

7 What Is Islam?

Islam was founded by a man named *Mohammed*. Mohammed was born in the city of Mecca in 570 AD. Mecca was a religious city with many temples and idols. Mohammed's people, who were Arabs, believed in many gods. At a very young age, Mohammed traveled with a camel caravan. In his travels he met many Christians and Jews. Mohammed was deeply impressed with their idea of one all-powerful god.

According to Islamic belief, one night an angel visited Mohammed. The angel spoke to Mohammed and gave him the first words of the Islamic holy book, the *Koran*. After that, the angel visited Mohammed several more times until Mohammed had all the words of the Koran.

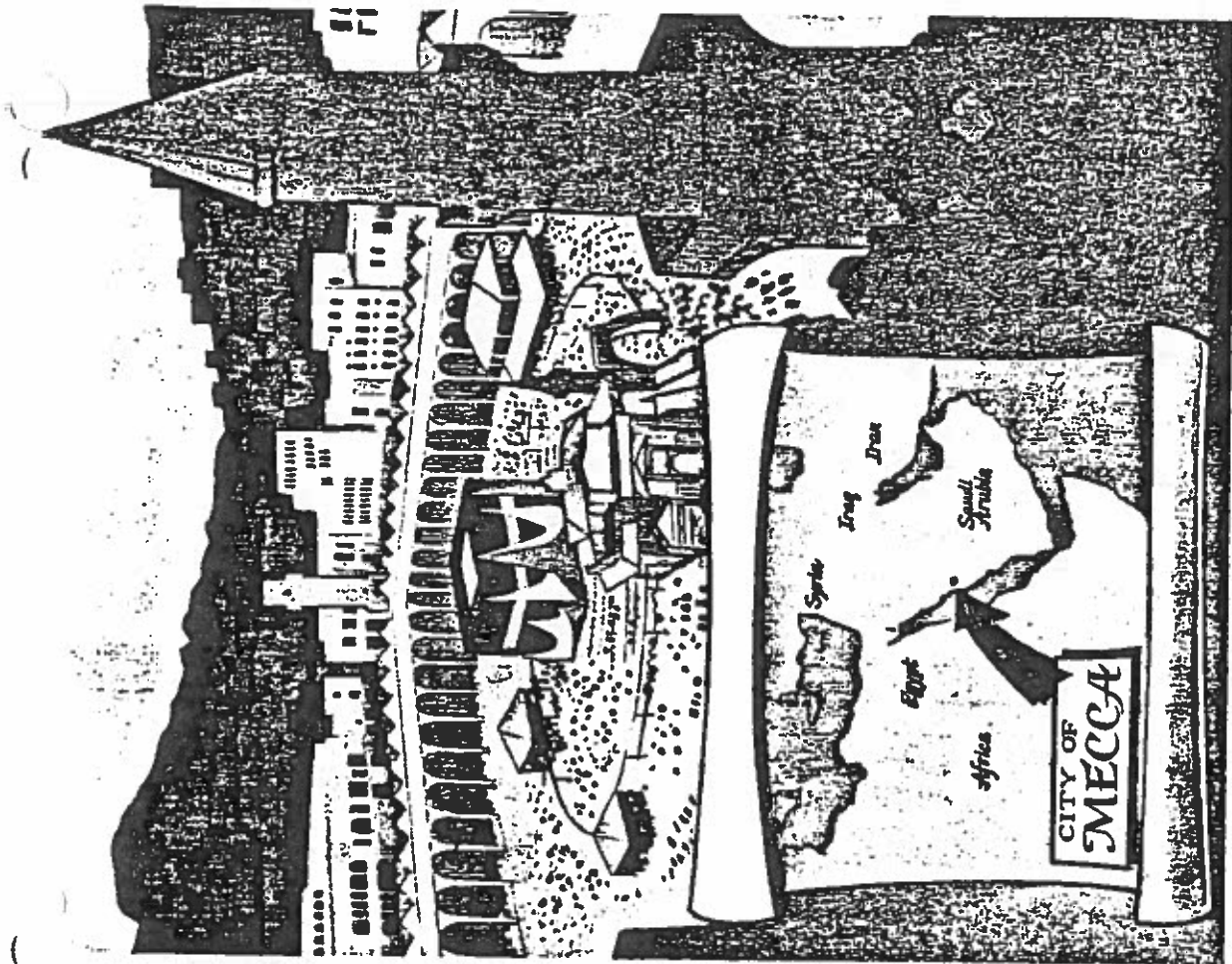
Mohammed began to tell his people about the Koran. Although some people welcomed the new beliefs, many people disagreed with him. Eventually, he was forced to leave Mecca. Mohammed went to a town called Medina. He told people about the Koran, and slowly he gained more and more supporters. In 630 AD Mohammed brought an army to Mecca and conquered the city. Mohammed's victory convinced many people that God was on Mohammed's side. After the fight, Mohammed broke all the idols in Mecca. He announced that no idols or pictures would ever be allowed in an Islamic temple again.

