

A PELICAN BOOK

ALFRED GUILLAUME

Islam

This book provides the essential background to the emergence of Islam and of modern reforms in religious law in

Western readers can understand.



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ISLAM

BY

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

By Arabia its people understand the land enclosed on the north by the mountains of Asia Minor, on the south by the Indian Ocean, on the east by the mountains of Persia, and on the west by the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. The name itself is comparatively modern and is first used by classical writers. So far as our knowledge goes the first use of the name Arab is on the inscription of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, who in the year 853 B.C. defeated a coalition of small western states in which Ahab, king of Israel, took a prominent part, being supported by a certain 'Jundibu the Arab' who, as all recent writers have noticed, appropriately contributed a thousand camels to the allied contingent. From this time onwards kings and queens of the Arabs are mentioned sporadically in cuneiform tablets. These people inhabited the north of the peninsula. The first known use of the term by the Arabs themselves is on an inscription in the Nabataean script which records the exploits of a certain 'King of all the Arabs'. His rule cannot have been recognized farther south than central Arabia.

It can hardly be supposed that a people firmly rooted in North and South Arabia – the latter the Arabia Felix of the classical writers, – possessing a political and tribal organization and considerable military strength, had not a long history behind them, and we should expect to find some mention of them in ancient historical documents. But no such reference by name is to be found. Where we should expect to find Arabs, e.g. in southern Babylonia (c. 2600 B.C.);

in and around Egypt and the middle Euphrates (c. 2000); and in Palestine and Syria (c. 1400), we find that hordes of tribesmen notorious for brigandage, who were a constant menace to the civilized settlements, are mentioned. These people or peoples were known as Habiru (or 'Apiru) and are almost certainly to be identified with the Arabs. If that be so, then the Hebrews of the Old Testament were Arabs,¹ part of the ancient inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula. No convincing explanation of the name Arab has ever been proposed: but if we adopt this identification the meaning of 'Arab, a meta-thetical form of 'Abir, is 'nomad'. This identification is supported by the meaning which the plural *a'rab* = nomads often has in the Qurān and in the inscriptions found in South Arabia which mention bedouin.

With the ancient history of Arabia we are not concerned, though it is worth noting that men of Semitic stock inherited and developed the ancient civilization of the Sumerians on which the empires of Babylon and Assyria were based, and others reached a high level of culture in Phoenicia and South Arabia. The name 'Semitic' has been coined from Shem the son of Noah, the reputed ancestor of most of the inhabitants of Arabia: it is now applied to those who speak, or spoke, a form of the ancient Semitic language of which Arabic is the greatest living representative.

In historical times wave upon wave of Arabs have come up from southern and central Arabia and found their way into the settled lands of the fertile crescent, urged on by poverty and hunger. Settlements and oases can support only a limited number of inhabitants; the pasturage of the steppes can support only a limited number of camels and herds, and

1. For the genealogical, historical, and philological reasons for this statement, see my article in *PEQ*, October 1946, pp. 64-85.

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when that number is exceeded a war of conquest or annual raids on the settlements are the only alternatives to starvation. Apart from systematic raids on a large scale, almost every year groups of men from the desert came in and gradually settled down on the cultivated land to replace the victims of disease and epidemics. Thus men in the settlements often have relatives among the tribes of the desert, and though there is hostility because of economic distress, there is also a sense of kinship subsisting between them. As we shall see, this state of affairs had a profound influence on the rapid advance of the Muslims in the first century of the hijra,¹ and has determined the course of history to the present day.

The agelong caravan routes which traverse Arabia in all directions indicate that commerce was an important link between the desert and the sown land. In southern Arabia there was a highly developed civilization, Sabaean, Minaean, and Qatabanian, based on agriculture and the spice traffic; and trade with the outside world brought wealth and prosperity to its people more than a thousand years before the Christian era. The Arab kingdoms in the south dammed the water-courses, built castles and temples, and developed the agriculture of their country to a remarkable degree. They pushed their trade centres far into the north. The language of the southerners differed greatly from the Arabic of the northerners, which was to become classical Arabic, and they used a different script. The 'travelling company of Ishmaelites bearing spicery, balm, and myrrh going to carry it down to Egypt'² were engaged in this trade, and it is worth noticing that elsewhere³ they are called Midianite merchantmen.

