

L E S S O N 3

Early Islam

According to the Koran, one day in 632, Muhammad received one of his last messages from Allah: "This day, have I perfected for you your religion and completed my favor to you." As Islamic legend indicates, Muhammad was overcome with joy, for he realized that this meant he had accomplished his mission on earth. He had preached and spread Islam throughout the land. Most of Arabia had embraced Islam. He also realized that, with his mission complete, he would soon join Allah in heaven.

Muhammad's success in spreading Islam was due in large part to his strong character. His followers were attracted to his morality, courage, and compassion, perhaps as much as they were attracted to his teaching.

When Muhammad died suddenly in 632 without naming a successor, his followers were stunned. Panic swept the community. Some tribes, reasoning that the Muslim community would die without Muhammad, renounced Islam. What would Muslims do without their inspired leader and prophet of Allah? Could someone who was not Allah's prophet guide them?

Abu Bakr (*Abū Bakr*), one of Muhammad's advisers,

offered wise counsel. He stressed the fact that Muslims worshiped Allah, not Muhammad:

And Muhammad is no more than a Messenger; all messengers before him have passed away.

Koran, 3:142

Abu Bakr's words restored calm and faith in the hearts of Muslims. The Muslim leaders now had to choose a successor to the prophet Muhammad.



THINKING FOCUS

How does the word conflict describe Islam after Muhammad's death?

Key Terms

- caliph
- council
- Shiite
- Sunni

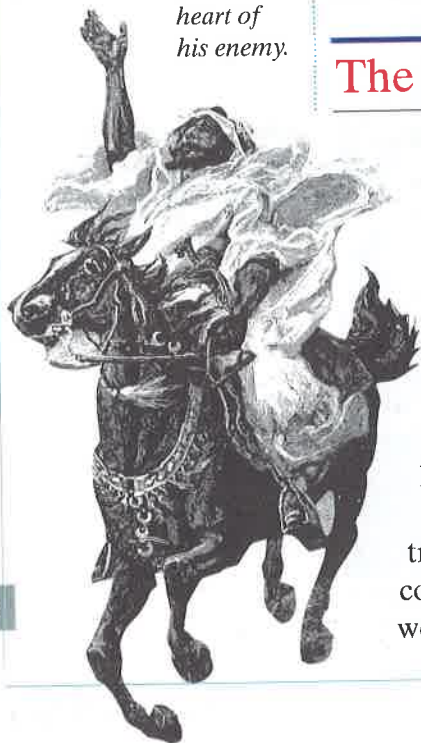
◀ *The teachings of Muhammad lived on after his death. Here a muezzin, a Muslim crier, calls the hour of prayer from the minaret of a mosque in Sille, Turkey.*

The First Caliph

► Copies of the Koran were often richly decorated. This manuscript page was produced in Egypt during the Mamluk dynasty in the early fourteenth century and is now in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin.

■ How was the problem of Muhammad's successor resolved?

▼ This Arab warrior displays his ability with a sword to instill fear in the heart of his enemy.



Soon after Muhammad's death, his most trusted advisers met to choose a **caliph**, an Arabic word meaning "successor." This caliph, Muslims realized, could not give the same kind of spiritual leadership as Muhammad had. The new caliph would not be the prophet of Allah, as Muhammad had been. Rather, he would act as the administrator and military leader of the Muslims.

Four contenders for the position stood out. Abu Bakr was Muhammad's father-in-law and one of his most respected companions. Two other contenders were Umar and Uthman, Muhammad's long-time friends and advisers. The fourth was Ali, a blood relative. Ali was Muhammad's cousin, his son-in-law, and the father of his grandsons.

An assembly of tribal leaders in Medina chose Abu Bakr as Muhammad's successor. Abu Bakr's first task was to put down revolts by tribes in the area who had renounced Islam after the



death of Muhammad. To do this, he united the tribes within the Arabian peninsula into a few large armies. Abu Bakr kept the armies busy by urging them to extend the Muslim state to areas outside Arabia, north into Syria and east into Mesopotamia. ■

The Next Two Caliphs

Abu Bakr, who became caliph at age 59, was caliph for only two years. Before his death in 634, Abu Bakr appointed Umar as his successor. An energetic and spirited leader, Umar encouraged his armies to conquer more lands in the name of Allah.

The Muslims were extremely tolerant of those they conquered, as long as they were "people of the book."

The Muslims allowed Christians and Jews to keep their churches and temples and promised them security. In fact, some peoples who were persecuted by Persian and Byzantine conquerors, such as the Christians in Egypt, welcomed Muslim rule. They even aided the Muslim takeovers.

Non-Muslims who were not Christians or Jews were also tolerated. However, because of the provisions of jihad, they were encouraged to convert to Islam.

