

# What Is Judaism?

By Colleen Messina



<sup>1</sup> According to Jewish tradition, in the ancient city of Ur, a boy named Abraham boldly hit clay statues with a hammer. They shattered. Bits of clay flew about the room. His father had made the clay idols, but Abraham didn't like them. He believed in one God. Abraham broke the statues when his father left him in charge of his store. He destroyed all the idols...except one. 

<sup>2</sup> Abraham did something mischievous next. He placed the hammer in the surviving idol's hands! Abraham's father was probably furious when he discovered what his son had done. Abraham blamed the last idol on the rampage, and his father said, "These idols can't do anything on their own, so you must have broken them!" Abraham then had a good argument for his belief in one God since his father had finally admitted that the idols were useless. He survived his father's wrath and became one of the patriarchs, or founders, of Judaism.

<sup>3</sup> Judaism is an old religion and is based on the belief in one God. It is at the heart of both Christianity and Islam. It began with Abraham about 3,500 years ago. Abraham lived in what is now Iraq. When he grew up, he tended flocks of sheep and wandered around the desert looking for water and pastures. Jews believe that God spoke to Abraham and made a covenant, or bargain, with him. In exchange for their obedience, Jews believe that God made them his chosen people.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham's people were called Hebrews, and later, Israelites. Being Jewish can mean different things to different people. For some, it means being born into a Jewish family and growing up with Jewish culture. For others, it also means following a way of life based on the values of the Torah. These laws apply to all parts of life, even food. The food that strict Jews eat is called *kosher*, which means fit.

<sup>5</sup> The Torah is "the Law" of the Jewish faith. It is comprised of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Jews believe it is God's instructions to them. It promotes the sanctity of life, justice, and equality. Hospitality and charity towards others is also important. A Jewish teacher named Hillel in around 700 B.C. summarized the meaning of the Torah. One day a non-Jew came to him intending to make fun of the Torah. The non-Jew told Hillel that if Hillel could explain the Torah while the non-Jew balanced on one foot, the man would convert to Judaism. Hillel said, "What you think is hateful, don't do to your neighbor. The rest of the Torah is commentary." The man was so amazed that he became a Jew and a student of the Torah!

<sup>6</sup> Jews also follow the Ten Commandments, and the story about these laws became a popular movie by the same name. The Ten Commandments include things that people should do, like keeping the Sabbath holy and honoring your parents. It also includes things that you should not do, like kill, steal, commit adultery, or worship idols. Jews must pray to only one God. (monotheism)

<sup>7</sup> Prayer is an important part of worship in Judaism. Jews are supposed to pray three times a

day. The Jewish prayer book is called a *siddur*, and the most famous prayer is the *Shema*. The first line of this prayer is, "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.*" Reading the Torah is an important part of Jewish worship. Jews have many prayers for different occasions. Some prayers are said alone, while others are said in their synagogue.

<sup>8</sup> The synagogue is the place of worship for Jews. Their Sabbath, or holy day, goes from Friday at sunset to the following Saturday night. A rabbi conducts their services. The word synagogue means "place of assembly" in Greek. There is no set type of architecture for a synagogue, and the outer style of the building often depends on where it is. In Budapest, Hungary, the Dohany Synagogue looks almost Islamic with its globe-shaped towers, while in China, the Kaifeng Synagogue looks like a pagoda.

<sup>9</sup> Certain things are always the same inside a synagogue. The *bimah* is a raised platform where the Torah is read. A cupboard called the Ark holds the Torah scrolls. The Ark always faces Jerusalem. Men often wear a head covering called a *yarmulke* and a prayer shawl with tassels at both ends called a *tallit*. They also wear a pair of small black boxes that hold passages from the Torah. The synagogue is a place for worship, but also for celebration.

<sup>10</sup> Jews celebrate many festivals throughout the year. Jewish months last from one new moon until the next, which is shorter than ordinary months. Jews celebrate Purim in February or March. This holiday honors a Jewish queen named Esther. Passover comes in March or April and celebrates the escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Rosh Hoshanah is the Jewish New Year in September. Sukkot is a harvest festival and Yom Kippur is a time of repentance. Both of these holidays fall in September or October. Hanukkah falls in December and celebrates when the Israelites defeated a wicked king and regained the opportunity to practice their faith.

<sup>11</sup> Today, there are 12 million Jews in many countries of the world, but most of them live in Israel and the United States. Jews have contributed in many areas of life. Albert Einstein was one of the greatest physicists of all time, and Sigmund Freud developed the science of psychoanalysis. Even some sayings that we commonly use come from the Bible. You might be surprised at some of these! For example, the phrase, "a drop in the bucket" comes from the book of Isaiah. Other light-hearted Yiddish (Hebrew) proverbs can make anyone smile, such as, "*To be rich is not everything, but it certainly helps!*"

# What is Christianity?

By Colleen Messina



<sup>1</sup> If you found a time machine, traveled back to the first century A.D., and landed in Judea, you might hear about a man who could reportedly walk on water. According to the locals, this man was either a great teacher or an outright rebel. Jesus Christ was the most controversial person in the Roman Empire! Christianity, the world's largest religion, is based on his teachings.