At Petra until the second century A.D. there was a flourishing trade centre which controlled the caravan route from

1. See p. 19.

2. Genesis 37:25.

3. Verse 28.

South Arabia until the Nabataean kingdom was taken over by the Romans and became part of the Provincia Arabia in A.D. 105. These people occupied a large trading post at al-Hijr, south of Tayma. Their imposing sepulchral houses can still be seen there. They are mentioned in the Qurān (7:74) where it is said that they are dwelling-houses. Still farther north at Palmyra a powerful Arab state was founded and made famous by the beautiful and tragic queen Zenobia (Zaynab), whose memory still survives in Arab legend.

From this brief sketch of the Arabs it will be seen that trading as much as raiding formed the basis of their social and economic life. The former naturally was primarily the affair of the settled Arabs, though the nomads were equally concerned because the caravans had to pass through their territory and they shared indirectly in the profits that resulted by exacting payment for safe conduct through their lands. As we shall see, trading was the Prophet Muhammad's first occupation, and the end of his life was occupied with raids, to which latter a work by one of his earliest biographers is devoted.

In making a survey of the society into which Muhammad was born we cannot ignore the civilizations of Rome, Persia, and Arabia Felix as though the Arabs of what is now known as the Hijaz¹ – the district in which Mecca and Medina are situated – knew nothing about them. True, the bedouin of the interior were for the most part content to live their lives without regard to what was going on around them, but it must not be supposed that they were isolated. Until modern times news could travel only by word of mouth, or more rarely by letter, and it was the caravans which plied across Arabia in all directions to Syria, Egypt, and the Persian

1. In the time of Muhammad it did not run so far south as it does today.

border which brought back news of the outside world and also made the Arabs aware of the civilizations around them. Probably news was disseminated as rapidly as it was within the Byzantine empire itself. Those who could read and write were a small minority, but we have no reason to believe that the Arabs of the seventh century were unable to write their names, and indeed there is early evidence to the contrary. But there is no trustworthy record of any Arabic literature before the Qurān. The tribal bards were the repositories of history in the form of verse, which was repeated from generation to generation by professional remembrancers whose memories, by our standards, were often prodigious. Thus, for the study of the background of the society in which Muhammad lived we must rely on the Qurān itself, on what we know from classical writers, on what can be gleaned from pre-Islamic poetry that was written down centuries later, and on what early Muslim authors tell us about their heathen forefathers.

Mecca, like Petra and Palmyra before it, had become important and prosperous through its position in the centre of a trade route. Its merchants had commercial relations with both Persians and Byzantines and sent caravans twice yearly to the north and south. They also had dealings with Abyssinia on the other side of the Red Sea. The Quraysh, the tribe to which Muhammad belonged, formed companies which shared in the profits of these ventures, and the prophet himself travelled to Syria with a caravan carrying the wares dispatched by Khadija who afterwards became his wife. The town itself was governed by a committee of prominent merchants called the Malā.

The Qurān refers to, and is concerned with, three religious groups: heathens, Jews, and Christians. Muhammad's kins-

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men and predecessors were heathens; his neighbours numbered many Jews; Christians were known to him from personal intercourse. In Mecca itself there was apparently no organized Christian community, though, as we shall see, there were large settlements of Christians with their own bishops, churches, and monasteries within easy reach of Mecca; indeed it would have been impossible to travel north, south, or east from Mecca without meeting with them. Something must now be said about these three groups.

I. PAGANS

The customs of heathenism have left an indelible mark on Islam, notably in the rites of the pilgrimage (on which more will be said later), so that for this reason alone something ought to be said about the chief characteristics of Arabian paganism. It would seem that in general the ordinary Arab sat somewhat lightly to his religious duties. Sacrifices, which were for the most part communal feasts, were popular, and certain prophylactic rites were fairly widely observed, but at heart the Arab cared little for these things. He was, as he still is, fundamentally an individualist, and if a heathen god did not, or could not, help him to get what he wanted in life, so much the worse for the god. Nevertheless, a certain prestige attached to towns and oases which were centres of pilgrimage and religious ceremonies and, what was more important to the inhabitants, a good deal of profit accrued to the settlements thereby. This was especially true of Mecca with its annual pilgrimage to which the various tribes flocked in the holy month, to the no small gain of the custodians of the holy place.

