

# Islams early interactions with judaism and christianity

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



Because of its harsh desert environment, the Arabian Peninsula was left relatively unmolested by the several competing empires that swept through the Fertile Crescent just north of it in the early centuries before Islam. At the beginning of the 7th Century, the Byzantine and Sassanid empires were embroiled in a 26-year war for supremacy, which had a lasting cultural impact on the Arabs of the Peninsula eventually leading to the emergence and subsequent explosion of Islam into the monotheistic sphere.

The interaction Islam had with existing religions led to a unique monotheism better suited to the Arabs, yet still maintained traditional elements with Judaism and Christianity, even enabling it to fall under the Abrahamic title. Monotheism was initially introduced through trade. According to Jonathon Berkey, "...the exchange of people and ideas between Arabs of the interior and predominantly Aramaic-speaking inhabitants of Syria was, and had been for centuries, a routine element of life. That exchange touched on religious matters..." (64). Elements of these religions competed and intermingled with existing Arab paganism and traditions, creating a unique take on "the one God" that was much better suited to the Arabs than the politically-charged imperial baggage of the former traditions. Islam holds many similarities with the religions it sprung from besides its monotheism and devotion to the idea of a "true God," yet even these similarities come with a unique Arabian flavor. These include a prophet-messenger, a holy book of scripture, and an ancestral link to the Abrahamic line.

The idea of a special kind of person able to transcend mortal boundaries to commune with deity and transmit knowledge or specific messages to

mankind has been an integral part of the Judeo-Christian experience. There are many prophets throughout Torah and Old Testament including Noah, Samuel, and Isaiah. The New Testament continues this tradition with the addition of new messengers from God (though not by the term prophets) such as John the Baptist, Jesus Christ the declared Son of God, and his disciples, the apostles.

Islam adds one more prophet to the scene—Muhammad. Muslims view Muhammad as the greatest and last messenger of God. Muhammad's message was similar to the previously accepted prophets: to turn aside from false devotions and to worship the only true God in the right way. Like other Biblical prophets, Muhammad's message was initially unpopular towards the masses, necessitating his flight to what became Medina (Esposito History of Islam 8).

Despite initial troubles, however, Muhammad gained a considerable following and was able to later turn the tide against his former oppressors, and subdue them in a way no prophet of the earlier traditions was able to do: as a political conqueror (Esposito, History of Islam 8-11). Unifying several Arabian tribes created the beginning of an empire that would bring the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires to their knees and open up the spread of Islam to the whole world. Also significant to each Abrahamic denomination was the creation of a holy book.

Each consists of compilations of sacred texts, considered to be the words of God or of his prophets, though the original texts from which our modern ones are comprised of are non-existent today. It is generally assumed by many

scholars that each text has likely been through apocryphal revisions and retellings before getting to us in their current state, but many adherents to Jewish and Christian faiths still view their books as the pure transmitted words of God.

The holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, is also a compilation of revelations regarded as divine, though unlike the other sacred texts, it is only credited to one " receiver. " According to Muslim tradition, the Qur'an was preserved in both oral and written formats by Muhammad and his secretaries exactly as he had been given them from Allah, and were compiled in precise order of revelation and in their entirety (Esposito, Islam: the Straight Path 137). Yet like its contemporaries, it was not completed in written form while the receiver writer of the revelations lived. The Qur'an was compiled during the reign of Muhammad's third successor, Uthman, leaving a window (admittedly a much smaller one than of the Jewish and Christian texts) where possible changes or mistakes in oral or written transmission may have occurred. In addition to a prophet and a holy book, Islam created a third link with the previous traditions giving it a higher sense of legitimacy and authority.

Islam claims a direct ancestral link to Abraham—the great prophet to whom God promised nations of posterity, the land of Canaan and religious stewardship. Judaic and Christian traditions trace their spiritual ancestry to Abraham through Isaac, Abraham's son born to his legitimate wife, Sara. Islam instead, connects their heritage to Abraham through his first son Ishmael, born to Sara's Egyptian handmaid, Hagar. Each separate tradition

maintains that their particular son of Abraham was the favored son and heir to both the temporal and divine.

There are many other similarities Islam has with its older brother religions, but it is by no means a copy or mere synthesis of them either. While drawn to many aspects of the new religions that had sifted to them from the north, the Arabs had a substantially different religious, political, and economic environment than origins of Judaism and Christianity, making many doctrines and practices of the religions completely foreign and ill-suited to Arab sensibilities.

Islam has many similar components with the other two religions making its association with the other religions under Abraham a commonly accepted one. However, the unique political and spiritual environment of Arabia created unique elements in Islam not to be found anywhere else, and is possibly responsible for its exponential rate it acquired followers.