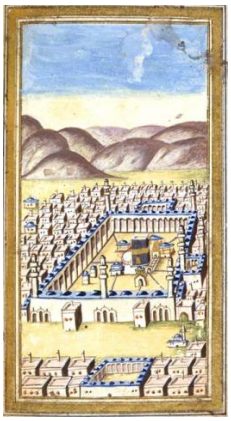
MUHAMMAD'S EARLY LIFE



0. MUHAMMAD'S EARLY LIFE - Story Preface

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At the Library of Congress we find extensive Near East Collections. One of its treasures is a 1718 manuscript of Muhammad ibn Sulayman al-Jazuli's *Dalail al-khayrat* ("Signs of blessing"). The Library describes this image: “Two of the holiest of sites for Islam, today still revered places of pilgrimage, are Medina, from which the Prophet Muhammad fled, and the Kabah in Mecca, the sanctuary to which Muslims turn in prayer and to which they go on pilgrimage.” This illustration depicts the Kabah.

It was the 7th century. The Arabian Peninsula was populated by wandering desert tribes called Bedouins who worshiped many gods. Their chief god was Allah. Their chief city was Makkah. Most people could neither read nor write.

Located 50 miles east of the Red Sea, the Arabian town of Makkah (called Mecca today) intersected the world's major trade routes. Commerce had transformed the town into a prosperous city, at the crossroads of the world.

Some of the Bedouin tribes were drawn to the more stable, settled life of Mecca. According to earliest historical accounts, the family of young Ubu'l Kassim was one of those who left the desert for the city.

Born in Mecca (follow the link to his alleged birthplace which is now a library), Ubu'l Kassim never knew his father who had died. His mother also died, when the boy was six years old. The young child (later called *Mustafa*, or Muhammad, "the chosen one") was first taken-in by his grandfather, then by his uncle, Abu Talib. The uncle took the child on caravan journeys to distant places.

Mecca then was the same as Mecca now for one significant aspect of life. It was a religious center. The Kabah (Ka'bah), a cube-like building—already ancient by the time of Ubu'l Kassim—was in Mecca. Pre-Islamic Arabs believed that the Kabah was built by their famous ancestors Abraham and Ishmael. (Abraham, of course, had two sons: Isaac, with his wife Sarah, and Ishmael, with his servant Hagar. Isaac is the patriarch of the Hebrew line of Abraham's family; Ishmael is the patriarch of the Arab line.)

The Kabah (which means "cube" in Arabic) housed the Black Stone (called "Hajarul Asward" in Arabic.) Arabs of Ubu'l Kassim's day believed the stone had miraculous powers, although Muslims do not believe that.

Ancient Arabs also believed that the original Kabah was built in heaven while the one in Mecca, an exact duplicate, was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael to stand on Earth (directly underneath the place where the eternal Kabah stands in heaven). Muslims today still believe that.

The city of Mecca, to an ancient Arab, would have represented the intersection of heaven and earth as well as the crossroad of the trading world. Such a place created great opportunities—even for priests of the numerous Arab deities.

By the time Ubu'l Kassim was a young man, 360 images of pagan gods stood around the Kabah. Those images were tended by priests who collected exorbitant fees from worshipers.

Ubu'l Kassim believed that the Black Stone had been given to Abraham by the angel Gabriel. History records that Muhammad touched the Black Stone. It is for that reason that Muslims today want to touch the stone. Such an act allows a devout believer of Islam to connect with something that the Prophet himself touched.

Muhammad did not approve of priests profiting from sacred relics. During one of his yearly visits to the Cave of Hira, where he went to think about the important issues of life, something happened to this contemplative, married man that changed his life and the history of the world.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
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See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

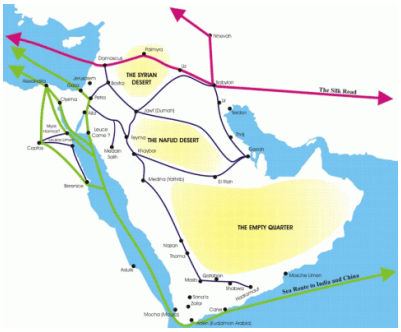
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Media Stream



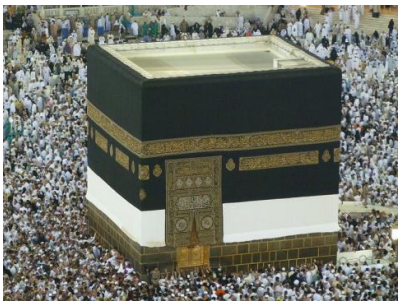
Map of the Arabian Peninsula

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.
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Mecca and Its Intersecting Trade Routes

Image online, courtesy the nabataea.net website.
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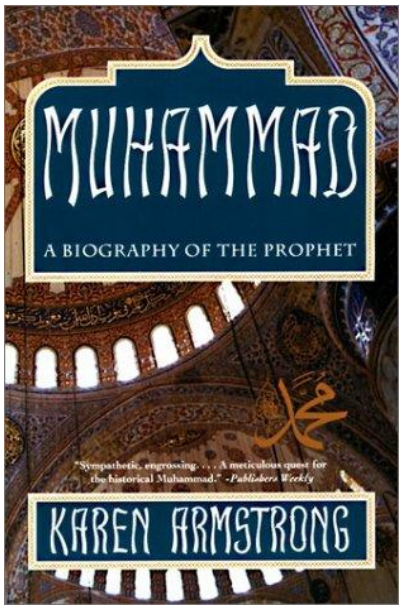
The Kabah

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Black Stone

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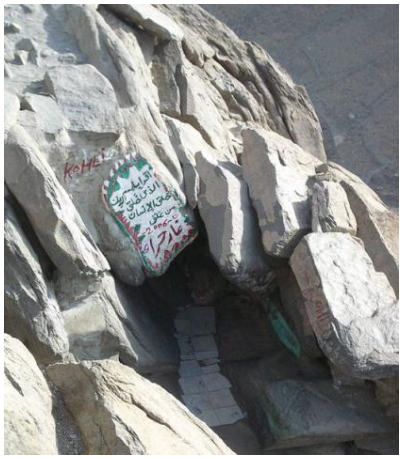
Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet

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The Black Stone

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Cave of Hira

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