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## **Modern Iran: Caliphs, Kings, and Jurisprudents**

by

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### **The *Jāhiliyyah* Era**

The appearance of Islam at the gate of Iran was neither as dramatic nor as sudden as some historians would have us believe. Ctesiphon and the Arabian tribes had been in contact for a long time and a special Bureau of Arab Affairs, supervised by Arab administrators from al-Ḥīrah, had been established at the Sāssānid capital. In fact, the history of relations between Arabs and Iranians goes back to mythic times when Kaykā'ūs invaded what is referred to as Yemen today. At the time it was referred to as the land of the Ḥimyarites or Hāmāwārān. Kaykā'ūs defeated the king of Hāmāwārān and married his daughter, Sūdābeh. In historic times, Cambyses II received assistance from the Arab tribes in the Sinai Desert. They provided water and provision for his massive army so that he could invade Egypt and become the first Iranian pharaoh of Egypt. After he came of age, Sāssānid monarch Shāpūr II, pushed the Arab tribes that had invaded Baḥrain and settled on the coast of the Persian Gulf all the way back to Arabia. During the reign of Yazdegerd I (399-421), al-Ḥīrah became an Iranian vassal and, by defeating the Ethiopians, Khosrau I (531-579) took over Yemen.<sup>1</sup> Yemen remained an Iranian outpost until the rise of Islam. Therefore, by the time of the Arab invasion of Iran, Yemen, in the south, and al-Ḥīrah in the north of the Arabian Peninsula had already been clients of the Sāssānid Empire for some time.<sup>2</sup> What took the Iranians by surprise, if they were taken by surprise at all, was the rapidity with which Prophet Muḥammad rallied the disparate Arabian tribes and the dexterity with which he, and the caliphs who succeeded him, focused their energy on a single cause: the promotion of the will of Allāh.

The situation at the court of Khosrau II (Parvīz) was the opposite. The opulence of the court masked the king's distress, but everyone, especially the influential Arabs at the court, was aware that the *farr-i shāhī* (kingly glory) was leaving Ctesiphon. The Prophet's message, delivered by the learned and respected Muslim Abū Ḥudhāfah Aḥmad ibn Ismā'īl al-Sahmī, was only one of the bad omens descending on the House of Sāssān. Other bad omens included the breaking of a massive dam on the Tigris River near Ctesiphon and the appearance of a fissure in the arch of the Kasrā Palace. All of these pointed to the fact that yet another era of Persian dominance in the region was coming to an end. Who were the Arabs and what motivated them to invade the Empire of the Sāssānids?

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<sup>1</sup> Zarinkoob, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive account of Arab-Iranian relations in pre-Islamic times, see Zarrinkoob, 1975, pp. 1-4.

## **The Bedou**

In pre-Islamic times, populated by the *bedou*, Arabia was one of the least known regions of North Africa. The *bedou* lived within a tightly organized, self-sufficient community in the desert. The domain of the *bedou* consisted of vast expanses of sand-covered dunes with low-growing bushes. Although arid, following every rainfall, the desert bloomed with grass and flowers. In search of grass for their herds, the *bedou* migrated south in winter and returned to the north during the summer season.

The *bedou* were herders. They lived off what game was available in addition to their goats, sheep, and cattle. Their sheep and cows constituted their primary sources of protein; however, there was also a substantial contribution to the food supply by their camels, especially their rich milk.

The *bedou* lived in tents made of goat or camel hair. The family tent was divided into two parts: women's and men's quarters. The men's quarters was about one-fourth of the tent and had its own fire. Guests were entertained in that quarter. The women's quarters also had its own fire. The women regulated the affairs of the whole tent.

It is not the purpose here to give a detailed account of the life of the *bedou*. It is, however, necessary to understand the circumstances into which Islam was born. It is also important to examine the mind-set of those who took Islam to heart and exported it to the far corners of the globe. What was there in teachings of Islam that persuaded the *bedou* to collectively abandon their pagan gods for Allāh, accept to treat their women with respect, and abandon the practice of burying their daughters alive in the sand at birth? More importantly, what was in Islam that persuaded non-Arabs to give up their ancient religion and culture, embrace Islam, devote their efforts to it, and fight its wars?

The *bedou* had always held a prominent place for loyalty to their household, clan, lineage, and tribe. Islam, however, dictated a new type of loyalty: absolute loyalty to Allāh. Alongside their loyalty to their chief, the *bedou* had always emphasized their *‘Aṣabiyyah*, or Arabism. The new faith dictated a shift in the direction of faith to the message of Allāh. Drawing on the wisdom of their elders through consensus, a strong devotion to Arabism, and a united response to the call of the Prophet, the *bedou* were galvanized. Dreams of reaching the Paradise that Allāh had prepared for them led the *bedou* to the dream of ruling empires, possibly even the world.

Although politically and spiritually ready, socially, and to a degree economically, the *bedou* were not ready to step out of their *Jāhiliyyah* (AD 525-622) mind set. The *bedou*, up until the time of Islam, other than listening to recitation of poetry at the *‘Ukkāz* market and participating in raids on other tribes did not have any meaningful experience of culture. He did not have either the time or the required knowledge to cultivate religion. He was proud of his manliness and of the number of wars in which he had participated. Generosity, hospitality, and honor were his main concern. In sum, the *bedou* lived in a world of his own that was quite different from the world beyond Arabia.

