



Qur'an: Muslim holy book revealed to the Prophet Muhammad

The Emergence of Islam

From its origin in seventh century Arabia to its status as a global religion today, Islam has a fascinating history, which we learn from multiple sources.

0:01

World map showing Muslims as a percentage population by country

Images of Abu Dhabi

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

Images depicting Muhammad's life and the Quran

1:00

Animation of the Five Pillars of Islam

Images of Islam across the world

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera, while central questions appear on the left

2:10

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

1.8 billion people around the world are Muslims. That's almost one of every four humans alive right now.

I live here in Abu Dhabi, a city on the Arabian Peninsula where most of the citizens follow the Muslim faith known as Islam.

Islam is a monotheistic tradition which means that Muslims believe in a single god, Allah. Muslims believe that a man named Muhammad who lived in the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century CE received a revelation from God, a holy book called the Quran.

In the decades that followed, Muhammad traveled from Mecca across the Arabian Peninsula, gaining followers and establishing the beliefs and traditions of one of the world's great religions.

The core belief and practices of Islam are called the Five Pillars.

One, declaring faith in God and in Muhammad as god's Prophet. Two, practicing regular daily prayers. Three, fasting during the sacred month of Ramadan. Four, giving charity to the poor. Five, performing the pilgrimage to Mecca if one is able.

Islam is a diverse religion practiced in many different cultures and each has left their own, distinct mark on the religion. Since the death of Muhammad, Muslim communities have interpreted Islam in unique ways, crafting narratives about their common history from Muhammad to the present.

Some narratives are created by Muslims, some by people outside of Muslim communities. Some of these narratives are tied to political goals as well, so it's important for historians to think critically about these narratives.

Where does the history of Islam begin? Why did it spread to so many different places? How did it become significant on a world historical scale? Finally, what historical narratives unite all these diverse traditions?

People tell a lot of stories about Islam. I'm sure you've heard some of them. It can be hard to sift through what's reliable and what's full of misinformation. That's one of the reasons that expertise is important.

Historians can help us evaluate narratives of the past, whether those stories were created 1400 years ago or yesterday. People with expertise can help us identify which narratives are useful and which are trying to use us.

So I went out and found an expert. Dr. Mariam Sheibani teaches about the history and culture of Islam at the University of Toronto. I asked her to help me explore the emergence of Islam and how narratives shape our understanding of it.

2:53

Nate Bowling and Mariam Sheibani converse, facing camera

Animation showing the spread of Islam until 750 CE

Images of Muslim worship

Nate Bowling and Mariam Sheibani converse, facing camera

3:45

Images of the Quran and the Hadith

Images of Muslim teachings and art

4:40

Nate Bowling speaks, facing camera

Images illustrating the spread of Islam

Animation showing the spread of Islam until 750 CE

5:25

Nate Bowling and Mariam Sheibani converse, facing camera

Dr. Sheibani, thanks for joining us.

Thank you very much it's an honor to be here with you today.

Can you give us a timeline and location for the early history and context for Islam?

So Islam emerged after the Prophet Muhammad established the new religion. He was in the Arabian Peninsula, and he died in 632, and within a decade his followers had spread Islam to Iraq, to Syria, to Egypt, and into present-day Iran and Central Asia.

So Islam emerges from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad who was born and lived his entire life in the Arabian Peninsula. At the time, the Arabian Peninsula was primarily polytheistic, but there were really important Jewish and Christian communities, particularly Jewish communities in the region.

What are the Quran and the Hadith?

So the Quran is the Muslim holy book which Muslims believe is the speech of God, the revelations that God revealed to Muhammad through the Archangel Gabriel and the Hadith are reports of the statements of the Prophet that are not revelation from God directly as well as reports from the early Muslim community, the early Muslims. So it's not just things the Prophet said, but things that the early caliphs, the early Muslims also said or did.

So the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet make it really clear that the Prophet is renewing the teachings of Abraham and continuing and renewing the teachings of Judaism and Christianity as well, and so the Prophet in fact retains certain aspects of the faith and practice that the Jews and Christians were already engaged in, but also introduces new teachings that are unique or particular to Islam.

After his revelation and conquest, Muhammad went from being a merchant living in a small town of Mecca to being the spiritual and political leader of a new community. Shortly after Muhammad's death, this small community would spread far beyond Mecca and Medina.

Muhammad's followers conquered the entire Arabian Peninsula and within a few decades had conquered lands that lay hundreds of miles to the east and west.

An Islamic empire was now stretching from Spain to India. But there were growing pains. The Muslim community struggled to organize its spiritual and political life after Muhammad died in 632 CE.

Let's talk more with Dr. Sheibani about this history.

How did early Muslims organize their community after the death of the Prophet?

The early Muslim community faced a lot of challenges after the death of the Prophet. From the historical record, we know that it was in some ways a surprise or a shock to them after the Prophet had passed away.

