

**5-3-1 Assignment:  
“Islam’s Origins” & “New Theories of the Koran”<sup>1</sup>**

**QUESTIONS**

1. What realities about Islam and the Koran have caused some historians to become “revisionist”?
2. How did the origins of Islam resemble those of Christianity, according to some historians?
3. How do the Koran and the Islamic tradition present a paradox?
4. What findings support the idea of Islam being closely related to Judaism and Christianity?
5. What developments could enable greater scholarly inquiry on the Koran and Islam’s origins?

Answers

1. *Very few sources exist that were written during or soon after Muhammad’s lifetime, and dating of the Koran is debatable. The text combines different writings—possibly spanning hundreds of years.*
2. *Christianity evolved slowly as Jews began to accept the apostolic tradition of Jesus’ teachings, eventually attracting Gentile believers, and a few centuries later determining the canon and the church’s theological parameters. Fred Donner asserts that in a similar fashion, Islam likely began as a “loosely defined community” of believers that included other monotheists, possibly Jews and Christians, focused on piety and righteousness.*
3. *The Koran is replete with monotheistic stories including such figures as Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, and Jesus. Their presence is difficult to square with Islamic tradition, which holds that Muhammad, “an illiterate camel merchant” (Stille p. 2), received the Koran in Mecca, a remote area of Arabia far from centers of monotheistic thought, and a place where Bedouins were worshipping idols.*
4. *Non-Muslim 7<sup>th</sup>-century records characterize Muhammad as a “preacher in the OT tradition” and his followers as “hagarenes”—descendants of Hagar and Abraham’s son Ishmael (Stille p. 2); 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>-century Christian records viewed Islam as an offshoot of their religion (Klein pp 2-3). Muhammad’s treaty with the Medinese says that Jews were included in his community.*
5. *Review of the earliest versions of the Koran may open the possibility of a “more tolerant brand of Islam” that sees ties to Judaism as well as Christianity (Stille p. 3).*

**TERMS**

<b>Muslim</b>	“One who submits,” a word used in the Koran to identify a monotheist, not necessarily only a follower of Muhammad (Klein p. 2).
<b>Hagarenes</b>	A term used in early documents for followers of Muhammad; it denotes descendants of Ishmael, son of Abraham and Hagar. (Stille p. 2)
<b>Hur</b>	Adjective (feminine plural) meaning “white,” which Islamic tradition has translated as “virgin,” but which Aramaic and early Arabic dictionaries cite as meaning “white raisin.” The latter definition fits semantically with the term “garden,” from which “paradise” is derived (Stille p. 3).

**SUMMARY**

Recent scholarly work indicates that Islam may be more closely related to Judaism and early Christianity than was previously assumed. Early documents show the presence of Jews in some Muslim communities, and the Koran contains numerous references to Biblical characters such as Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, and Jesus. The lack of clarity on the dating and provenance of the Koran, as well as the lack of detail on the early history of Islam, has made it difficult for scholars to define relationships between these early

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<sup>1</sup> See Works Consulted for bibliographic information on the two articles on which this assignment is based.

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monotheistic religions—but intensified study of the earliest versions of the Koran may open the way to a greater understanding.

#### WORKS CONSULTED

Klein, Asher. “Islam’s origins: Historian Fred Donner offers a new reading of an old story.” *The University of Chicago Magazine*, July-Aug. 2011. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/3naErex>.

Stille, Alexander. “Scholars Are Quietly Offering New Theories of the Koran.” *New York Times*, March 2, 2002, A1.