It would be tedious to the reader to hear about the many

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minor gods in the Arabian pantheon, and therefore it seems best to confine ourselves to those mentioned in the Qurān.

The oldest name for God used in the Semitic world consists of but two letters, the consonant 'l' preceded by a smooth breathing, which was pronounced 'Il' in ancient Babylonia, 'El' in ancient Israel. The relation of this name, which in Babylonia and Assyria became a generic term simply meaning 'god', to the Arabian *Ilāh* familiar to us in the form *Allāh*, which is compounded of *al*, the definite article, and *Ilāh* by eliding the vowel 'i', is not clear. Some scholars trace the name to the South Arabian *Ilāh*, a title of the Moon god, but this is a matter of antiquarian interest. In Arabia Allah was known from Christian and Jewish sources as the one god, and there can be no doubt whatever that he was known to the pagan Arabs of Mecca as the supreme being. Were this not so, the Qurān would have been unintelligible to the Meccans; moreover, it is clear from Nabataean and other inscriptions that Allah meant 'the god'.

The other gods mentioned in the Qurān are all female deities:¹ Al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and al-Manāt, which represent the Sun, the planet Venus, and Fortune, respectively; at Mecca they were regarded as daughters of Allah. The cult of Al-Lāt was widespread. As Allah means 'the god', so Al-Lāt means 'the goddess'. She is mentioned by Herodotus; in old Arabian inscriptions; and in the pre-Islamic poets; and was the great mother goddess who, under various names, was worshipped all over the ancient world. Tāif, a town near Mecca, was a centre of her worship. For the Meccans al-'Uzzā, 'the mighty one', was the most important. Evidence for her wor-

1. The five gods mentioned in sura 71:22 need not be discussed here, but the verse is a valuable witness to the number of gods with whom the Meccans were familiar.

ship from the fourth century A.D. onwards is copious. Tradition says that in his youth Muhammad sacrificed a white sheep to her. When Muhammad took up arms against the pagans of Mecca, the latter took into battle images of Al-Lāt and al-'Uzza, and their battle-cry, 'Strength is ours, you have no strength' (*'izza*), was probably a taunt in reply to the Prophet's assertion that these gods had no real existence but were merely names which they and their forefathers had invented. Al-Manāt was a goddess of a different type who controlled the individual's fortune. All through Arabic literature there runs the thought of time the destroyer (the forerunner of Allah's decree), which settles man's fate, strive how he will, and Manāt seems to be a deified representative of the all-pervading mystery of life and death. She was sometimes a household deity.

The heathenism with which Muhammad came to grips was largely animistic in nature and similar in many respects to the most primitive form of religion in the Old Testament. Like the Old Testament prophets, Muhammad took steps to put an end to practices which were inconsistent with monotheism. Idols, that is to say images fashioned by hand, were probably brought into Arabia from the surrounding countries, or made from foreign models. These were systematically destroyed by missions dispatched by the Prophet himself for that purpose. The primitive worship of the Arabs was given to the god or spirit who was believed to inhabit blocks of stone, rocks, trees, or wells. These stones served as altars and the blood of the victims was smeared or poured on them while the tribesmen danced round the stone. Herodotus states very credibly that blood-brotherhood was established in this way. The devotees licked the blood, or dipped their hands in it, and thus a reciprocal bond held them

to one another and the deity to whom the stone belonged. Nilus, a Christian writer, gives a fairly full account of such a sacrifice to 'Uzzā. Though there is no trace of human sacrifice in the Qurān, it is clear from the authority just quoted and from early Arab sources that human beings were sacrificed to these gods in Dūma and Hīra.