<sup>2</sup> The story of Jesus' birth is the story of Christmas. According the Bible, the angel Gabriel appeared to a Jewish woman named Mary. Although she was a virgin, the angel told her that she was going to have a baby who would be the Messiah. This was startling news! Jews had hoped that a savior, or Messiah, would come to free them from Roman tyranny. The baby Jesus is traditionally shown with his parents, Mary and Joseph, in a stable full of animals. Angels hover brightly above. Shepherds stand close by. This "nativity scene" is often set up during Christmastime.

<sup>3</sup> We don't know many details about Jesus' life. We don't even know what he looked like. Christians believe that Jesus was a precocious young man who thought of God as his Father. He became a carpenter, but his wisdom exceeded his years. He even explained the Old Testament scriptures to the wise men of the temple when he was only 12! When Jesus turned 30, he gathered a band of disciples, and he began preaching, teaching, and healing. He left no writings behind except symbols in the sand, but his disciples loved him so much that they left their homes to follow him.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus had a riveting message. He taught that people needed to repent, or ask for forgiveness for their sins. He taught about love and the Kingdom of God. However, he didn't always teach quietly. Sometimes, he shouted. Sometimes, he did surprising things, even in the holiest place in Jerusalem.

<sup>5</sup> Tables were set up inside the temple so people could to buy animals to sacrifice for Passover. They came from all over Judea for this holiday, and they had different kinds of money. People had to exchange their money for the local currency in order to buy things in Jerusalem, and the moneychangers did that job. Jesus thought that that was terrible! He knocked the tables over and told the people to stop turning his Father's house into a marketplace!

<sup>6</sup> Jesus' disciples believed that he was the Messiah, or the incarnation of God who came to Earth to bring salvation to mankind. They believed that he set an example for his students to follow. His best known sermon is called the Sermon on the Mount which contained the Lord's Prayer. Jesus gave this sermon at a mountain near Capernaum which was supposedly the site of an extinct volcano. The Lord's Prayer became the most well known prayer of Christianity.

<sup>7</sup> Jesus often taught in parables with secret messages, like the story of the lost sheep. According to the Bible, Jesus asked the Pharisees and scribes whether they would go after one

lost sheep, even if they had ninety-nine others. If they found their lost sheep, they would certainly bring the animal home. They might say, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost." The Bible says that "...there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent." (Luke 15:2-7)

<sup>8</sup> While many people loved Jesus, the chief priests and the Roman authorities did not. They felt threatened by his message. One of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot, made a deal for 30 pieces of silver. He betrayed Jesus. Jesus was tried as a criminal and then crucified on a cross. According to the Bible, Jesus rose from the dead three days later. He appeared to his disciples and taught them for 40 days. He told them to spread the gospel, or the "good news" to all people. Jesus ascended to heaven. Christians believe that Jesus achieved victory over death and that his death made forgiveness of sin possible.

<sup>9</sup> Because Jesus died on a cross, one of the most popular symbols of the Christian faith is the cross. Many Christians wear crosses around their necks on a chain, and many churches have crosses on their altars or walls. Another symbol of Christianity is a fish. It is believed that Jesus miraculously fed 5,000 people by multiplying two fishes and five loaves of bread! He also asked his disciples to become "fishers of men." Other Bible stories tell of miracles that Jesus performed, like turning water into wine at a wedding and restoring sight to a blind man.

<sup>10</sup> The Bible, the sacred book of Christianity, has two parts. The first part is the Jewish Bible, which is called the Old Testament by Christians. The second part is the New Testament, and it is made up of the writings of the early Christians. The New Testament contains the story of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were four of Jesus' disciples, and they wrote the first four sections, or books, called Gospels. Gospel comes from an old English word meaning "good news." Christians believe that the Bible is the authority for living a good life.

<sup>11</sup> Christians have holidays that celebrate events in Jesus' life. Christmas celebrates his birthday, while Easter celebrates his resurrection. Christians attend worship services in churches that are built in many different styles. Most groups of Christians have a minister or priest who gives talks during services. These sermons are based on the Bible. Christians also have special rituals called sacraments, like baptism and Holy Communion.

<sup>12</sup> Today, there are at least 22,000 Christian groups. There are Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Quakers. Even within these big groups, there are small differences. For example, there are Russian and Greek Orthodox Christians. There are also thirteen other Orthodox groups. There are Baptist, Lutheran, and Anglican Protestants. Some Christians have quiet meetings, like the Quakers, while Catholics hold formal masses in beautiful cathedrals, and charismatic groups have noisy celebrations. However, Christians of all kinds believe that Jesus Christ was "the Light of the world."

