
Why Did Islam Spread So Quickly?



A medieval caravan of Muslim pilgrims traveling to Mecca

Overview: According to the holy texts of the Muslims, in 610 CE a local merchant named Muhammad retreated to a cave outside the city of Mecca in Arabia to meditate. There, the archangel Gabriel appeared and gave Muhammad words to recite. These words were to give birth to a religion called Islam. Within 140 years, followers of Islam had created an empire that ruled the Middle East and stretched across North Africa into Europe. This Mini-Q explores why this new religion was able to spread so quickly.

The Documents:

Document A: Arabian Peninsula Trade Routes (map)

Document B: Verses from the Qur'an

Document C: The Spread of Islam (map)

Document D: The Ghazu

Document E: The Duties of the Caliph

Document F: The People of Hims

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Why Did Islam Spread So Quickly?

In 610 CE, a merchant trader from Mecca made one of his frequent visits to a cave on nearby Mount Hira. For Muhammad ibn Abdallah it was a time to pray, to get away from the scramble for money and wealth he felt was causing his people to lose their way. According to Muhammad, it was on this visit to Mt. Hira that the archangel Gabriel squeezed him hard and caused words to flow from his mouth. The words said that **Allah** was the one God. No doubt a bit shaken, Muhammad reported the event to his wife and her cousin but otherwise stayed silent. The words continued to come.

In 610 Mecca was a bustling Arabian trade town with camel caravans arriving regularly from points north and south. It was also the site of an annual pilgrimage where Arab pagans came to perform rituals at the sacred **Ka'ba** (the holy shrine in Mecca). The Meccan population included a number of Jewish families

and some Christians. There may have been a feeling among the pagan Arabs that their religious world was less sophisticated than that of the Jews and the Christians. They had nothing to match the Torah and the Bible. They had no Abraham or Moses or Jesus. But all that was about to change.

After receiving Allah's words for two years, Muhammad decided it was time to talk. Encouraged by the support of close friends and his wife, Kadija, Muhammad began to recite the received words in public. He spoke of the one god, Allah, and the importance of charity – sharing wealth with the weak and poor. Together these teachings would be given the name **Islam**, the Arabic word for “submission.” A follower of Islam was to be called a Muslim, meaning one “who submits to the will of Allah.” After

Muhammad's death in 632, Allah's words that Muhammad was reciting would be written down and called the **Qur'an**.

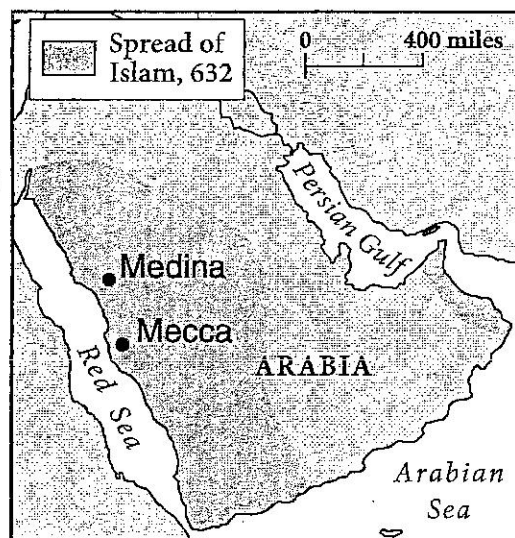
At first, many in Mecca resisted Muhammad's preaching. What would happen to idol worship? Surely pilgrimages to Mecca would stop. Business would suffer. By 622 resistance was so strong that Muhammad decided to leave. Together with 70 families, he migrated 250 miles north. There, in the town of Medina, he established a new base. He also made a symbolic break with the past. Muham-

mad had respect for Jews and Christians, “people of the Book,” as he called them. However, at a prayer session in 624, Muhammad symbolically turned his body to the south – away from Jerusalem and toward Mecca. It was as much as saying that a new religion had been born.

In 628, Muhammad made the hard decision to return to Mecca. Despite

opposition, he was allowed back in the city. He soon had enough support to order that the idols in the Ka'ba be destroyed and the shrine dedicated to Allah. Pilgrimages to the Ka'ba became one of the Five Pillars, or essential duties, of Islam. These duties – confession of belief, prayer five times a day, **Ramadan**, an annual month-long fast, giving alms to the poor, and the pilgrimage to Mecca – would become the bedrock practices of Islam.