Today there are more than 500 million Islamic people. They are called *Moslems*. Most Moslems live in the Middle East, Turkey, parts of Africa, and parts of Asia. There are about 60,000 Moslems in the United States.

Islam teaches that there is only one god, whom Moslems call *Allah*. Islam accepts Jesus and Moses as messengers of Allah. But Moslems believe that Mohammed was the greatest of Allah's messengers. In their view, the Jewish and Christian bibles had mistakes in them. Moslems say that Allah sent the Koran to Mohammed so that people could learn the true word of Allah.

Moslems believe in *predestination*. This means that Allah has

believe



Mohammed's birthplace, Mecca, is still the most sacred Islamic city.

planned out everyone's earthly life. When something goes wrong Moslems often say, "It is the will of Allah." Moslems also believe in an afterlife. Moslems believe that every person has two recording angels. These angels keep track of the person's good deeds and bad deeds. On Judgment Day, Moslems believe that people who have done more good than bad will go to Paradise.

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8 How Is Islam Observed?

Every Moslem has five religious duties called the *Five Pillars of Islam*. The first pillar is very simple. Moslems must declare their faith by saying, "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his messenger." Any serious person who says these words in public can become a Moslem.

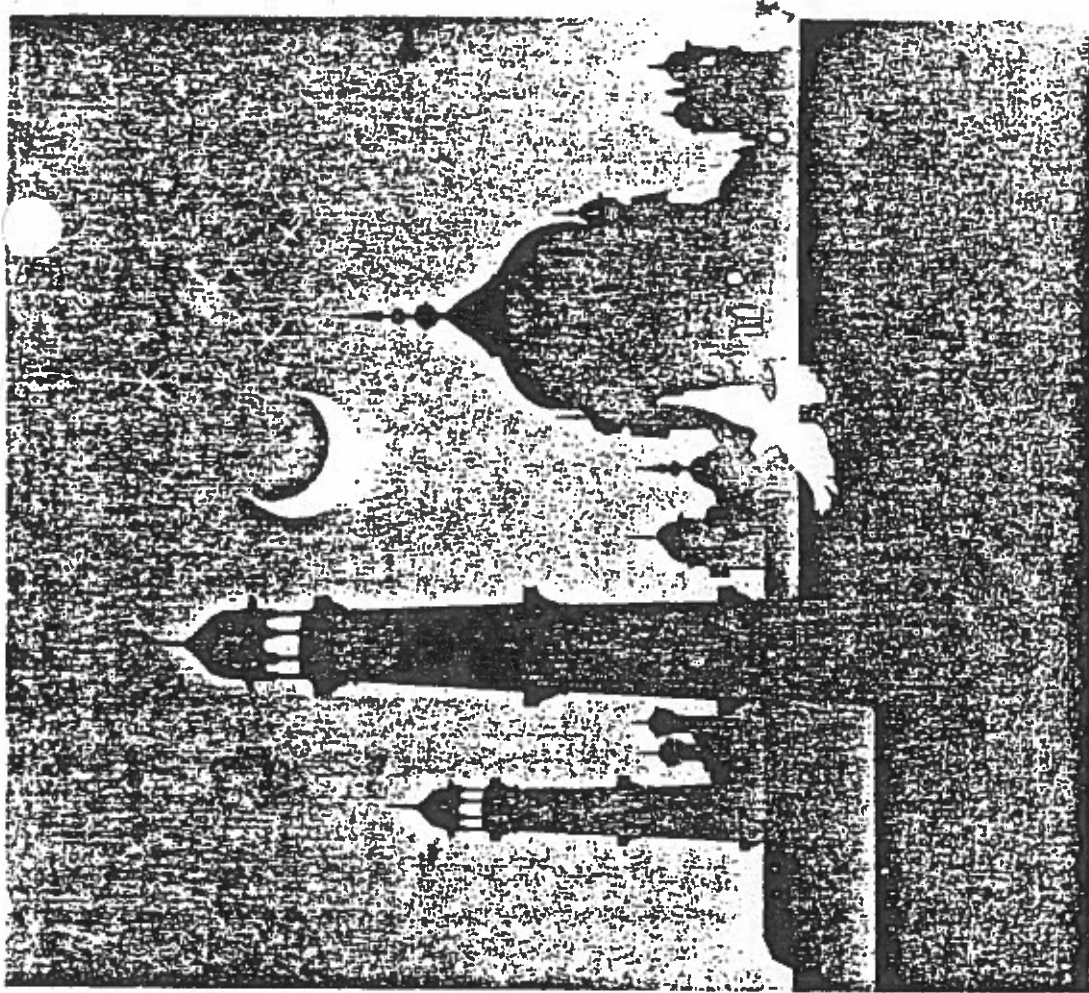
The second pillar requires Moslems to face the city of Mecca five times a day and pray. Since Allah is everywhere, Moslems can pray in any clean place. On Fridays, however, men must go to a temple to pray. Moslem temples are called *mosques*. Mosques have no chairs. Moslems sit or kneel on small prayer rugs. Mosques have no priests or special sacraments. Prayers are led by a leader called an *Imam*. Any man who follows Islam and understands Mohammed's teachings can be an Imam. Women also pray in mosques, but they do not worship with men. Mosques usually have a separate section for women.

