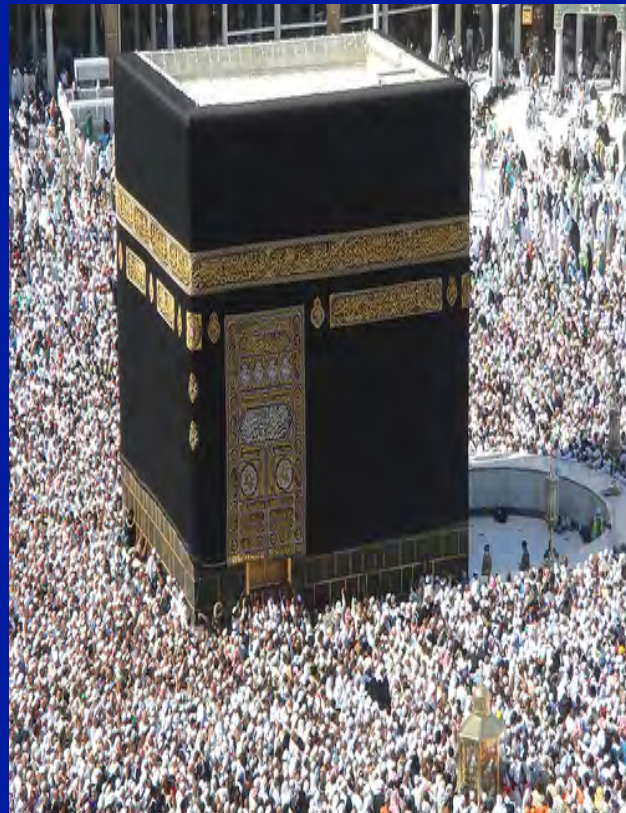
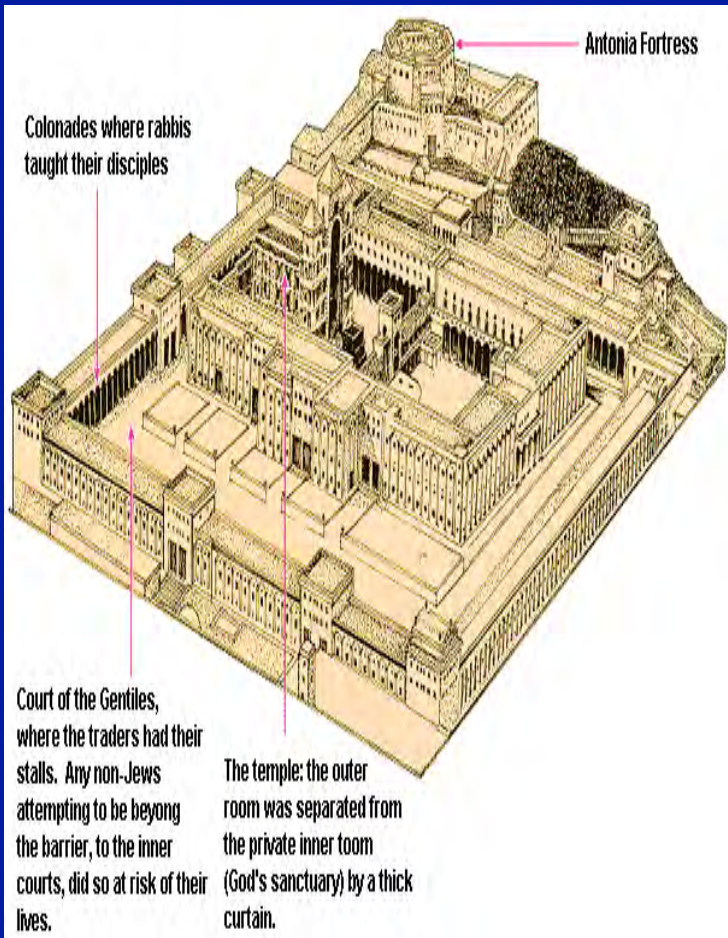




The Jews, Arabs and Islam



Dentwater Bible Church

Israel; The Arabs and Islam

Pre Islam Arabia

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According to Arabist scholar Alfred Guillaume it is probable that the first Jews in Arabia came in Cir. 722 B.C. when the Assyrians invaded Israel and carried them away to Mesopotamia.¹ Therefore they settled in Arabia in connection with the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. Guillaume is also certain that "in the first and second centuries A.D., Arabia offered a near asylum" to the Jews who had been victimized by the "utterly ruthless" Romans.