The *bedou* had lived a nomadic life. They had occupied predetermined regions and had often lived in total isolation. But now those circumstances were changing, forcing the *bedou* to rapidly adjust his life to the new circumstances. What were the dynamics of this new world?

## Arabia

At the time of the rise of Islam, Arabia was divided into three geographical and cultural zones: the south, the center, and the north. The mountainous south, tucked between the sea and the desert, was virtually inaccessible. It was the home of the ancestors of the present-day Yemenites. For nearly fifty years before the rise of Islam, it was supported by Sāsānid Iran. Before that time, the *Ma'ārib* dam had contributed to its prosperity.

The center, consisting of the Ḥijāz and the Rub' al-Khālī (empty quarter), had great potential for development, especially, due to the reserves of animal, and manpower provided by the *bedou*. In fact, the landscape of Ḥijāz was lined with caravan routes and dotted with oases and towns connecting southern Arabia to Europe and Asia. The city of Mecca accommodated over 300 gods at its *Ka'bah* or cube. Allāh's three daughters: *al-Lāt* (the goddess), *al-Manāh* (fate), and *al-'Uzza* (power) were the most prominent of these pagan deities. Yathrib (later, Medīnat al-Nabī or the city of the Prophet), populated by the Aws, Khazraj, and some tribes of the Ghassānids, was politically active. Jews of Yathrib exerted a great deal of influence on the affairs of the city.

The north and the Fertile Crescent, although mostly arid, were the home of the *musta'rab* (Arabized) nomads who handled the region's wars as well as trade. They also participated in the region's cultural exchanges with Byzantium and Persia through the city of Palmyra, a major center of trade, in the north.

The people of the peninsula shared the same ethnic heritage, i.e., Semitic. Linguistically, they spoke the same language: Arabic. In the north, they spoke northern Arabic, the variety of Arabic that, once used in the *Qur'ān*, became the language of Islam and gained a great deal of prestige. In Yemen, they spoke Sabaean or southern Arabic.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the south had commanded a successful agriculture and, thereby, continued to enjoy a prosperous economy through trade. Using terraces and dams, the Yemenites irrigated large tracts of inhospitable land, mostly on the slopes of mountains. In addition to aromatic plants, the Yemenites also produced apricots, figs, almonds, grapes, peaches, wheat, barley, and millet.<sup>4</sup> With frankincense and myrrh in abundance, Yemen served as a major conveyor for the spice trade that connected India with the Byzantine and Persian Empires. In fact, Yemen not only was a port of entry for goods arriving from India and Somalia, but also a contributor to the trade with its own, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.<sup>5</sup>

In time, the spice trade that had promoted Yemeni commerce caused its downfall. In the sixth century, prompted by Byzantium, Ethiopia, interested in selling its ivory in the Byzantine and Persian markets, made a bid to control the Spice Route by invading Yemen. Helpless, the Yemenites called on Sāsānid Iran for protection. The Persians obliged. In 574, they expelled the Ethiopians and ended their 52-years of occupation.<sup>6</sup> For the next 50 years, however, until its inclusion in the Islamic Empire, Yemen remained under Persian occupation.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf., Hitti, p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Rashid, 1970, pp. 16, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Rashid, 1970, pp. 10-11. According to Herodotus, [Arabia is] the only country that produces frankincense, myrrh, cassia, cinnamon, and laudanum., Herodotus, Bk III, ch. 107; Hitti, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Rahman, 1892, p. 8.

As we shall see, the rise and fall of the Yemenite civilization is not only a major event in the history of the Arabian Peninsula, but it also plays a major role in the shaping of the future of Islamic, more particularly, Shī'ite Iran. Similarly, the Arabian Peninsula is important for our purposes because it is in this milieu that the *bedou* found their fortune and it is out of this set of circumstances that they rose to the pinnacle of success as the lords of an Empire stretching between Cordoba, in Spain, and Kāshghar and Ghazna in present-day Central Asia and Afghanistan, respectively.

The political dynamics of Pre-Islamic Arabia can be summarized in the interactions among three major forces: the Ghassānids, the Lakhmids, and the Kindah.<sup>7</sup> The Ghassānids, clients of the Byzantine Empire, were supported by the Ethiopians; the Lakhmids were allied with the Persians; and the Kindah cooperated with the Yemenites.



<sup>7</sup> Rashid, 1970, p. 25; Hitti, 1970, pp. 80-86.

In AD 500, the Ghassānids, a south Arabian tribe, the Banū Ghassān, migrated north and settled in the region of Damascus. Christian by religion, they became a vassal of Byzantium and agreed to protect the southern flank of the Byzantine Empire against the intrusion of Arab tribes. They also fought on the side of the Byzantines when they were fighting the Persians. By 581, as Byzantium began to lose its power, many Ghassānids defected to the increasingly dominating Arab tribes in the heartland of Arabia.<sup>8</sup> In the seventh century, the Muslim Ghassānids facilitated the invasion of Syria by the Muslim forces.