The Qurān condemns the heathen rites at sacred stones, which it calls uncleanness and the work of Satan. It orders believers to have nothing to do with them, and forbids Muslims to eat the meat of an animal which has been slain at such a place. Gods were honoured by a kiss, or by stroking the rock or stone with the hand, the underlying idea being that the worshipper would acquire holiness by contagion. This is one of the practices which will be described later in connexion with the ceremonies of the Hajj or pilgrimage; but it is worth noticing here that there is a tradition that the Caliph 'Umar once said of the Black Stone which is kissed by the pilgrims, 'Had I not seen the Prophet kiss you, I would not kiss you myself.'

Trees were also regarded as sacred because a deity inhabited them, and the practice of hanging scraps of clothing, rags, and other personal belongings on the branches of a sacred tree persists to this day in country districts in the Near East, and much the same may be said of the cult of wells and springs. All these beliefs and customs are inconsistent with monotheism, but neither Christianity nor Judaism has succeeded in extirpating them entirely, so it need not surprise us if Islam has not been more successful.

Like the early Hebrews, the Arabs appear to have had no conception of a resurrection: at any rate it is clear from the Qurān that Muhammad's teaching of a physical resurrection was received with incredulity and ridicule; nevertheless,

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there must have been some belief in some quarters in a shadowy existence after death similar to the early Hebrew belief in Sheol, where the dead lived on in the gloom and darkness of the under-world conscious of their surroundings. In many parts of the world at a certain stage of cultural development it was the custom to provide the dead man with the means of life to which he was accustomed. He was given food, cooking pots, a horse, and sometimes servants to attend to his wants in the future life. It is extremely unlikely that the Arabs went as far as this, but if we may believe the statements of later Arab writers, a she-camel was tethered and left to die by the dead man's grave, the idea being that he would one day ride her again. The apostolic tradition of Islam condemns all such practices.

Temples were few and far between. Outside the famous sanctuary of the Ka'ba at Mecca there was a Ka'ba in Nejrān on the Su'ūdī-Yaman border (discovered by Mr Philby in 1936¹) and one at San'a. In these last two places Christian cathedrals once stood. Doubtless the extraordinary pains that were taken in their construction and decoration were directed towards weaning the pagan population from their agelong practices. In addition to these there were many sanctuaries served by priests who dwelt within their inviolate confines. The titles of many of the early Meccans indicate that the Ka'ba itself was given great honour. How the Prophet dealt with his ancestral sanctuary will be shown later.

2. JEWS

We do not know when Jews first settled in Arabia. There are three obvious possibilities: (a) the eighth, (b) the sixth cen-

1. St John Philby, *Arabian Highlands*, 1952, pp. 220 f.

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tury B.C., and (c) the first and second centuries A.D. (a) The first date would connect the Jewish community in Arabia with the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C. This is not so improbable as it sounds, since it is almost certain that the self-contained Jewish military colony in Aswān in upper Egypt, about which the world knew nothing until a few years ago, was founded just after the fall of Samaria, and consequently it is not impossible that some Jewish settlements in Arabia were due to fugitives fleeing from the old northern capital of the Hebrews. (b) The second date marks a much greater dispersion, when the large Jewish settlements in Mesopotamia which have survived to the present day were founded. (c) The last date is perhaps the most probable, because the Romans were so utterly ruthless in their repression of the Jews that few dared remain in Palestine, and Arabia offered a near asylum. The presence of Jews on the trade route from South to North Arabia is well attested in the Greco-Roman age. It is of course possible that homeless Jews or their enterprising merchant colonists entered Arabia from the eighth century B.C. onwards until the rise of Islam.

There was a large Jewish colony in the Yaman in pre-Islamic times, and they maintained an organized communal existence for centuries until they were brought to Palestine a few years ago. These Yamanite Jews certainly go back to the fourth century A.D., and at one time the ruling king had become a Jew. Two descendants of these people exercised a profound influence on Muslim tradition.

At the dawn of Islam the Jews dominated the economic life of the Hijaz. They held all the best land in the oases of Taima, Fadak, and Wadi-l-Qurā; at Medina they must have formed at least half of the population. There was also a Jewish settlement to the north of the Gulf of Aqaba. In the Hijaz

have been found Jewish tombs dating from the second and third centuries. These may well be brought into connexion with the statement of an Arab writer that when the Romans conquered Palestine bands of Jewish refugees fled to the Hijaz. Whether this writer is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in A.D. 70, or to the savage reprisals which followed the revolt of Bar Kokba in 136, cannot be determined, nor is the point important. What is important is to note that the Jews of the Hijaz made many proselytes among the Arab tribesmen.