From this modest beginning in west-central Arabia, Islam exploded in size. Within 100 years of Muhammad's death, it had reached Europe and Asia. The question before us is why. Examine the documents that follow and answer the question: *Why did Islam spread so quickly?*



EV

Background Essay Questions

1. When and where did Muhammad first receive words from Allah?
2. What were the two main ideas expressed by these words?
3. What were the three religious practices one could find in Mecca before Muhammad's revelations?
4. Why did Muhammad leave Mecca for Medina?
5. Can you explain why Muhammad's turning from Jerusalem and facing Mecca is called a symbolic break with the past? (A symbolic break would be a change with special meaning. Why was this act significant?)
6. What are the Five Pillars of Islam?
7. Define these terms:
 - Allah
 - pagan
 - Ka'ba
 - Islam
 - Qur'an
 - Ramadan

570 CE – Muhammad is born in Mecca.

610 – Muhammad receives first revelation at Mt. Hira.

622 – Muhammad leads the first Muslims to safety in Medina.

628 – Muhammad returns to Mecca.

632 – Muhammad dies.

636 – Battle of Yarmuk takes place on the modern-day border between Syria and Jordan.
Muslims defeat the army of the Byzantine Empire.

692 – The Dome of the Rock, a Muslim shrine, is finished in Jerusalem.

710 – Muslim forces land in Spain.

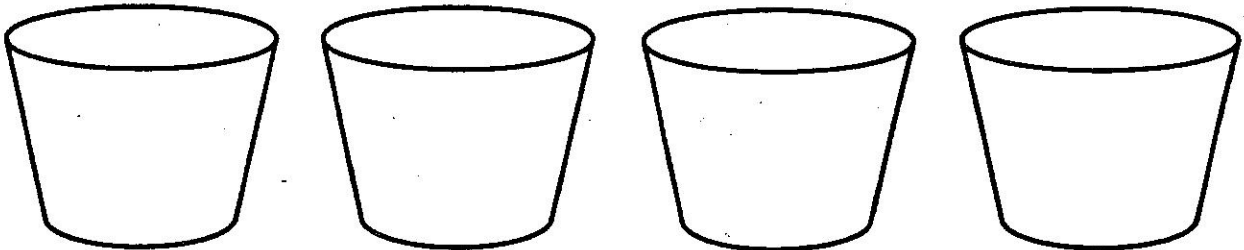
Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?
2. What terms in the question need to be defined?
3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

Pre-Bucketing

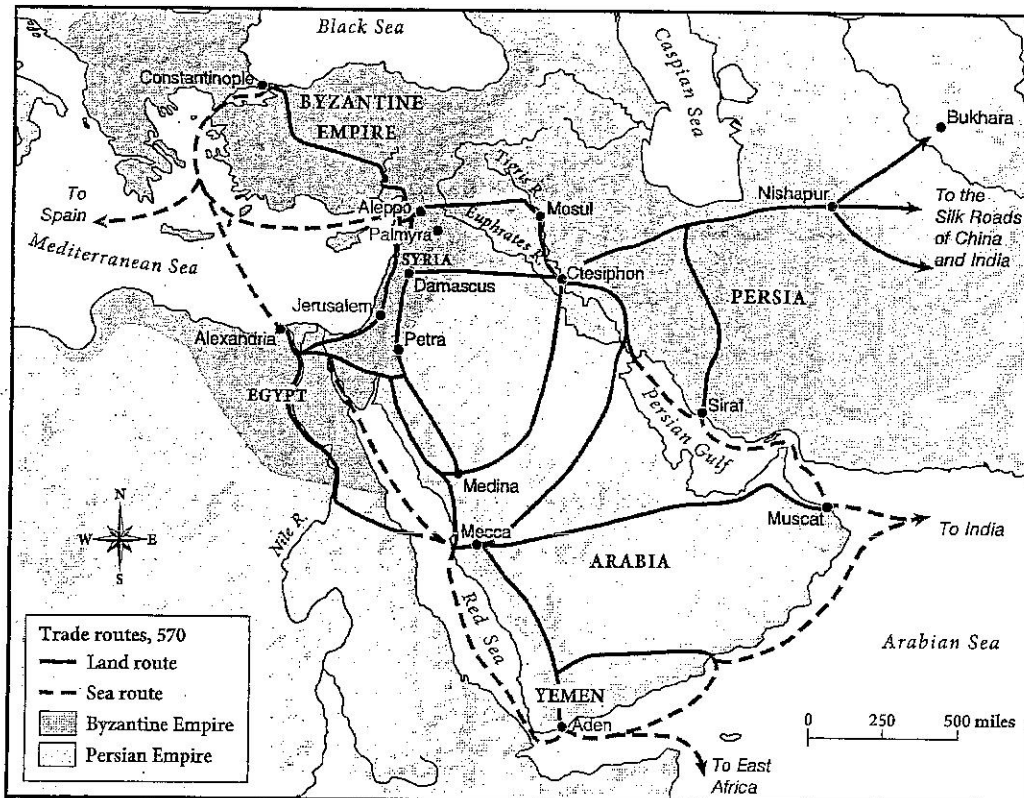
Directions: Using clues from the Mini-Q question, suggest general analytical categories and label the buckets.