Numbers of Jewish and Christian settlements were established in different parts of Arabia, both spreading Aramaic and Hellenistic culture. Christianity had already been introduced into Southern Arabia and was flourishing by the time of Muhammad. The heretical works such as the gospel of Barnabus was present there and were flourishing by the time of Muhammad. The chief southern Arabian Christian centre was in Najran, where a relatively advanced political life was developed. Jews and Judaized Arabs were everywhere, especially in Yathrib, later renamed Medina. The Islamic Arab world's second holiest city, Medina, was one of the allegedly "purely Arab" cities that actually was first settled by Jewish tribes. Bernard Lewis states:

The city of Medina, some 280 miles north of Mecca, had originally been settled by Jewish tribes from the north, especially the Banu Nadir and Banu Quraiza. The comparative richness of the town attracted an infiltration of pagan Arabs who came at first as clients of the Jews and ultimately succeeded in dominating them. Medina, or, as it was known before Islam, Yathrib, had no form of stable government at all. The town was tom by the feuds of the rival Arab tribes of Aus and Khazraj, with the Jews maintaining an uneasy balance of power. The latter, engaged mainly in agriculture and handicrafts, were economically and culturally superior to the Arabs, and were consequently disliked.... as soon as the Arabs had attained unity through the agency of Muhammad they attacked and ultimately eliminated the Jews.²

The Arab tribes of the Jazeerah (Arabian Peninsula) - Christian, Pagan or Jewish - fought each other over the acquisition of water resources, over blood feuds and over supremacy. Each individual Arab was known and identified by the name of the tribe to which he belonged. Stories of the Old Testament, the Mishnah, the Talmud and Jewish apocryphal works such as the Testament of Abraham were well known to the Arabs.

¹ Alfred Guillaume, Islam (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 10-11.

² Bernard Lewis, The Arabs in History, rev. ed. (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper-Colophon Books, 1966), pp. 31-32.

Although all the people of the peninsula were Arab, there was no such thing as a sense of unity or nationalism. Each tribe was a separate and independent entity, with different dialects and religious beliefs and had no feeling of affinity or loyalty to any other except in terms of mutually beneficial and convenient alliances. The sense of the “Umma al Arabia”, the nation and people of Arabia, was achieved only after all of Arabia was subjugated and united under Muhammad.



