Diaspora. They believed that the lands of ancient Israel and Judea remained part of the covenant they had made with God.

8. What is the main belief that distinguished the Jewish faith from the others in the ancient world?

- A. the belief in life after death
- B. the organization of believers into a separate state
- C. the worship of a single god rather than many gods
- D. the offering of sacrifices during religious ceremonies

9. Which is the holy writing of Judaism?

- A. Torah
- B. Quran
- C. Constitution
- D. New Testament

10. The "Exodus" in the history of the Jewish people was the time when

- A. Jews were in captivity in Babylon.
- B. the Romans forced the Jews out of Jerusalem.
- C. Abraham left Mesopotamia and moved to Canaan.
- D. Jews were freed from slavery in Egypt and returned to the land of Canaan.

## CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is a religious movement that grew out of Judaism during the time of Roman rule in Palestine. The founding figure in Christianity is Jesus, a man who was born in Bethlehem in Judea to a Jewish family in about 4 BC. Tradition holds that he lived a modest life in Nazareth as a carpenter until he began to attract attention as a teacher and preacher when he reached the age of about thirty years of age. While he followed Jewish law and belief, he spoke of a more personal relationship with God, focusing on both the love of God and the generous treatment of neighbors and acquaintances. He had a number of followers who became known as his disciples, and their writings provide much of what is known about the life and teachings of Jesus. The first four books of the New Testament are made of these writings. They are known as the Gospels.

Many among both the Romans and the Jewish leaders worried about the attention Jesus attracted among the common people. Some of his followers went so far as to claim that he was the long awaited Messiah, or "savior of man." Jewish leaders claimed Jesus encouraged such beliefs and was therefore guilty of crimes against Jewish teachings. The Roman ruler, Pontius Pilate, saw him as a threat to his authority and that of the Roman Empire. As a result, Jesus was sentenced to death by crucifixion, a form of execution in those days in which a person either was tied or nailed to a cross and suspended there until dead.

After his death, his followers believed that he was able to rise from the dead and walk among them again before going to heaven. They continued to call him the Messiah or the Greek "Christos," which was shortened to "Christ." They called him the "Son of God." Word of Jesus' rising from the dead began to spread quickly, and along with his teachings became the basis for a new religion called Christianity. His followers emphasized this new religion's willingness to take in all who wished to believe. They angered the Romans, as they refused to worship Roman gods and goddesses. Many of the early Christians were put to death by Roman authorities in the years following the time of Jesus, but the religion continued to have growing appeal among many who did not like Roman rule and who wanted a religion that emphasized both Old Testament teachings and the loving and forgiving God described by Jesus. By the year 300 AD, Christianity had spread to most parts of the Roman world. In 313 AD, the Roman Emperor Constantine officially ended the harsh treatment of Christians and made Christianity a religion approved by the empire.

11. Why did Jesus have trouble with both the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities?

- A. Jesus urged people to tear down the Temple in Jerusalem.
- B. The new religion of Christianity was opened only to a very few people.
- C. He encouraged the people to form an army and revolt against the government.
- D. Jews accused him of crimes against their teachings; Romans saw him as a threat to the Roman Empire.

12. What basic belief made Christianity different from Judaism?

- A. Christians believed Jesus was the Messiah, or savior of man.
- B. Only Judaism accepted and believed in the Ten Commandments.
- C. Jews never had problems with Roman authorities, while the Christians did.
- D. Christians allowed the worship of many of the Roman gods, while Judaism did not.

13. Why was Christianity finally accepted by the Roman Emperor as a legal religion?

- A. Christian armies defeated the Roman Emperor in battle.
- B. There were few other religions left in the Roman Empire by 313 AD.
- C. Emperor Constantine recognized that many Romans had become Christians.
- D. Christians made the worship of Roman gods and goddesses part of their religion as well.

## ISLAM

Islam is a religion that began in the city of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula in the 600s AD. Mecca was a trading center located along a main route on the Red Sea coast connecting the Byzantine Empire with the shipping and trading centers coming from the Indian Ocean and the Far East. As a stop on the trade route, many different people visited the city of Mecca. In the center of the town stood a rectangular building, the Ka'aba, which held several hundred different idols inside. Meccans believed the building had originally been built by Abraham and his son, Ishmael, to honor God for saving them from dying in the desert. Over the centuries, however, statues of many other idols and gods were placed in the building.

Muhammad was born in Mecca in 570 AD. Orphaned at an early age, he was taken in by his uncle and trained to become a merchant. He married an older woman and took over her caravan business, becoming a respected member of the Mecca community.

At the age of forty, while spending an evening in one of the cool caves in the hills around Mecca, Muhammad began to hear the voice of the angel Gabriel, calling on him to tell the word of God to the people. After much worry and after talking with his wife, Muhammad decided the voice was real, and he began to tell others in Mecca about what he had heard. He told people they needed to rededicate themselves to the worship of one God, whom he called Allah. Those who were willing to agree to this belief became known as "Muslims," or "ones who submit" to the will of God. Many in Mecca worried that his teachings would hurt their trade by angering those who worshipped other gods, and some of his followers began to face threats and violence.

To escape these threats, in 622 AD, Muhammad and his followers moved about 200 miles north to Yathrib, a city Muhammad renamed Medina, which means "the city of the prophet." This move came to be known among Muslims as the "Hijrah," and the date serves as the first year of the Islamic calendar. The people of Medina accepted Muhammad as both a political and a religious leader, and many joined the new religion of Islam.