### **The Ma'ārib Dam**

The source of great prosperity and prestige for pre-Islamic kingdom of Yemen, the Ma'ārib Dam was built during the second Sabaean kingdom (ca. BCE 610-AD 115) near the town of the same name on the Spice Trade route between Yemen and the Mediterranean ports. One of the major engineering feats of its time, often referred to as one of the wonders of the ancient world, the dam gathered runoff water from three mountains as they crossed the same valley and formed a virtual lake. Originally, the dam was 580 meters long and 4 meters high. Later, its height was extended to 7 meters. The reservoir, alluded to in the *Qur'ān*, irrigated some 25,000 acres of land arranged as terraces on the side of the adjacent mountains.<sup>9</sup>

The dam broke in the fifth century AD and was repaired. A second breach in the sixth century, however, was beyond repair. It not only destroyed the entire irrigation system around Ma'ārib, but it also forced some 50,000 people to migrate to other parts of Arabia, as well as to Syria and what is present-day Iraq. Many famous southern tribes, including the Banū Ghassān, Banū Lakhm, and the Kīnda were dislocated at this time.<sup>10</sup> During early Islamic times we find them in regions as far away as Qum and Khurasān, in present-day Iran. The Shī'ite sect of Islam, as we shall see, benefited a great deal from their efforts.

The Lakhmids, also known as the Ḥīrah, were descendants of Arab tribes that had settled around the Euphrates River in the third century AD. There, they had built magnificent palaces like Kākh-i Khwarnaq (the Khwarnaq palace), Kākh-i Sefid (the white palace), and Kākh-i ibn Bajīlah (Ibn Bajīlah palace) and introduced literacy into the region. Some of the population of al-Ḥīrah was Nestorian Christian and some were Zoroastrians. The capital of the kingdom, near present-day Najaf, was also called al-Ḥīrah. The kingdom itself extended to the Persian Gulf.<sup>11</sup> The same type of master-client relationship that was explained for the Ghassānids was also true for the Lakhmids and the Sāssānids of Persia. In 605, a quarrel between Nu'mān III of al-Ḥīrah and Khosrau II resulted in the Lakhmids' disenchantment with the Persians. Consequently, Khosrau II dismissed the Lakhmid governor and installed his own *satrap* at al-Ḥīrah. The Arab tribes that populated al-Ḥīrah were not impressed. Predictably, in the seventh century, when

<sup>8</sup> See Rahman, p. 9, for details.

<sup>9</sup> Al-*Qur'ān* 34: 15-16.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., Hitti, pp. 54, 64.

<sup>11</sup> Zarinkoob, p. 35.

circumstances permitted, they defected to the dominating Arab side. They surrendered to Khālīd ibn Walīd without a fight and accepted to pay *jiziyah*.<sup>12</sup>

The conquest of al-Ḥīra in 633 was important because it was the Muslims' first acquisition outside of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>13</sup> In time, the Lakhmids facilitated the defeat of the Sāsānids at the Battle of al-Qādisiyyah.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the Kindah, in Central Arabia consisted of Jews and others affected by Judaism. During the wars of the Byzantines with the Persian Empire, this population controlled the region south of the Ghassānid and the Lakhmid territories. After the intense struggle for the control of Armenia exhausted the energies of Byzantium and Persia, and after the withdrawal of the Ghassānids and the Lakhmids from the scene, the Kindah retired to Yemen.

The departure of the two major empires of the time and their client states from the scene opened the way for the *bedou*. They poured into central Arabia from all corners and took control of the growing wealth and prestige of the region. By default, as it were, the *bedou* became the masters of the Spice Route and the directors of the caravan trade centered on the cultural hub of Mecca. More than any one, this transformation benefited the Quraysh tribe, the custodian of the Ka'bah, a sanctuary of pagan gods that was gradually becoming a center of monotheism. Prophet Muḥammad, born in 570, grew up under these circumstances. As a youth, he questioned the validity of the idols and as a prophet destroyed almost all of them.<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that Mecca and Ythrib were independent cities surrounded by tribes. The territory in which they were located, the Ḥijāz, did not have a central government. Neither did the surrounding tribes form any confederation of tribes.

## The *Jāhiliyyah* Culture

The word "*jāhiliyyah*" is used several times in the *Qur'ān*. It means both a lack of knowledge and a lack of wisdom. The *Qur'ān* uses it in the latter sense.<sup>16</sup>

The social structure of *al-Jāhiliyyah* Arabs consisted of three strata: the nobles, the *mawālī*, and the slaves. The nobles of the tribe were related to each other by blood. They formed the original progeny of the tribe and, in the main, were the main supports of the tribe. They fought the tribe's wars. In return, they enjoyed the full support of the tribe and were given many freedoms. It was of paramount importance for the nobles to abide by the rules of the elders. Insubordination resulted in expulsion. The names of those who broke the rules were announced in the bazaar and their actions were discussed at major meetings.

To continue their lives, those expelled had one of several options to choose from. Some sought support from other, often rival, tribes and aided those tribes when a conflict occurred between them and their original tribe. Some joined other tribes as *mawālīs*, some became brigands, and some lived their lives in poverty.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Zarinkoob, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Rahman, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Rahman, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Rashid, 1970, pp. 27-28.

<sup>16</sup> Binesh, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., Hitti, pp. 26-27.

As mentioned, some of the *mawālī* were nobles who had been expelled from their original tribe. Others were slaves who had been freed. To join a tribe, the *mawālī* had to sign a contract with a noble member of the tribe (*mawlā*). The noble member's clan would support him. During the time of the contract, the *mawālī* enjoyed the same rights as the other members of the tribe. Once the *mawlā* ended the contract, the *mawālī* was on his own. He had to, either find another *mawlā*, live in poverty, or become a brigand. The *mawlā-mawālī* relationship had a personal and a communal aspect. The personal aspect, as we saw, consisted of a contract signed between two individuals for a particular amount of time. The communal aspect consisted of a contract signed between two groups of people or two tribes (cf., treaty).