Document A

Sources: Desmond Stewart and the Editors of Time-Life Books, *Great Ages of Man: Early Islam*, Time-Life Books, 1967.
Map created from various sources.

By the middle of the sixth century ... Mecca was ... prosperous and important. First, it was at the crossroads of the lucrative caravan trade. Vast camel trains, bearing spices, perfumes, precious metals, ivory and silk, filed through the town, headed north on the way from Yemen ... to the markets of Syria, and headed east from the Red Sea across the desert to Iraq. Adding to the profits from caravans was a brisk pilgrimage trade, for Mecca was the site of Arabia's holiest pagan shrine [the Ka'ba].



Document Analysis

1. What year is shown on this map? How does this relate to the history of Islam?
2. Name three cities that are easy to reach by trade routes from Mecca.
3. What two empires are shown on this map, and where are they in relation to Arabia?
4. Name four areas these trade routes went to that are outside the boundaries of this map.
5. Judging from both the map and the quotation on this page, why was Mecca a trade center for the Arabian Peninsula?
6. How does this document explain why Islam might have spread so quickly?

Document B

Source: Verses from the Qur'an.

Those who submit to God and accept the true Faith; who are devout, sincere, patient, humble, charitable, and chaste; who fast and are ever mindful of God – on these, both men and women, God will bestow forgiveness and rich recompense [reward]. (33:35) Key Quote

... (W)hoever killed a human being, except as punishment for murder or other villainy..., shall be deemed as having killed all mankind; and ... whoever saved a human life shall be deemed as having saved all mankind.... (5:32)

But the believers who do good works, both men and women, shall enter Paradise. They shall not suffer the least injustice. (4:124)

Do not devour one another's property by unjust means, nor bribe the judges with it in order that you may wrongfully and knowingly usurp [take] other people's possessions.... (2:188)

Permission to take up arms is hereby given to those who are attacked, because they have been wronged. God has power to grant them victory. (22:39)

