

The Koran

Upper Secondary Level

WS: **History of the Koran**

Answer the following questions about the emergence and historical significance of the Koran. Use a general and theological encyclopedia, the Internet, and the attached text.

1. When and where was the Koran revealed to the Prophet Muhammad?
2. Describe the inhabitants of the Arabic peninsula and life in the pre-Islamic period.
3. The text, “The Koran as Literature in the Late Antiquity Period of the History of Religion” by Islam Dayeh und Nesrine Jamoud briefly describes religious life on the Arab peninsula. Read the text with the following aspects in mind:
 - Which monotheistic societies are described?
 - Which pagan societies are described?
4. What trade routes during the Late Antiquity period do you know of? What was transported from the Near East and Middle East to Europe?
5. Explain and evaluate Peter Brown’s statement that the Arabia of Late Antiquity was a “gigantic sound chamber.”
6. What relationship do Jews and Christians have to the Koran’s concept of divine revelation?
7. On page two you will find an image that displays the calligraphy of the “Basmala” in a copy of the Koran from the Saudi Arabian King Fahd Complex. Read up on the Basmala and answer the following questions:
 - Where is the Basmala found in the Koran?
 - What is the wording of the Basmala in English?
8. The text briefly explains that many biblical scenes und motifs from biblical stories in the Koran are the same or similar. Take the figure of Abraham, Moses or Jesus and compare his name and history in the Koran and in the Bible. What is the same? What is different?



A verse from the Koran on a sweet chestnut leaf
Source: Agha Khan Trust for Culture

The Koran as Literature in the Late Antiquity Period of Religious History

Contemporary historical and archeological studies allow us to draw a rough sketch of the various monotheistic and pagan societies that existed on the Arabic peninsula before the appearance of Islam. We know that these societies, which populated both urban and rural regions, were in active communication and exchange with neighboring regions and societies, that they developed distinctive cultures of language and literature, and that they were experienced traders. Their trade routes led them from the Arabic peninsula through North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean territories to India. In addition to trading valuable goods from around the world, they also developed an

active intellectual exchange that contributed to the spread of ideas, beliefs, and their resulting modifications that resulted from these exchanges. Some of these societies were able to successfully partner with fellow believers outside of Arabia such as in Persia, the Byzantine Empire, and Yemen. Arabia is, as the British Late Antiquity historian Peter Brown described, a “gigantic sound chamber” in which ideas, religions, and histories interact, compete, and coexist. The Koran is thus looked upon as a self-contained, creative reflection of the cultural and religious conflicts that prevailed at the time of its emergence.

The Koran and the Biblical Tradition

In a chain of centuries-old theological conflicts the Koran considers itself to be the “corrector” or “reviser” within the theological debates carried out among the Jewish and Christian communities. The Koran maintains that over time, Jews and Christians have forgotten the true message of God, have deviated from it, falsified it, and even consciously corrupted it. The Koran calls for the absolutely pure monotheistic belief (*tawhid*) that was also promoted by Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and praises the holiness of the Torah and the Gospels.

Many stories mentioned in the Koran refer to biblical writings. Some are briefly recounted, while others, such as those from Abraham, Moses and Jesus are elaborated upon and at times even revisions are made with regard to the biblical narrative. Elements that aren't taken directly from the Bible appear mostly in stories about two prophets, who are mentioned in the Koran, Hud and Salih. The Koran is fully conscious of the connections between the prophetic stories in biblical literature. Jews and Christians are often named as religious groups that should particularly give credence to the revelations of the Koran because they are familiar with the prophets that God sent before Mohammad. Furthermore, they

could to attest to the Koran's message, as they know the prophets from their own scriptures.

The list of prophets mentioned in the Koran is not meant to be exhaustive. In fact, it intentionally omits some prophets. Various reasons are given for the omissions: a few interpretations suggest there were too many (approximately 124,000 prophets: Koran exegeses by al-Bayawi), while others explain that some prophets weren't remarkable enough to be named, as was the case, for example, with an Ethiopian slave (Koran exegeses by al-Suyuti).

