

# Judaism

**Origins and Early History:** Judaism is one of the world's oldest religions. Judaism developed in the Middle East about 6,000 years ago. **Abraham**, a poor sheepherder, is believed to have started the Jewish religion. According to Jewish tradition, God called on Abraham to leave his home in Mesopotamia and to begin a new nation, called Israel. The Jews later became enslaved in Egypt, but were freed by Moses.

**Major Beliefs:** Unlike other ancient people, the Jewish people believed in only one God. This belief in only one God is known as **monotheism**. Jews believe that God is the creator of the universe and is all-powerful and just. Jews further believe that God made a special promise to protect them, so long as they obey his commandments. Jews believe that their God expects them to lead righteous and moral lives. Jews believe that God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.



(Moses as sculpted by Michelangelo)



**Holy Books:** The main holy book of Judaism is known as the Bible (*the Old Testament*). Jews call the first five books of the Old Testament, which are especially important, the **Torah**.

**Major Practices:** The **Ten Commandments** serve as a code of morals for Jews to live by. The Ten Commandments say that Jews must worship God. They state that Jews must respect their parents and forbid stealing, murder, and other forms of immoral behavior. Jewish practice also states that they should celebrate the **Sabbath**, a day of rest. Jewish belief states that God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day- the Sabbath- God rested. Jews celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday. Besides the Ten Commandments, Jews follow several other religious laws.



A traditional Jewish wedding, with a rabbi leading and men wearing yarmulkes)

Many Jews will not eat certain foods, like pork, or mix meat and dairy foods. Some Jewish men keep their heads covered with a small hat, known as a yarmulke. In many Jewish homes, copies of God's law can be found at the door. The major holidays celebrated by Jews include the Day of Atonement, Rosh Hashanah, Passover, Chanukah (Hanukkah), and Yom Kippur. For Yom Kippur, many Jews **fast**, or go without food and drink, from sunrise until sunset.

**Places of Worship:** The Jewish house of worship is known as a **synagogue**, or temple. The synagogue is a place for Jews to pray to God. It also serves as a place for social and festive activities. The leader of each synagogue is a teacher, known as a **rabbi**.

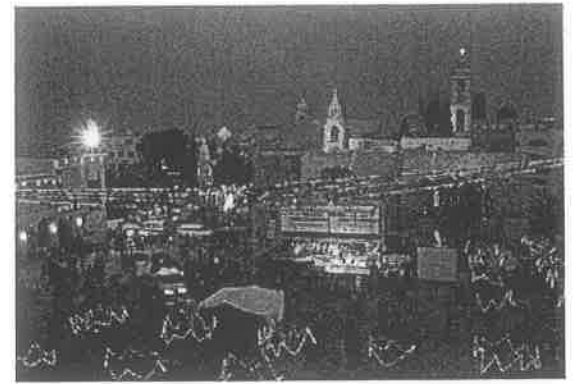
**Main Divisions:** Today, Jews are divided into three main groups: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. They all believe in Judaism, however practice it differently. Orthodox Jews strictly keep all the traditional rules, such as avoiding pork and covering their heads with the yarmulke. Reform Jews have adapted Jewish traditions and beliefs to modern life-styles and are more casual in their practices. Conservative Jews follow practices somewhere in between those of Orthodox and Reform Jews.

# Christianity

## Origins and Early History: Christianity

developed out of Judaism about 2,000 years ago.

Christianity is based on the teachings of **Jesus** of Nazareth, also known as Christ, or Savior. Jesus preached to Jews and non-Jews alike. He taught others to lead a life of brotherhood, peace and charity. The ancient Romans felt that Jesus was a threat to their rule in the Middle East, and therefore executed him through **crusifixion**. After the death of Jesus, his followers, known as **disciples** (Apostles), spread the new religion. Christianity soon spread to Rome and other parts of the world. Today, it is the principal religion in Europe and North and South America. There are also large numbers of Christians in Africa and Asia.



(Manger Square, Bethlehem- near the birthplace of Jesus)

## Major Beliefs: Like Jews, Christians believe in only one God. They

accept many Jewish teachings, such as the Ten Commandments. Unlike Jews, however, Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God, who took human form and who sacrificed himself for the sins of humanity. Christians believe that after his death, Jesus was **resurrected**, returned, from death, and then rose to heaven. Christians see this as the turning point in history. It opened the gates of heaven to all who have faith in Christ and live righteous lives.



(Tablet of the Ten Commandments)

**Holy Books:** Christians accept the Jewish Bible, which they call the Old Testament. They also have a second part of their **Bible**, which they call the **New Testament**. The first books, or **scriptures**, of the New Testament, called the **Gospels**, tell the story of life and death of Jesus Christ.