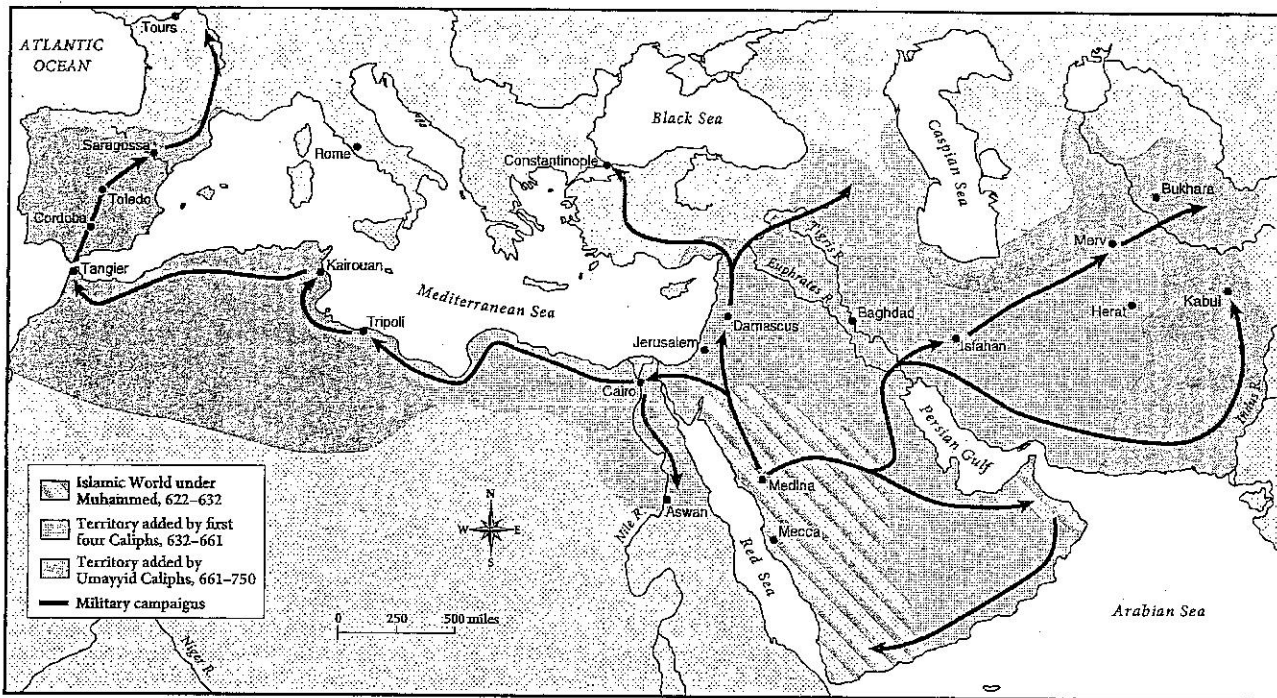
Document Analysis

1. According to verse 33:35 of the Qur'an, what are the qualities of someone who is favored by God?
2. What does verse 5:32 suggest about the value of human life?
3. Examine verse 2:188. What does it suggest about Islam's view of private property?
4. According to verse 22:39, when are Muslims allowed to fight?
5. How does this document explain how Islam spread so quickly?

Document C

Source: Map created from various sources.

The Spread of Islam



Document Analysis

1. By what year had each of the following come under Muslim control?

- Mecca
- Jerusalem
- Cairo
- Baghdad
- Saragossa

2. How far north did Islam spread in the 600s? How far east?

3. What does this map tell you about Muhammad's followers?

4. How does this document explain how Islam spread so quickly?

Document D

Source: Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, Random House, 2000.

For centuries... Arabs had [added to] their inadequate resources by means of the ghazu [raids against other tribes], but Islam had put a stop to this because the ummah [Muslim community] was not permitted to attack one another. What would replace the ghazu, which had enabled Muslims to scratch out a meager livelihood?... The obvious answer was a series of ghazu raids against the non-Muslim communities in the neighboring countries. The unity of the ummah would be preserved by an outwardly directed offensive [attack].

There was nothing religious about these campaigns.... The objective ... was plunder and a common activity that would preserve the unity of the ummah. For centuries the Arabs had tried to raid the richer settled lands beyond the [Arabian] peninsula: the difference was that this time they encountered a power vacuum. Persia and Byzantium had both been engaged for decades in a long ... series of wars with one another. Both were exhausted.

Document Analysis

1. What was the ghazu? What was the ummah?
2. What was the purpose of the ghazu in the years before Islam?
3. How did Islam change the way the ghazu worked?
4. Why were the Arabs able to conquer much of Persia and parts of Byzantium?
5. How does this document explain how Islam spread so quickly?

Document E

Source: Abu al-Hasan Al-Mawardi, *The Ordinances of the Government*, circa 975 CE.

Note: In 632, following the death of Muhammad, the first caliph (a spiritual ruler, sometimes called an imam) was selected to lead the Muslim community. Over the next three centuries, the duties of the caliph were firmly established, with the understanding that the caliph would not delegate these duties to others. The excerpt below, from a book of Islamic law written by an Arab judge in the 10th century, outlines four of the ten public duties of the caliph.

