

Background Reading and Glossary

Name _____

Date _____

Jews Under Medieval Muslim Rule

In the 7th century, the Prophet Muhammad founded a new monotheistic religion, Islam, in Arabia. Within a hundred years, Muslim armies had conquered lands from Spain and Morocco in the west to Iran in the east. Most of the world's Jews now lived under Muslim rule.

Islam taught that Jews and Christians were **People of the Book**, communities that had received earlier revelations from the one God. Instead of being forced to convert, they were given the status of **dhimmi**, "protected people." Dhimmi paid a special tax, the **jizya**. In return, they could practice their religion, keep their synagogues and churches, and run many of their own affairs through their own courts and leaders.

Protection came with inequality. A set of rules known as the **Pact of Umar** limited what dhimmis could do in public. They could not build new houses of worship, display their religion openly, carry weapons, or dress like Muslims. Many of these rules were meant to make clear that Muslims ranked above non-Muslims. At the same time, the pact did not limit where Jews could live or what work they could do, and Jews took part fully in trade, medicine, and scholarship.

How strictly these rules were enforced depended on the ruler, the place, and the times. In Baghdad, Jewish academies led Jewish learning for the whole Jewish world. In Muslim Spain, Jews served as doctors, diplomats, and even government ministers, and wrote poetry and philosophy that are still studied today. But there were also periods of persecution. In the 12th century, the Almohads, a strict dynasty from North Africa, forced Jews and Christians in Spain and Morocco to convert or leave. Historians agree that Jews under Islam generally faced less violence than Jews in medieval Christian Europe, but they disagree about how to describe their lives. Was it a time of tolerance, of second class status, or both?

Glossary

Monotheistic	Believing in one God.
People of the Book	In Islam, Jews and Christians, who received earlier scriptures.
Dhimmi	A protected but legally unequal non-Muslim living under Muslim rule.
Jizya	A special tax paid by dhimmis.
Caliph	A ruler of the Muslim community.
Al-Andalus	The Arabic name for Muslim-ruled Spain and Portugal.
Almohads	A strict Muslim dynasty from North Africa that ruled Morocco and Spain in the 12th and 13th centuries.
Judeo-Arabic	Arabic written in Hebrew letters, spoken and written by Jews across the Islamic world.

As you read: Underline one right that came with dhimmi status and circle one restriction.