The slaves, a major part of the community, were traded in the bazaar. There were several types of slaves. Black slaves who were brought from Ethiopia and the Sudan, white slaves, who were Iranian or Byzantine citizens captured in war, and ordinary individuals who had lost themselves, often even their family, in gambling.

Slaves did not have any rights. They were a part of the inheritance. In general, they were given jobs—blacksmithing, carpentry, cupping—that were beneath Arab dignity. At home, they performed such hard tasks as farming, and animal husbandry. Slaves who participated in wars did not receive any of the booty. The master received his slave's portion. If a slave performed a highly profitable service for his master, he became a candidate for future freedom. If a slave did not like his master, he could ask to be sold to a different master.

Financially, the *Jāhiliyyah* society was divided into two major groups with some auxiliary subgroups. Here we will deal with two of those groups, the wealthy and the poor. The wealthy were engaged in trade and agriculture. Often the amount of wealth they commanded was considerable. The following is a record of the wealth of 'Uthman ibn 'Affan: 950 camels, 50 horses, a water well worth 12,000 *dirhams*, a savings account of 30,000,000 *dirhams*, and 200,000 *dirhams* worth of charity contribution. Similarly, a record of the wealth of 'Abd al-Rahman 'Awf reveals: 1,000 camels, 3,000 sheep, and 100 horses. When he died there was 80,000 *dirhams* in his will to be divided among his four wives.

The poor of the *Jāhiliyyah* society were the *bedou*. They were scattered all over the land and had to eke a living out of the desert sand. A good part of what they acquired was spent on sacrifices to the gods in the sanctuary in Mecca. The brigands, i.e., those nobles who were expelled from their original tribe and could not find the support of a new tribe, mounted raids on the caravans of the rich to sustain themselves and, possibly, some of their needy cohorts.

The hard part of being poor during the *Jāhiliyyah* days was not so much the lack of cash and access to amenities, but the shame with which poverty was associated. The way that the poor man's own wives, children, neighbors, the rich, and the others viewed him was often unbearable. *Jāhiliyyah* poets addressed the issue openly. Their moving odes on the subject provide us a glimpse of the discrepancy that permeated their society.

The *Jāhiliyyah* Arabs were well known for their generosity, bravery, loyalty, and chastity. They gave generously to their supporters and threw lavish parties to impress their friends and foes. Ḥātim al-Ṭā'ī (c. AD 605) is usually cited as

the personification of Arab generosity to guests.<sup>18</sup> It is said that he slaughtered a camel in honor of those who passed his tent!

Arab bravery was based on *murū'ah* (manliness, chivalry, virtue, courage). It depended on the individual's performance in the *raziyyahs* (raid) and his participation in the *ghazwahs* (war). The number of *ghazwahs* that a warrior had participated in indicated the amount of courage or *'ird* (honor) that that individual had accrued and the amount of glory that should be attached to his name.<sup>19</sup>

The *Jāhiliyyah* Arabs were steadfast in honoring their contracts and keeping their word. They hated being lied to or being double-crossed. In general, their loyalty was to Arabism—*al-'Arabiyyah* or *al-'Aṣabiyyah* (spirit of the clan), the tribal hierarchy, and the decision of the elders—consensus.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, in spite of their great wealth, some nobles lived pious lives. They served as a moderating element in this otherwise intensely contentious society of haves and have-nots.

Family Relations in the *Jāhiliyyah* era were very strong. The family unit was the basis of social life. The family lived in a tent. A number of tents constituted a *ḥayy* populated by a *qawm* (clan). The *qabīla* or *banū* was formed by the coming together of a number of *qawms*. The head of the *qabīla* was referred to as *shaykh*. The *shaykh* had to be of noble birth, brave, at least forty years old, rich, generous, and dedicated to the protection of the tribe.

#### **A Question of Demography**

It is well known that pre-Islamic Arabia did not have a large population. During the *Ṣifqah* event, for instance, only 8,000 warriors participated. The situation changed when Islam needed more warriors in the battlefield and when the economic sector needed more contributors. Then Arab men married more than one wife and had many concubines. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ḥakam Umrī had 150 sons and 50 daughters, Tamim ibn Mu'īz Fāṭimī had 100 sons and 50 daughters, and 'Umar ibn Walīd had 90 sons. 60 of them were warriors.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, Zoroastrian Iranians had some very strict rules for marriage. As a result, their number decreased as the Arab numbers soar.

They married many wives in order to create political ties with the elders of other tribes. In this regard, some men preferred to sire boys rather than girls. Boys could defend the family and the tribe against unruly individuals and opportunist tribes. Girls, on the other hand, had the potential of bringing shame to the family and the tribe. This and similar reasons prompted some fathers to bury their infant daughters alive.

In the life of the *bedou*, marriages were made among the members of the same lineage and among equals. They were arranged marriages; love was not a factor in them. Rarely an outsider was allowed to marry a *bedou*. There were a number of ways by which

<sup>18</sup> See Hitti, pp. 95-96 for further detail.

<sup>19</sup> Hitti, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Hitti, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Makki, 2005, p. 60.

a man could marry a woman. One way was a regular marriage; it was based on the payment of *mahr* (dowry) to the bride by the family of the bridegroom. Then there was *muta`ā* or marriage of convenience. This marriage was based on a set amount of money and a set amount of time. Children of *muta`ā* received inheritance.