# What Is Islam?

By Colleen Messina



<sup>1</sup> Muhammad never expected to change the world. He was born in 570 A.D. in Saudi Arabia. He was kind, and his nickname was "the truthful one." The boy was orphaned, and his uncle raised him. Muhammad tended sheep on the dry hills like many young Arabians. Later, he became a successful merchant and married a wealthy widow. However, he felt as though something was missing in his life, so he went on a retreat. 

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad went up to Mount Hira to pray in a small cave. He had studied both Judaism and Christianity, and he wanted to find a deeper meaning for his life. He was also upset about the cruelty of his people. They killed baby girls to control the number of women, and they treated their slaves unkindly. Muhammad had a strong sense of right and wrong. He wanted change, but he had no idea that his prayers would lead to a new religion.

<sup>3</sup> According to Islamic beliefs, Islam began in 610 A.D. when Muhammad said that the Archangel Gabriel appeared in the cave. Muhammad was amazed at the angel's first command: 'Read, in the name of Allah!' He wanted to obey, but he tried to explain that he didn't know how to read. Archangel Gabriel still gave Muhammad the message. The messages from the archangel over the next twenty-three years became the Koran, or Qur'ân. The Koran is the poetic, holy book of Islam.

<sup>4</sup> Archangel Gabriel told Muhammad to preach about Allah. Muhammad began to preach three years after his vision. Mecca had 360 shrines to different gods, and the people didn't like the idea of just one god. They may have thought that more gods gave them a better chance of getting answers to their prayers. So the first Muslims became outcasts, and they moved to the city of Medina in 622 A.D. The Islamic calendar begins at this date instead of from the birth of Christ. Medina later became the center of Islamic civilization.

<sup>5</sup> By the time Muhammad died, he had united many people in the Arabian Peninsula. It is said that Muhammad met Archangel Gabriel again at the end of his life. The angel led the Prophet to a mysterious animal called the *burag*. This animal had a human face, angel wings, and a horse's body. Muhammad ascended to heaven on its back. Muslims call this event the Night Journey. Muslims all over the world celebrate this event.

<sup>6</sup> A Muslim is a person who follows the religion of Islam. A Muslim believes in Allah as the one god. The word "Muslim" means "someone who surrenders to God." Muslims believe in the *Arkan-ul-Islam*, the Five Pillars of Islam. Muslims must do these five things. The first is *Shahadah*, or a declaration of faith. A Muslim says, "There is no god except Allah, and I declare that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." The second pillar, *Salaat*, means that Muslims must pray five times a day. *Zakaat* is the third pillar, and it means to give to the poor. Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan, which is the fourth pillar. The last pillar is *Haj*, a pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>7</sup> All Muslims want to go to Mecca. It was Muhammad's birthplace. Pilgrims wear white robes in Mecca to show equality in Allah's eyes. They circle the Ka'bah, a small building made from bricks covered with a black cloth. The Ka'bah represents monotheism. Millions of pilgrims visit many holy sites each year. Many shops close during prayer time. Meetings are arranged around prayers. Businessmen may say to each other, "Let's meet after evening prayers!"

<sup>8</sup> Muslims say their prayers in mosques, but some carry a prayer rug with them so they can pray anywhere. Mosques are beautiful buildings that serve as the spiritual centers of their communities. They can be simple or elaborate. Muslims follow certain rules when they are inside their mosques. Everyone takes off their shoes and covers their heads. Often a special area in the mosque is reserved for women. Everyone also washes before praying. Muslims face Mecca when they pray. A niche in the wall shows the direction of Mecca.

<sup>9</sup> Prayers are important, but Islam is a complete way of life for Muslims around the world. Muslims believe that manners are important. They teach their children to respect others. The Muslim way of life begins moments after a baby is born. The father whispers the name of God, Allah, into his child's ear. Muslims raise their children to have high standards. Muslims are taught to not kill, lie, steal, cheat, or betray their country. They don't gamble, commit adultery, or drink alcohol.

<sup>10</sup> Muslims also have fun. They enjoy wonderful festivals that celebrate historical events. Other holidays honor the Five Pillars of Islam. Births and marriages are marked by great celebrations. During Ramadan, Muslims fast between sunrise and sunset. A celebration called *Id al-Fitr* marks the end of the fast.

<sup>11</sup> Muslims prepare delicious foods for these celebrations. Sharing food is an important part of Muslim life. (After all, food was hard to find in the desert.) Yummy pastries called *hama* are covered with honey. Cookies called *kuch* are made with palm sugar. Lamb kebobs are also popular. Muslims do not eat pork as they follow certain dietary rules.

<sup>12</sup> Today there are 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide. The name Muhammad, which means, "highly praised," is given to more boys than any other name. Muslims have variations on their customs in different countries, but they are united in their belief in Allah. Their Call to Prayer summarizes their faith:

<sup>13</sup>

*Allah is the greatest.*

*I bear witness that there is no God but Allah.*

*I bear witness that Muhammad is his Prophet.*

*Hasten to prayer, hasten to success.*

*Allah is the greatest. There is no God but Allah.*