The prosperity of the Jews was due to their superior knowledge of agriculture and irrigation and their energy and industry. Homeless refugees in the course of a few generations became large landowners in the country, controllers of its finance and trade. Apparently they 'cornered' the iron trade, for it was they who supplied arms, coats of mail, and agricultural implements to their neighbours for a suitable consideration. At Taima a Jew named Samuel controlled the fair to which the tribesmen came to buy and sell and to barter their women's woven work for arms and such rough tools as they needed, while at Medina the market was controlled by a Jewish tribe. Thus it can readily be seen that Jewish prosperity was a challenge to the Arabs, particularly the Quraysh at Mecca and the Aus and Khazraj at Medina. To the former tribe Muhammad himself belonged, while his supporters at Medina, to whom he was related by blood, belonged to the latter two tribes. When the Muslims took up arms they treated the Jews with much greater severity than the Christians, who, until the end of the purely Arab Caliphate, were not badly treated. The most probable reasons for this discrimination are (a) the Arabs' resentment of their economic exploitation by the Jews, and (b) the Qurān's scornful words.

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In the nature of things there is no need to give an account of Judaism. Everyone is familiar with its main tenets, though some stories which were current in what is called *midrash*, that is to say allegorical and sometimes fanciful explanations of scripture stories and Rabbinical tradition which have found their way into the Qurān, will not be familiar to the general reader.

3. CHRISTIANS

If we use the word Arabian in its widest sense, Arabian Christianity is as old as Christianity itself. In Damascus the place where St Paul was let down from the wall in a basket is still shown to visitors, and tradition associates the apostle St Thomas with the founding of the church at Edessa in Iraq. One would not suppose from reading the Qurān that an enormous number of Arabs were Christians. Though the bedouin of the Hijaz were predominantly pagan, many of the surrounding tribes had accepted Christianity, either whole-heartedly or as a matter of form. Apart from scattered Christian communities throughout the Arabian peninsula the three chief centres of influence were the Yaman in the south, Syria in the north, and Hira in the east. (Abysinia, to which some of Muhammad's companions were forced to flee, was Christian in communion with the Egyptian Monophysite church.) The Hijaz was invaded from the Yaman by the Christian general Abraha c. A.D. 570. The sura called *The Elephant* refers to this. In the Hijaz itself there were at least two Christian tribes, Judham and 'Udhra. In Mecca we hear only of individual Christians, though it is to be noted that they belonged to Quraysh. Tradition mentions a few others. It is credibly recorded that when Muhammad

entered Mecca in triumph in the year 630, paintings of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, among others, were still visible on the inner walls of the Ka'ba. He ordered all the paintings except that of the Virgin and Child to be expunged; this painting was seen by an eye-witness as late as 683, when so much of the Ka'ba was destroyed by fire that it had to be rebuilt.

An incidental indication of the presence of Christians in the Hijaz is to be found in the tradition which records that Muhammad wore tunics which had been given him by monks in the neighbouring desert.

As we shall see, when Muhammad reached manhood, Arab Christianity was split into rival camps weakened by persecutions and internecine war, and filled with utter detestation of the Greeks. The Arab Christians were drawn into quarrels with which they had little sympathy, though they displayed that loyalty to leaders who had won their respect and confidence which has always been a mark of the Arab people.

The old divisions of Arab Christianity – Greek Orthodox, Monophysite (Jacobite), and Nestorian – still survive to this day, though in much reduced numbers and in vastly different proportions. Of the first it is unnecessary to speak; the Monophysites held that there was only one nature in Christ who was the divine Word (notice the expression 'a word from Him' used to explain the office of Jesus in the Qurān) incarnate. Nestorians held that Christ was truly man but was born as God of the Virgin Mary, uniting in himself two natures. Christology is such an extremely complicated and technical subject that few but professional theologians can understand the niceties of the disputes, and no more need be said of it here.

The Monophysites were extraordinarily active in convert-