Additionally, men could marry captive women without having to pay a dowry. They could also marry slave women at will. Neither the woman nor the children, if any, born to the latter union received inheritance. In fact, the children of such a marriage were slaves of their own sire. He could release them as he would release any of his other slaves. The most unusual, perhaps, was marrying one's own step-mother. Upon the death of the father, the step-mother was included in the inheritance.

Divorce was a man's prerogative; it could not be initiated by a female, unless she was ill-treated. In other words, a woman could leave her husband's tent and return to her father's tent.<sup>22</sup> But, considering the humiliation that such an act accompanied, it was not a situation a woman wanted to find herself in. A woman whose husband had died had to wait one year before she could remarry. The same was true for a woman who was divorced by her husband.

In general, during the *Jāhiliyyah* era, women experienced a bitter sweet life. As infants, they were destined to a live burial in the sand of the desert. This was a burden that both the infant and the mother had to carry. If an infant girl, under special circumstances, survived being buried alive, as a young girl, she was kept isolated. She had no recourse to the world of men except through her father and brothers. When she came of age, she had to move to the tent of a man who offered the most dowry. Unfortunately for her, this was where the most difficult phase of her life began. In the past she had been responsible for the honor of her family. Now she was responsible for the honor of her husband, as well as the honor of the family of her husband. In the larger picture, she was also responsible for upholding the honor of her clan, lineage, and tribe.

The same set of tough responsibilities, if performed well, brought her a great deal of esteem and satisfaction. As mother and wife she was honored profusely. The names of many chaste women graced the names of their families and clans.

Women shared their husbands' lives in war and peace. Often after the death of their husbands, they did not remarry and kept his memory alive among the members of the tribe, the old and the young. Some women joined convents and in that way kept the love between themselves and their husbands alive.

When there were no wars, women attended to their children and kept themselves occupied with household chores. Some worked in the farms and others spent their time in animal husbandry. Still others became traders. In time of war, women supported their men, carried water to warriors, and helped the wounded. Some women are known to have entered the battlefield as warriors.

### **The Religions of the *Jāhiliyyah* Era**

Although the term *Jāhiliyyah* means ignorance, in the case of Arabia we need to add an explanation. In pre-Islamic times, as we have seen, Yemen in the south of the peninsula, was highly civilized. It served as a major link on the Spice Route between the continents of Asia and Africa and Europe. With that in mind, it is logical to agree with

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<sup>22</sup> Unlike in the West, the new couple did not leave the family nucleus after marriage.

Philip Hitti and refer to the era as an era "without dispensation" or an era without a "revealed book" of its own.<sup>23</sup>

The Arabs of the *Jāhiliyyah* era, depending on the geographic area in which they lived, the tribe to which they belonged, and the influences that they received from their neighbors, adhered to several different sets of beliefs. Some were impressed by the sun, the moon, and the stars and worshiped them. Some, like those in al-Ḥīrah, Yemen, and Bahrain believed in the Iranian or Mazdian religions. They believed either in the duality principle (good versus evil, light versus dark) as did the Zoroastrians and the Manicheans or they believed in the eternity of Time, i.e., Dahrism or Zurvanism. In that case they believed that Nature brings life and Time takes it away. They did not believe in an either afterlife, or resurrection, as did the others.<sup>24</sup>

***Dīn-i Ḥanīf*** (pre-Islamic monotheism)

Among the Arabs of the *Jāhiliyyah*, a group appeared that rejected the idols kept in the *Ka'bah*, as well as the deities worshiped by the Jews and the Christians. They believed in a single god, the god of Abraham, a Resurrection Day, preventing people from doing evil acts, and a degree of *jabr* (predestination). For instance, some thought that God had compelled them to worship idols. Known as the *Ḥanīf*, they are the precursor to Muḥammad's followers and their belief in Allāh and the Oneness that Muḥammad preached. At the time, their devotion to one god undermined the *Jāhiliyyah* Arab's devotion to some three hundred idols they kept in the *Ka'bah*.<sup>25</sup> The *ḥanīf* thought that the idols, at best, could serve as an intermediary between God and man.

In addition to worship of totems, sun, moon, etc. and the worship of the god of Abraham, there were influences in the region from Christianity and Judaism. The influence of Christianity was by far stronger than that of Judaism. Christianity entered from the north, converting many in Syria and Iraq. In the latter area it clashed with Zoroastrianism. From there it traveled south and had followers as far as Yemen and Ethiopia.

Judaism entered Arabia after AD 70 when the Romans destroyed the Jews' temple in Jerusalem. They were centered mostly in Yathrib, Khayber, and Tima. Some moved away from Yathrib to Yemen. The Jews were wealthy, skilled in farming, jewelry making, trade, and banking. Nevertheless, for several reasons, they were not as successful in converting the Arabs to their religion, as were the Christians. One reason was that they thought they were a chosen people. This attitude clashed with Arab pride that saw farming, banking, and the like below Arab dignity. Additionally, Judaism had many rituals that were difficult for the *Jāhiliyyah* Arabs to follow, as well as certain traits that were not acceptable in Arab society of the time.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Cf., Hitti, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Cf., Salim, pp. 383-385.

<sup>25</sup> Salim, pp. 391-396; Hitti, pp. 107-108.

<sup>26</sup> For details, see Salim, pp. 386-390.