*Images of Muslim leaders
and the expansion of the
Islamic Empire*

There were some early debates and discussions about how the community should organize itself and who should lead the community after the Prophet. Should it be a member of his household? Should it be prominent political leaders in the community?

But eventually, they arrived at a caliphate which is basically a representative of the Prophet who presides over the community, governs the community both politically and also religiously in the early period. The early community had to mature relatively quickly especially after the spread of Islam and the expansion of the Islamic empire to these diverse regions where the communities were primarily non-Muslims.

And part of that dynamic was also the absorption of a lot of other religious communities, a lot of cultures that were very different than the first Muslim community in the Arabian Peninsula.

6:34

*Nate Bowling and Mariam
Sheibani converse, facing
camera*

How did Islam go from a small community in Arabia to a religion that has 1.8 billion adherents around the world?

Yeah, that's a good question, and that's a process that took over 1400 years. But briefly, I can tell you that conversion to Islam in the early period was quite slow.

*Animation showing the
spread of Islam until 1700
CE*

So even though Muslims were ruling over places like Iraq and Syria and Egypt, the majority of the population hadn't converted to Islam for decades, sometimes even centuries. The spread of Islam to regions where Muslims are very numerous today like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Malay archipelago, sub-saharan Africa. The spread of Islam to these regions actually happened quite late starting primarily in the 13th, 14th, quite a bit after the 15th century. And that happened through these merchants and tradesmen and traveling mystics who went to these regions and introduced Islam in the Medieval Period.

7:29

*Nate Bowling and Mariam
Sheibani converse, facing
camera*

How did Islam reorganize communities and networks, both regionally and globally?

*Images of Muslim urban
centers*

Muslims in these diverse regions they established really important urban centers that were very cosmopolitan places, like Iraq, places like Cairo, like Damascus. They became these magnets for people coming from diverse regions.

*Mariam Sheibani speaks,
facing camera*

And so there was a process of first of all assimilating the local cultures, the Byzantine cultures, the Sasanian cultures that had preceded Islam and there was a very interesting kind of integration of maybe Islamic values and religious norms with these preceding civilizations, these preceding cultures that developed a very unique local culture.

*Images of Muslim
urban centers and trade
networks*

These cosmopolitan centers, these urban centers were really important for cultural and intellectual production.

The other important dynamic is the connection of disparate communities through economic and trade network, Indian Ocean trade for example, the Silk Road.

Because of these trade routes, Islam continued to spread to these regions that were further away from the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the development of shared methods of economic exchange and shared social norms.

8:40

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera*

The influence of Islam continued to expand for centuries beyond his death. Islamic empires conquered new lands and expanded old trade routes. Many of the people they encountered chose to convert to this new religion, reshaping life across Afro-Eurasia during this era.

Clearly, Islam is important to the study of history. So how do historians study Islam? Where do we get our narratives about early Islam? And what sources do Muslims use to understand their faith and practice their religion?

Let's bring these questions back to our expert.

9:19

*Nate Bowling and Mariam
Sheibani converse, facing
camera*

What are some of the different ways the history of Islam has been told?

So although historians disagree about some of the details surrounding Islamic history, as they do about any historical account, there's a consensus among scholars about a few things, that the Prophet Muhammad existed, that he lived in Arabia, that he claimed to have received revelation from God, and that Islam spread to these regions outside of the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Central Asia, pretty quickly.

What are the most important sources in Islam for Muslims and historians?

*Mariam Sheibani speaks,
facing camera, with
images of Muslim holy
books on the left*

The most important sources for Muslims in learning about their history are the Quran, which is the Muslim holy book, as well as the Hadith reports, which are accounts or anecdotes about the Prophet and the early community, things that they did, the things that they said, and these Hadith reports were compiled into historical chronicles as early as the 9th century and their way of documenting the biography, the life of the Prophet, and the life of the early Muslim community after the Prophet.

10:21

*Mariam Sheibani speaks,
facing camera*

Historians do rely on these sources, the Quran and the Hadith reports, in addition to which they try to corroborate that narrative through other sources like archaeological evidence.

So early on, these sources were transmitted orally for one or two generations.

*Images of Hadith report
compilations*

They were written down in private collections that were later compiled into collections of Hadith reports, compilations that we still have today and that historians and Muslims both rely upon to construct and understand the early history of Islam.

It was an oral culture, and so people would memorize these reports and they would retain them in their memory and transmit them to others, in addition to writing them down and preserving them in writing.

Images of Muslim centers

Historical narratives about early Islam remain important to many communities today. There are lots of different narratives and not all are historically accurate. These come from within and outside Muslim communities, and they often have a political purpose.

11:22

*Nate Bowling speaks,
facing camera*

*Images of Muslim
communities around the
world*

My conversation with our historical expert Dr. Sheibani helped me understand why it's important to evaluate these narratives.

Today, there are a lot of Muslim communities all over the world. Islam is a major force in global affairs. Historical narratives about Islam's emergence and development over the past 14 centuries shapes our understanding of the world today.