The third pillar says that Moslems must give a part of their income to charity. This money usually goes to the poor, to building and maintaining mosques, and to school scholarships.

The fourth pillar requires Moslems to observe the *fast of Ramadan*. Ramadan lasts approximately a month. It takes place during the same month of the Moslem calendar that Mohammed received the Koran. During Ramadan, healthy Moslems may not eat between sunrise and sunset. Fasting reminds Moslems to be thankful for all the good things Allah gave humanity. It is also supposed to teach Moslems to be sympathetic to the poor and hungry.

The fifth pillar of Islam says that every Moslem must visit Mecca at least once. This visit is called a *pilgrimage*. Every year more than two million Moslems visit the Great Mosque in Mecca. Male pilgrims wear simple white sheets of fabric draped around their bodies. Pilgrims must dress the same because they are all equal in the eyes of Allah.

In addition to the Five Pillars of Islam, Moslems must also follow the Islamic Code of conduct. They are expected to be honest



Mosques have towers called *minarets*. Minarets do not have bells. Moslems are called to prayer by people called *muezzins*. Muezzins stand in the minarets and chant a special call to prayer.

generous, and ready to fight to defend Islam. They are not allowed to gamble, drink alcohol, or eat pork.

Like most other major religions, Islam has many holidays. One of the happiest Islamic holidays is called *Eid ul-Fitr*. *Eid ul-Fitr* means Festival of Fast-Breaking. It comes at the end of Ramadan and lasts three days. During *Eid ul-Fitr*, people wear their best clothes and go to mosques to pray. Afterwards, they eat holiday meals, exchange gifts, and visit relatives.