## Muḥammad

Since the life of the Prophet of Islam is available from many sources, we shall outline only a few highlights. That should provide enough background against which to present some related aspects such as the *Qur'ān*, the *Aḥādīth*, and the *Mi'rāj*.

Muḥammad was born in Mecca around AD 570 and died in Medīna on June 8, 632. He belonged to the clan of Hāshim of the Quraysh tribe. Little is known about Muḥammad's early life other than that he traveled with his uncle Abū Ṭālib who was a merchant. At the age of twenty-five, he was assigned the charge of the merchandise of a noble woman called Khadijah. Muḥammad's honesty impressed Khadijah and attracted her to him. They got married in 596. Khadijah was forty years of age. She brought Muḥammad two sons who died young and four daughters. One of their daughters, Fāṭimah, married 'Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib, the first future saint of the Shī'ites.

Around the year AD 610, Mecca was a divided city, split between the haves and the have-nots. Over the decades, the care of the community had been sacrificed to a pursuit of worldly things. In 610, Muḥammad received a dispensation from Allāh to destroy all idols that had attracted the wealthy of Mecca away from the needs of the community, and to establish the rule of Allāh on earth.

After the proclamation of Islam, Muḥammad faced stiff opposition, even from some of his own people. The opposition was to the degree that he was forced to leave Mecca—the Hijrah.

After many battles with the Meccans, Muḥammad finally established Islam and invited all the Arabian tribes to submit to the rule of Allāh

As the prophet of Allāh, Muḥammad initiated religious, social, and cultural development of monumental significance. He brought a monotheistic religion and a new way of life. More importantly, he brought the *Qur'ān*, with special moral guidelines, and answered special spiritual needs.

Muḥammad was humble. He did not claim to be anything but a messenger devoted to Allāh. He was sincere, eloquent, and greatly concerned with the well being of community. The Prophet loved three things: women, scents, and foods. He did not speak rapidly but he walked so rapidly that others had to half run behind him. He never ate reclining because he attributed that kind of attitude to the habit of kings. He had a special liking for sweetmeats, honey, cucumbers, and fresh dates.

Muḥammad's goal in creating and promoting Islam was the creation of a human community under divine rule or *Tawḥīd*. In his community, there was to be no place for discrimination on the basis of gender, color, and race. He intended to build that community with the help of the *Qur'ān*—the word of Allāh and *Sharī'a*, Islamic law derived from the *Qur'ān*.

### **The *Qur'ān***

The first verses of the *Qur'ān* were revealed to the Prophet in 610 AD in Mecca. The *Qur'ān* was written down partially during the lifetime of the prophet, mostly on palm leaves, animal bones, and papyrus. The companions of the Prophet and the first three Rightly-Guided Caliphs put the entire text together as a combined effort. The original text of the *Qur'ān* is with Allāh.

The *Qur'ān* consists of 114 *sūrahs* or chapters. Each *sūrah* contains a number of *āyahs* or verses. Altogether the *Qur'ān* contains 6,616 *āyahs* and 600,000 words.

The *Qur'ān* contains warnings of the end of the world, descriptions of the Judgment Day, and Heaven, and Hell. There are nearly 500 *āyahs* legislating marriage, polygamy, dowry, divorce, fostering, contracts, weights and measures, wills, and the like.

Main issue related to the *Qur'ān* is: Is the *Qur'ān* revealed or created? Muslims believe that the *Qur'ān* was revealed to the Prophet over 23 years. The rationalist Mu'tazilites (733-847) espoused that the *Qur'ān* was created.

The *Qur'ān* is translated into many languages.

During the time of the Prophet, the people of Arabia, all of them, underwent a unique education. Some became acquainted with the words of Allāh as they were produced as *wahy* in the Prophet's *dhihn* and as he pronounced them. Some became distantly cognizant of the word of God and the words of the Prophet. These people heard reports about the Prophet in the form of *aḥādīth*, something that came to play a pivotal role in the development of almost all aspects of future Islam.

### ***Ḥadīth* (pl. *Aḥādīth*)**

*Ḥadīth* is the body of laws, legends, and stories about Muḥammad's way of life, and also the things he said, or "sayings" that he elaborated on to make his choices and offerings of advice (cf., *wahy*, the words of God delivered by Muḥammad without alteration). Each *ḥadīth* consists of a *matn* (text) and a chain of *isnād* (documentation) defining the reliability of its *rāwī* (reporter of the *ḥadīth*).

The *rāwī* says: I heard from A, who on the authority of B, said that he (B) had heard on the authority of C, who had heard on the authority of D... That the Prophet of Allāh had said, "It is good to eat dates."

"It is good to eat dates" is the *matn* or text of this *ḥadīth*. A, B, C, and D... form the *isnād* or chain of the *ḥadīth*. Excellent, good, weak, and unreliable would be evaluations to be attached to this item, depending on how it is evaluated.

Some of the things that people heard were easily understandable. Some, on the other hand, bordered on the incredible, even for the *bedou*. Between the death of the Prophet

and ninth century AD, scholars traveled long distances to hear the actual words of a *ḥadīth*. Some collected the actual words and deeds and some made fabrications of their own. Only certain scholars were given the authority to decide whether a *ḥadīth*, one dealing with the Prophet's Night Journey, for instance, was incredible, authentic, or a fabrication.

### **The Mi'raj (ascent to heaven)**

Some time before the *Hijrah* (AD 622, departure of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina), the Prophet experienced the *Isra'* (night journey) and the *Mi'raj*. The original account is quite sketchy, but tradition has supplied some detail.