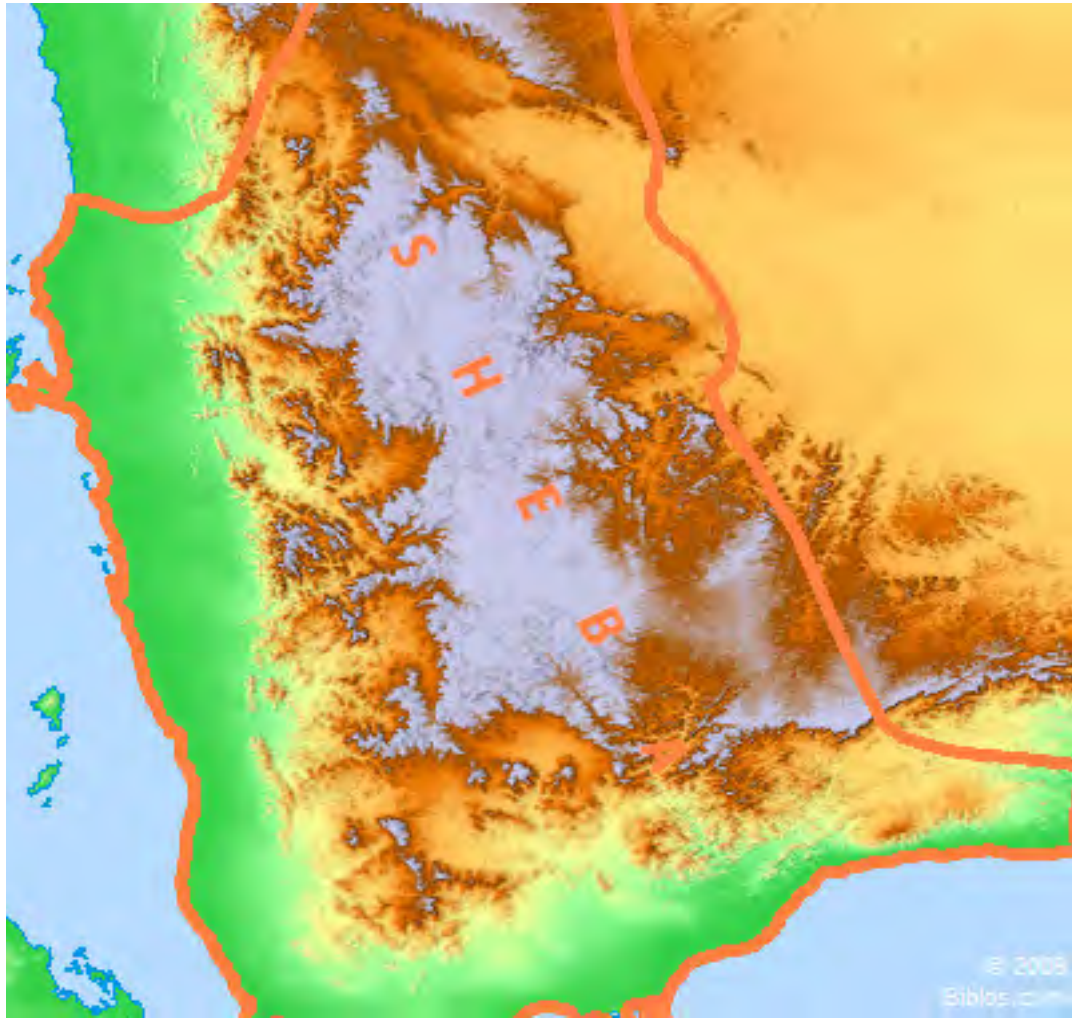
Various Arab Tribes at the Beginning of Islam Cir 600 A.D. 50 A.H. (Anno Hegirae)

The two predominant ancient pre Islamic groups were the Nabateans and the Sabeans. The Nabateans were in the northern area of ancient Edom and today that is Southern Jordan. They were a group of commercial nomads. Two sons of Ishmael *Nebajoth* and *Kedar* are mentioned in Isaiah 60:7 as rich possessors of flocks, are probably the Nabataeans They are mentioned in the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal's list of enemies in 647 B.C., they appeared in the Negev in the 4th century B.C. and pushed the Edomites (Idumeans) north into southern Judah. Originally they were sheep and cattle farmers, but as traders they grew wealthy, holding a monopoly of the market because they knew the secrets of the desert. The route the Nabateans took across the Negev with their camel trains was called the Spice Route; it stretched from the Persian Gulf (Arabia) to the ports of Gaza, passing through Petra (their capital) and Avdat.



The Sabaeans or people of Saba or Sheba are referred to as traders in gold and spices, and as inhabiting a country remote from Israel (1 Kings 10:1 Isaiah 60:6 Jeremiah 6:20 Ezekiel 27:22 Psalm 72:15 Matthew 12:42), also as slave-traders (Joel 3:8), or even desert-raiders (Job 1:15; Job 6:19). The queen of Sheba is mentioned in Scripture as visiting Solomon and being amazed at his wealth (II Chronicles 9: 1). She brought gifts of gold and spice traditionally what they traded. These two groups worshipped a pagan moon god. The moon was viewed as a male deity and the sun as a female deity. In their

crude pagan understanding of creation the two together begat the stars. The Quran refers to this pre-Islamic practice in Sura 41: 37 and elsewhere.



