

Muhammad's Biography (part 1 of 12): The Conditions of Arabia Prior to Prophecy

Description: A brief look at the social and political state of the Arabian Peninsula prior to the birth of Prophet Muhammad.

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Arabia in that period was divided into three areas of influence. The north lived under the shadow of two great empires, the Christian Byzantium and the Zoroastrian Persia, empires in perpetual war so evenly matched that neither could achieve definitive victory over the other. In the shadows of these powers lived the Arabs of the northern region with divided and shifting allegiances.



The south was the land of the Arabian perfumes, called by the Romans 'Arabia Felix.' (present day Yemen and Southern Saudi Arabia) It was desirable property. The conversion of the Ethiopian ruler, the Negus, to Christianity had brought his country into alliance with Byzantium, and it was with Byzantine approval that the Ethiopians took possession of this fertile territory early in the sixth century. Before their ruin at the hands of a ruthless conqueror, however, the southerners had opened up the deserts of central Arabia to trade, introducing a measure of organization into the life of the Bedouin who served as guides for their caravans and establishing trading-posts in the oases.

If the symbol of these sedentary people was the frankincense tree, that of the arid zone was the date-palm; on one hand the luxury of perfume, on the other necessary food. No one could have regarded the Hejaz - '*where no bird sings and no grass grows*' - according to a southern poet - as desirable property. The tribes of the Hejaz had never experienced either conquest or oppression; they had never been obliged to say 'Sir' to any man.

Poverty was their protection, but it is doubtful whether they felt poor. To feel poor one must envy the rich, and they envied no one. Their wealth was in their freedom, in their honor, in their noble ancestry, and in the pliant instrument of the only art they knew, the art of poetry. All that we would now call 'culture' was concentrated in this one medium. Their poetry would glorify courage and freedom, praise the friend and mock the adversary, extol the bravery of the fellow tribesmen and the beauty of women, in poems chanted at the fireside or in the infiniteness of the desert under the vast blue sky, bearing witness to the grandeur of this little human creature forever traveling across the barren spaces of the earth.

For the Bedouin the word was as powerful as the sword. When hostile tribes met for trial in battle it was usual for each side to put up its finest poet to praise the courage and nobility of his own people and heap contempt upon the ignoble foe. Such battles, in which combat between rival champions was a major feature, were more a sport of honor than warfare as we now understand the term; affairs of tumult, boasting and display, with much fewer casualties than those produced by modern warfare. They served a clear economic purpose through the distribution of booty, and for the victor to press his advantage too far would have been contrary to the concept of honor. When one side or the other acknowledged defeat the dead on both sides were counted and the victors would pay blood-money - in effect reparations - to the vanquished, so that the relative strength of the tribes was maintained in healthy balance. The contrast between this and the practices of civilized warfare is striking.

However, Mecca was, and remains, important for an altogether different reason. For here lies the Kaaba, the first House' ever set up for humanity to worship their only God. The ancient Kaaba had long been the center of this little world. More than 1,000 years before Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, his ancestor, Abraham, aided by Ishmael, his elder son, raised its walls on ancient foundations. A certain Qusayy, chieftain of the powerful tribe of Quraysh, had established a permanent settlement there. This was the city of Mecca (or 'Bakka'). Close by the Kaaba ran the well of Zam Zam. Its origin, too, goes back to Abraham's time. It was this well which saved the life of the infant Ishmael. As the Bible says:

oeAnd God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her: 'What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Arise, lift up the boy, and hold him in your hand; for I will make him a great nation. And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy; and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.'" (Genesis 21:17-20)

Or, as the Psalmist sings:

oeAs they pass through the dry Valley of Baca, it becomes a place of springs; the early rain fills it with pools." (Psalms 84:6)

The circumstances of the time favored the development of Mecca as a major commercial center. The wars between Persia and Byzantium had closed the more northerly trading routes between east and west, while the influence and prosperity of southern Arabia had been destroyed by the Ethiopians. Moreover, the city's prestige was enhanced by its role as a centre of pilgrimage, as was that of Quraysh as custodians of the Kaaba, enjoying the best of both worlds. The combination of nobility " the Arab descent from Abraham through Ishmael - with wealth and spiritual authority gave them grounds for believing that their splendor, compared with that of any other people on earth, was as the splendor of the sun compared with the twinkling of the stars.

But the distance of time from the great patriarchs and prophets as well as their isolation in the arid deserts of the peninsula had given rise to idolatry. Having faith in the

intercession of lesser gods with the Supreme Being in their rites of worship, they held the belief that their deities possessed the power to carry their prayers to the Supreme God. Every region and clan, indeed every house, had a separate little 'god' of its own. Three hundred and sixty idols had been installed within the Kaaba and its courtyard - the house built by Abraham for the worship of the One and only God. The Arabs actually paid divine honors not merely to sculptured idols but venerated everything supernatural. They believed that the angels were daughters of God. Drunkenness and gambling were rife. Female infanticide was common where newborn girls were buried alive.

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