The Prophet was sleeping in the sanctuary next to the *Ka'ba* (cube with the black stone) when the angel Gabriel woke him and led him to a swift flying animal with human face called *Burāq*. Mounted on *Burāq*, the Prophet went through the sky to Jerusalem where he prayed at the temple of Solomon with Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others.

There, two vessels containing wine and milk were offered to him. He chose milk. Gabriel said to him that he had chosen the primordial path for himself and his people. Carried by Gabriel, Muḥammad rose to heaven from the Temple Mount, Holy of Holies "Farthest Mosque." (The Dome of the Rock sanctuary stands there today.). He ascended to the Divine Presence through the "seven Heavens," separating the non-manifest from the manifest. Both Heaven and Hell are described.

In Heaven, he encountered those he prayed with but now on the ascension to spiritual realities. At the end of the ascent was the "Lote Tree of the Uttermost Limit," the limit of being before the Absolute. Here he received the command that people should profess prayer 50 times each day. Moses advised him to request a reduction; eventually it was reduced to five.

The Qurayish mocked Muḥammad. But Abū Bakr accepted the account as true. This earned Abū Bakr the title "*al-Ṣiddīq*" (truth-witnessing).

The journey from Mecca to Jerusalem is known as the *Isra'*. The ascent from Jerusalem to Heaven is the *Mi'raj*. Together they are known as the "Night Journey."

The actual date is not known but A.D. 620 is the most mentioned. The *Mi'raj* is often celebrated on the 27<sup>th</sup> of Rajab.

The Night Journey has been subject of discussion for centuries. Was the journey physical or spiritual? Was *Burāq* a human beast or a spiritual reality in worldly terms?

Meeting with other prophets and the establishment of 5 prayers were also controversial.

### **Understanding Islam**

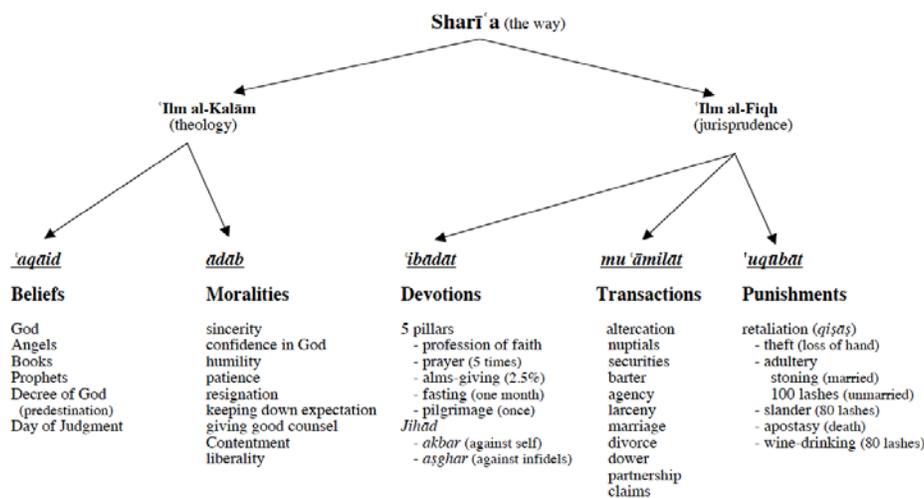
Islam is understood at three distinct levels. *Sharī'a* (the law) deals with man's everyday life and rituals he should perform in the community. It distinguishes right to property. Yours is yours and mine is mine. *Ṭarīqah* (the path) regards man as an individual longing

to reach his beloved by traversing stages and stations. On the way to the beloved, he gives up his rights. Yours is yours, mine is yours, too. *Haqīqah* (the truth) deals with man and the Ultimate. Here the level of *maʿrifah* is so high that there are no discussion of rights. There exists neither mine nor yours.

### The *Sharīʿa*

The *Sharīʿa* does not differentiate among criminal law, civil law, and family law. The primary source of the *Sharīʿa* is the *Qurʿān*. *Aḥādīth*, the *Sunnah*, and silent approval are also used. Subsidiary sources are *qiyās* (analogy with a known case), *ijmāʿ* (consensus), *raʾy* (opinion), and *ijtihād* (independent reasoning, Shīʿite).

The *Sharīʿa* is divided into: theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*) and Jurisprudence (*ʿilm al-fiqh*). The first covers beliefs (*ʿaqāid*) and morality (*ādāb*). The second covers devotions (*ibādāt*), transactions (*Muʿāmilāt*), and punishment (*ʿuqūbāt*). The following illustrates the subdivisions of theology and jurisprudence.



### Islamic *Sharīʿa* Law

During the time that the Byzantine and Sassanid empires were at war, each diminishing the power of the other, a young, belligerent, and combative society was taking shape in Arabia. This was a Muslim society in which discrimination was a socio-political worldview. In it Arabs discriminated against Arabs on the basis of tribal superiority and Muslims discriminated against non-Muslims on the basis of ideology. Even older Muslims, i.e., those who had become a Muslim a few months ago discriminated against the new converts on the basis of seniority. In the eyes of all of them, the non-Arab—Sabaean, Roman, or Iranian—ranked slightly higher than a slave. As *mawālī*, they were assigned to menial tasks such as the postal services, accounting, bookkeeping, and farming. They were assigned to tasks that were considered to be beneath Arab dignity. What were the root causes of this behavior?