Muhammad returned to Mecca as the head of an army in 630 AD, and the city surrendered rather than face a war. One of his first acts on entering Mecca was to go to the Ka'aba and remove all the idols. He then dedicated the building to Allah, the one God. Mecca and the Ka'aba remained central to Muslim worship.

After Muhammad's death, his followers collected the teachings from the angel Gabriel into the Quran (the holy book of Islam). Muslims believe there is only one God, and they view Muhammad as his final prophet. Much of the Old Testament and the New Testament are also included in the Quran, so Muslims see the Quran and Islam as the final and complete word of God. All Muslims believe they must meet five basic obligations, known as the Five Pillars. The first is called Shahada, the belief that "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet." The second is Salat, or praying five times a day facing the direction of Mecca. Zakat, or charity to the poor is the third, followed by Sawm, or eating or drinking nothing during the daylight hours of the month of Ramadan, the tenth month in the Muslim calendar. The final Pillar is to make the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, sometime during one's lifetime.

For Muslims, the Quran offers a handbook for leading a respectable life. Some Muslim countries base their legal code on the law of Quran, a system known as shariah law. Because so much of both the Old and New Testaments are a part of the Quran, Muslims view Jews and Christians as "People of the Book," who should be accorded special respect though they were expected to pay a tax as they were not required to give Zakat to the poor.

After Muhammad's death, the religion of Islam spread rapidly throughout the Arabian Peninsula and parts of the Persian and Byzantine Empires. Led by four men who had been friends of Muhammad, the "Rightly Guided Caliphs," Muslim armies were able to easily conquer areas where these older empires had weakened over the years. The word "Caliph" means leader or ruler. Many people welcomed the Muslims and converted to Islam, finding it a simple and direct religion.

14. What is the relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?

- A. The three religions all believe in different gods.
- B. All three religions accept Jesus as the "Son of God."
- C. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam won new converts only by war and force.
- D. Islam includes much of the Old and New Testaments in its holy book, the Quran.

15. What did Muhammad believe the angel Gabriel was asking him to do?

- A. tell the word of God to the people
- B. bring an end to all religions other than Islam
- C. develop Mecca into a more powerful trading center
- D. tear down the Ka'aba because idols had been stored there

16. What is the importance of the Ka'aba to Muslims?

- A. The Ka'aba was the original home of Muhammad.
- B. They believe it was originally built by the prophet Abraham.
- C. This building is where most important business deals were made in Mecca.
- D. They believe it is the place where Gabriel gave Muhammad the word of God.

17. Why did Islam spread so quickly after the death of Muhammad?

- A. Muslim armies conquered empires that had weakened over the years.
- B. Muslims refused to trade with anyone who would not convert to Islam.
- C. There were no religions in that part of the world to compete with Islam.
- D. Jews and Christians were forced to convert to Islam or face prison or death.

18. What are the Five Pillars?

- A. the first five books of the Quran
- B. the five columns that support the roof of the Ka'aba
- C. five beliefs shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
- D. five basic obligations that Muslims are supposed to meet in their lives

19. Why do Muslims call Jews and Christians "People of the Book"?

- A. People belonging to these religions could read.
- B. Followers of all three religions were taken in census records.
- C. Much of the Old and New Testament is included in the Quran.
- D. Jews and Christians were the first groups in Southwest Asia who had a written language.

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**d. Explain the origin of the division between Sunni and Shia Muslims.**

After Muhammad died, there was disagreement about who should lead the Muslim community, or the ummah. This question was settled for a time by agreeing to place power in the hands of men who had been friends of Muhammad's in his lifetime. They ruled one after the other, and they were known as the "Four Rightly Guided Caliphs." When the last of these men died, a new argument arose over who should lead the Muslim community. One group thought leadership should go to whoever was most able to keep the community together. These people came to be known as the Sunni Muslims, those who saw themselves closely following Muhammad's example. The second group felt leadership should go to a direct descendant of Muhammad. They wanted to choose one of Muhammad's grandsons, the children of his son-in-law Ali, for leadership. They became known as the Shia-Ali, or "supporters of Ali." This name has been shortened to Shia. A battle for control soon followed, resulting in the death of one of Muhammad's grandsons and the transfer of power to the Umayyad family and the Sunni supporters. These divisions in the Muslim community remain even today, though there is little difference in their basic religious beliefs. The Sunni Muslims have always been in the majority, making up about 85 percent of those who call themselves Muslims today. The Shia Muslims have always been a minority, but they are a major portion of the populations of a number of countries today including Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Iran is over 90 percent Shia.

20. What issue led to the split between the Sunni and Shia in Islam?

- A. The Shia believed only Arabs could be Muslims.
- B. Arguments began over what should be included in the Five Pillars.
- C. The Shia wanted to change the direction of prayer to Jerusalem rather than Mecca.
- D. They disagreed over who should lead the Muslim community after the death of Muhammad.

21. Why were the first four leaders of the Muslims after Muhammad's death called the "Four Rightly Guided Caliphs"?

- A. They had been friends of Muhammad.
- B. They had studied leadership for many years and were well prepared to rule.
- C. They arranged for a split in the community between Sunni and Shia Muslims.
- D. These men all ruled together so there could be no question about their decisions.