Biblical Sheba – The Land of the Sabaeans

They used a lunar calendar to divide their religious activities and had a month of fasting regulated by the moon. The fast began with the appearance of the crescent moon and ended when the crescent moon reappeared. Later this cycle would become one of the five pillars of Islam. The Arabian pagans taught that all should bow to Mecca at set times during the day. All had to make a pilgrimage to Mecca to worship at the Kaabah at least once in their life. Once they arrived there they had to run around the Kaabah seven times, kiss the black stone and then run a mile to the Wadi Mina to throw stones at the devil. They even had a certain month where fasting was done according to the lunar calendar. Heathenism's customs have left an indelible mark on Islam, notably in the rites of the pilgrimage.³

The survival of nomads (or bedouins) was partially dependent on raiding caravans or oases; thus they saw this as no crime. Medina was a large flourishing agricultural

³ Alfred Guillaume, *Islam* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 6.

settlement, while Mecca was an important financial center for many of the surrounding tribes. Mecca was on the trade route and it seems that Muhammad's father Abd Allah ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib thrived from the trade. Some say he provided the Kaabah to allow the caravans to worship the pagan deity of their choice. It provided a spot to worship the pagan's 360 gods with Allah being one of them. Perhaps named after him. The Encyclopedia of Religion says it corresponds to the Babylonian god Bel. The early history of the Kaabah is not well known, but it is certain that in the period before the rise of Islam it was a polytheist sanctuary and was a site of pilgrimage for people throughout the Arabian Peninsula.⁴

In general, the pagan Arabs - the majority in Arabia - had a very primitive and simple astral and animistic religion of at least 360 gods and goddesses. Among the gods of the pagan Arabs, Allah was one of the most important. In Mecca, Allah was the principal name for the moon god, though not the only deity. He had three daughters: Al Lat (Crescent); Al Uzzah (Venus) and Al Manah (Fate). Besides the Kaaba of Mecca, caves, trees, waterholes, wells etc. were also venerated especially in a bleak, arid and desolate land as theirs. There were other holy sites also called Kaaba besides the one in Mecca, such as the ones in Petra, Sana and Najran (far southwest Arabia).

The sun too was worshipped but not to the same level of importance as the moon. Moon worship in general implies a nomadic society, whereas Sun worship is invariably associated with an agricultural one. Most important of all is that in the scorching furnace heat of the Arabian Desert, the Sun is actually an enemy of the nomads depriving them of pasture, shade and water. On the other hand, the moon is their friend and ally providing them with light, coolness of the night, dew and shade; and this is reflected in its greater importance as a deity for them.

The pagan Arabs built no temples or special structures for their gods, unlike all the surrounding civilizations. They developed no elaborate mythology, no structured theology and no cosmogony (origin of the universe) comparable to that of any of their neighbors.

The pagan Kaaba was a special but very simple cube-like building that housed a fallen black meteorite, which was venerated as a fetish. Because of its holiness, the area surrounding it was pronounced prohibited and sacred. As mentioned earlier even before Islam, it was an object of annual pilgrimage and sacrifice.

Most of the holy places of their other divinities were trees, wells, caves or fallen meteors. The pagan Arabs made sacrifices - both human and animal - to Venus (Al Uzzah) and it is recorded that Muhammad participated in giving sacrifices to this goddess as a young man. The Bedouins also believed that the desert was full of living creatures or spirits called Jinns whose purpose was to blight their lives with mischief and difficulties. Since nomadic people bury their dead on the move and hence have no special resting-places such as graveyards, they subsequently had neither special reverence for their dead nor any concept of an afterlife, of resurrection, a Day of Judgment or heaven and hell.

Please Call or e-mail with any questions or comments.

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⁴ Internet <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/309173/Kabah>