**Major Practices:** Jesus taught his followers to treat others with love and respect. Christians try to follow his example in their own lives. They also try to live righteous lives by obeying the Ten Commandments. Christians believe they will be saved and will go to heaven if they believe in the miracle of Jesus' life and have faith in his teachings. There are two main holidays for Christians- Christmas and Easter. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus and Easter marks Jesus' death and resurrection, or rise to heaven.



(Michelangelo's sculpture of Jesus in the arms of his mom Mary, after he was crucified)

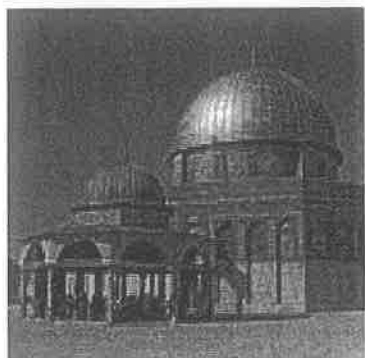
## Places of Worship: The Christian house of worship is known as a church.

Sunday is the Christian Sabbath, or day of rest, and a special day for prayer at church. Catholics and Orthodox Christians are led by **priests**. Protestant churches are often lead by **pastors** or **ministers**.

**Main Divisions:** The early Christian church was led by the Bishop of Rome, called the **Pope**. Since its founding, Christianity has experienced two major splits, creating three major Christian groups. These groups are the Roman Catholics (who look to the Pope for leadership), the Eastern Orthodox Christians, and the Protestants (Luthern, Methodist, Prysbyterian, Anglicans). They all share the same beliefs, but practice in different ways.

# Islam

**Origins and Early History:** Islam was the third great religion to arise in the Middle East. It began about 1,500 years ago. Followers of Islam call themselves Muslims. Islam was founded by **Mohammed** in the seventh century. Mohammad was exposed to the ideas of Judaism and



Christianity through his contacts with traveling merchants. Mohammed claimed he was visited by an angel, who instructed him to preach in the name of the true God. Mohammed began preaching in Mecca, telling people to give up their many gods and to destroy their statues of these gods. The citizens of Mecca forced Mohammed out of the city. He fled to Medina, where he established the new faith. Several years later, he conquered Mecca in a "holy war." After Mohammed's death, Muslims in Arabia fought holy wars to convert non-Muslims people to Islam. The new Islamic religion spread rapidly throughout the Middle East, North Africa,

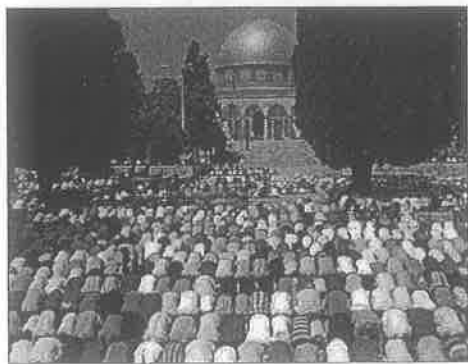
Spain and South Asia.  
(The Dome of the Rock, built on the spot which Mohammed is believed to have risen to heaven.)

**Major Beliefs:** Like Jews and Christians, Muslims believe in one, all-powerful god. They use the Arabic word for God, **Allah**. The word "Islam" means to surrender or to submit to the will of God. Muslims believe that God has complete control over each person's future, and that some day all people will be held responsible for their actions. Muslims believe that God revealed his plans to humanity through a series of prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Muslims believe that Mohammed was the last of God's messengers.

**Holy Books:** The holy book of Islam is the **Koran** (sometimes spelled **Qur'an**). Muslims believe the Koran contains the words of God, as told to Mohammed.



**Major Practices:** Muslims pray five times a day. Before praying, a worshiper washes his or her face, hands, arms, and feet. While praying, Muslims face the holy city of **Mecca**, where Mohammed was born. Muslims also believe it is important to give charity to the poor. Like Jews, Muslims do not eat pork. During the month of **Ramadan**, the month in which the Koran was first revealed to Mohammed, Muslims do not eat or drink during daylight hours (fast). They also believe that good Muslims should make a religious pilgrimage, or religious journey, to visit Mecca at least once in their lifetime. These five practices make up the Muslim's **Five Pillars of Faith**.



(Muslims praying outside a mosque)

**Places of Worship:** The Muslim house of worship is known as a **mosque**. Worshippers remove their shoes and cover their heads before entering the mosque. The Muslim day of Sabbath is Friday.

**Main Divisions:** Soon after Mohammed's death, the Muslim world divided into two groups: the Shi'ites and the Sunnis. Most Muslims are Sunnis, therefore they are the majority. The Shi'ite minority believe that only descendants of Mohammed's son-in-law should lead the Islamic world.