Expansion of Islam, 622–661



In 644, on his deathbed, Umar named a **council**, or an assembly, to choose the next caliph. This council appointed Uthman. He, in turn, continued to conquer other lands

and expand the empire. As you can see on the map above, Muslim forces had pushed into North Africa and had completed the conquest of Persia by 661. ■

▲ *The four caliphs after Muhammad greatly expanded the Islamic empire. About how many times larger was it in 661 than in 632?*

Early Political Division

During the time of the empire's rapid expansion, internal troubles plagued the Muslim government. Uthman made enemies at home by appointing members of his own family as regional governors of the empire. This caused bitter jealousy among other families. In 656, an angry mob of about 500 murdered Uthman.

This situation was an opportunity to take power. Ali's supporters proclaimed him the new caliph. However, many of Uthman's supporters believed that Ali had plotted Uthman's assassination. The families continued to struggle for power, and civil war broke out in the empire.

Muawiya (*mu AH wih ya*), who was Uthman's cousin and the governor of Syria, challenged Ali's right to rule. To Ali this was a declaration of war. However, before he could start a war against Muawiya, Ali was murdered by an angry former supporter. In 661, Muawiya became the caliph.

The Shiites

The problem that had caused the first civil war remained. Who was Muhammad's rightful successor—his descendants, such as Ali, or elected caliphs, such as Uthman?

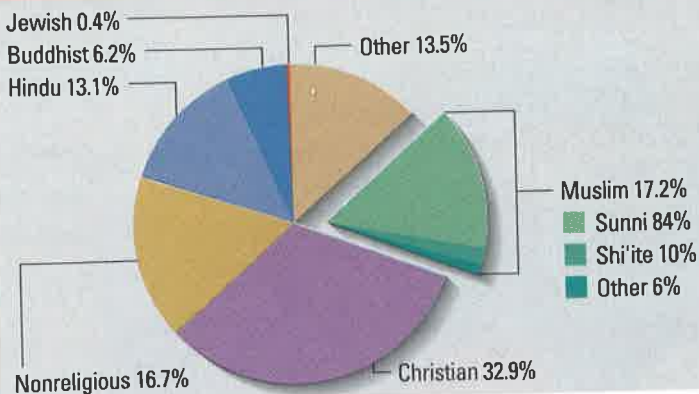
Ali's followers became known as **Shiites** (*shee EYETZ*), from the Arabic meaning "the party of Ali."

■ *Why was the expansion of the Islamic empire so successful a venture?*

Across Time & Space

The largest Muslim communities are in the Middle East and North Africa and in the countries of Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, China, and the Soviet Union. In Europe, Turkey and Albania have the most Muslims. About 6 million Muslims live in the United States.

Religious Populations of the World Today



► This Shiite man, dressed in a business suit, kneels in prayer in a mosque. What percentage of the world religious population are Muslims? What percentage of Muslims are Shiite?

The Shiites believed that only members of Muhammad's family could be his successors. For centuries, Arab tribes had believed that leadership ran in certain families. Therefore, Shiites denied the legitimacy of the first three caliphs, who had not been blood relatives of the prophet.

Shiites also believed that the caliph should be more spiritual and less political. They had given Ali the title of Imam, meaning the divinely guided, sinless successor and descendant of Muhammad. They believed the Imam provided a spiritual link to Allah.

The Sunnis

Those who believe that the election of the first three caliphs was valid are known as **Sunni** Muslims. They claim to follow the Sunna or customs of the prophet Muhammad. They reject the Shiite



idea of the Imam. Sunnis believe it goes against Muhammad's teaching that every individual has a direct relationship with Allah.

Islam today is still divided into Sunnis and the Shiites. Sunnis make up more than 80 percent of Muslims in the world today. Iran is the only Islamic country with a large number of Shiites. Out of a total population of 50 million, 40 million are Shiite Muslims.

As in Ali and Muawiya's time, the Sunnis and Shiites continue to argue and even wage war against each other in the Middle East. Despite such conflict, all Muslims today are united by their faith in Allah. They also share a reverence for the Koran as Allah's word and recognize Muhammad as Allah's prophet. ■

■ How did the division of Muslims into Sunnis and Shiites come about?

R E V I E W

1. **FOCUS** How does the word *conflict* describe Islam after Muhammad's death?
2. **CONNECT** Why were many Muslims fearful after the death of Muhammad?
3. **GEOGRAPHY** How far did the Islamic empire extend under the four caliphs?
4. **CRITICAL THINKING** Whose claim to the leadership of the Islamic state do you think was stronger: Ali's or Abu Bakr's? Give reasons for your answer.
5. **WRITING ACTIVITY** Assume you are a Muslim soldier on your way to conquer Syria in the year A.D. 635. Write three journal entries that reveal your thoughts about Islam, fighting in battle, or life in the desert.