The Ordinances of Government

1. To maintain the religion according to established principles and the consensus of the first generation of Muslims. If . . . some dubious person deviates from it, the Imam must clarify the proofs of religion to him, expound that which is correct, and apply to him the proper rules and penalties so that religion may be protected from injury and the community safeguarded from error.
2. To execute judgments between litigants [people involved in lawsuits] and to settle disputes between contestants so that justice may prevail and so that none commit or suffer injustice.
3. To defend the lands of Islam and to protect them from intrusion so that people may earn their livelihood and travel at will without danger to life or property.
4. To enforce the legal penalties for the protection of God's commandments from violation and for the preservation of the rights of his servants from injury or destruction. . . .
6. To wage . . . jihad [holy war] against those who, after having been invited to accept Islam, persist in rejecting it, until they either become Muslims or enter the Pact* so that God's truth may prevail over every religion.

*The Pact was an arrangement often made by Muslim rulers that permitted conquered Christians, Jews and other non-Muslims to continue to practice their religion if they paid a special tax called the *jizyah* and obeyed Islamic laws.

Document Analysis

1. What responsibility is given to the caliph in the first duty?
2. What responsibilities are listed in duties 2, 3, and 4?
3. In American society, who is responsible for these tasks?
4. What was the Pact?
5. How does this document explain how Islam spread so quickly?

Document F

Source: Ahmad ibn-Jabir al-Baladhuri, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, circa 850 CE.

Note: In the year 636, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius ("hair-uh-kli-us") gathered an army at the Yarmuk River in Syria to resist the expansion of Islam. The people of Hims are the Syrians, non-Muslims who had been under Byzantine rule. This account was written by the Arabic Muslim historian al-Baladhuri about 200 years after the battle.

Heraclius gathered [a] large Byzantine army ... numbering about 200,000. This army he put under the command of one of his choice men.... The Moslems gathered together and the [Byzantine] army marched against them. The battle they fought at al-Yarmuk was of the fiercest and bloodiest kind.... In this battle 24,000 Moslems took part. The [Byzantines] and their followers in the battle tied themselves to each other by chains, so that no one might set his hope on flight. By Allah's help, some 70,000 of them were put to death....

When Heraclius massed his troops against the Moslems and the Moslems heard that they were coming to meet them at al-Yarmuk, the Moslems re-

funded to the inhabitants of Hims the [land tax] they had taken from them saying, "We are too busy to support and protect you. Take care of yourselves." But the people of Hims replied, "We like your rule and justice far better than the state of oppression and tyranny in which we were. The army of Heraclius we shall indeed . . . repulse from the city." . . . Saying this, they closed the gates of the city and guarded them... When by Allah's help the "unbelievers" were defeated and the Moslems won, they opened the gates of their cities, went out with the singers and music players who began to play, and paid the [land tax].

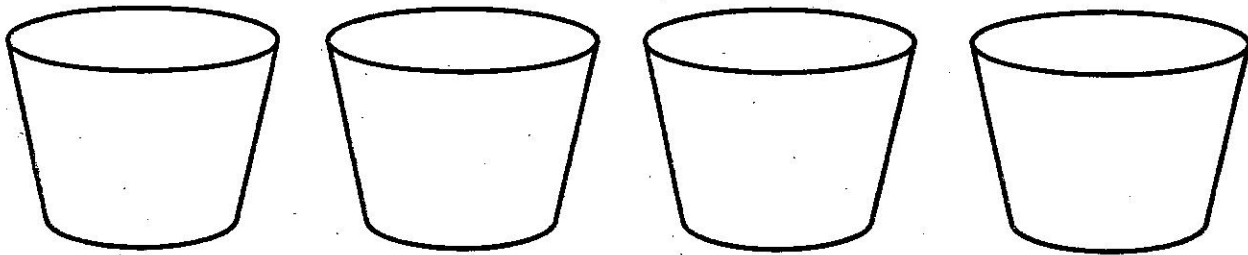
Document Analysis

1. Who was the Muslim army fighting in this account?
2. To whom did the Muslims attribute their victory?
3. Whose version of the battle is this? Why is this important to note?
4. How did the people of Hims (the Syrians) feel about the Muslims?
5. How does this document help explain why Islam spread quickly?

Bucketing – Getting Ready to Write

Bucketing

Look over the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. Plan out either a three- or four-paragraph essay and remember—your bucket labels are going to become your body paragraphs.



Thesis Development and Road Map

On the chicken foot below, write your thesis and your road map. Your thesis is always an opinion that answers the Mini-Q question. The road map is created from your bucket labels and lists the topic areas you will examine in order to prove your thesis.