According to Islam, the world is divided into two abodes: the abode of peace, or *dār al-Islām*, and the abode of war, or *dār al-ḥarb*. Another name for the latter is the abode of the irreligious, or *dār al-kufr*. Both the *dār al-Islām* and the *dār al-ḥarb* had laws and regulations according to which society was organized and the individual's role was

defined. In the *dār al-Islām*, although in the eyes of Allāh all Muslims were of equal standing, a distinction was made between those who had accepted Islam before the *Hijra*, especially those who had emigrated with the Prophet, leaving their families, homes and businesses, and the Arabs of Medīna who, necessarily, accepted Islam after the *Hijra*.

The Muhājirūn or emigrants, about 150 in number, were a privileged population in that all their sins were automatically forgiven.<sup>27</sup> In the wars, they received the lion's share of the booty to compensate for their losses in Mecca where they had promoted the message of Allāh and protected His messenger. Additionally, as the most esteemed members of the *'ummah* (community), they were very active in the succession process, both as promoters and as potential office holders.

The population of Medīna, after the entrance of the Prophet to that city, was divided between the *Anṣār*, or helpers, and the *Munāfiqūn* or hypocrites. The *Anṣār*, although instrumental in saving the life of the Prophet and, thereby, preserving his message, were rarely included in the succession deliberations. In fact, as a rule, they were not included among the candidates for succession. The requirements for consideration were to be knowledgeable, just, capable, sound in body and mind, and from the tribe of Quraysh. All these requirements were within human achievement except the last. The *Anṣār* could console themselves by taking pride in their pre-Islamic ties to the civilization of southern Arabia, but within the *dār al-Islām*, their status remained low. In fact, in a formal division of the *'ummah*, the caliph 'Umar placed the *Anṣār* in the second category among those entitled to hold possessions of their own. Below the *Anṣār* were the *Munāfiqūn*, i.e., those among the people of Medīna who called themselves Muslims, but who, in reality, endeavored to sabotage the faith. We shall return to this aspect in the context of Islamic conquests.

A key concept for understanding the meaning of faith (*īmān*) in Islam, at various levels and during different historic eras, is the compound concept of *tavallā* and *tabarrā*. *Tavallā* is from the root *wly* and *tabarrā* is from the root *br'*. The former means agreement in friendship, belief, and intent; the latter means seeking distance in friendship, belief, and intent. In the case of *tavallā*, in the early days of Islam, the friendship discussed was a person's friendship to Allāh and by extension to His Prophet. Allāh reciprocated such friendship by blessing the individual. In the case of *tabarrā*, an individual sought distance from Allāh or His Prophet. Allāh, in turn, withdrew His blessing from the individual.

As can be seen, love and hate towards Allāh were at the core of *tavallā* and *tabarrā*; they engaged the attention of the faithful fully. The question is where does this intense love and hate originate? The concept enters Islamic theology from the *Qur'ān* and has been interpreted by different scholars differently. For instance, Zamakhsharī believes that *tavallā* and *tabarrā*, like prayer, fasting, alms-giving, and pilgrimage to Mecca, are among the principles of Islam. He believes those befriending infidels automatically deprive themselves of the blessing of Allāh. In other words, for him, *tavallā* and *tabarrā* serve as a touchstone for identifying the true believer.<sup>28</sup>

In the early days of Islam, the true believer had to show his sincerity in faith by performing the act of acceptance twice. Once, by testifying that he loved Allāh and His prophet. This love had to be from the heart, expressed verbally, and backed up in action

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<sup>27</sup> *Qur'ān*: iii, 105.

<sup>28</sup> Zamakhsharī, pp. 345-46.

by following the *Sharī‘a*, participating in community activities and, when necessary participate in *jihād*. He also had to testify that he would detest those who do not love Allāh and His prophet. The first act was *tavallā*; the second was *tabarrā*. In other words, *tavallā* opened the door for the potential faithful to enter the *dār al-Islām*. *Tabarrā* welcomed him in the fold and solidified his position. From then on the new convert potentially hated all those whom he had left in the *dār al-ḥarb*. They were, theoretically at least, among his potential enemies and objects of hate.

Al-Ṭūsī regarded any leniency towards the infidel unacceptable. He regarded only fathers and brothers of the faithful, if they had remained in the *dār al-ḥarb*, were worthy of affection.<sup>29</sup> Fakh al-Dīn Rāzī stated that friendship with the infidel to the point of gravitation to his belief was not permitted, but friendship with the infidel as an ethical nice gesture was allowed.<sup>30</sup>

As we shall see, *tavallā* and *tabarrā* cover a vast spectrum of activity in the life of the faithful. Over the centuries, it has played a major role in bringing in converts to the faith and keeping them. We shall attend to the nuances of this concept as it changes to accommodate the needs of various Muslim communities, in the course of this study. At the present, however, our focus is the function of *tavallā* and *tabarrā* during the early days of Islam, when it was a simple but potent concept. After accepting Islam, the individual was obliged to love Allāh and accepted that Allāh reciprocated his love with blessing. Additionally, he had to hate, or at least to seek distance (*tabarrā*) from those who did not love Allāh. In other words, as a convert, he had entered an enclave in which everyone loved Allāh (a *tawḥīdī* enclave) and where everyone who did not belong to the enclave was an enemy.

One can easily guess the type of tension that this love, and this failure to love, could have generated in early Islamic communities? *Tavallā* and *tabarrā* had brought Arab families, even members of the same family and tribe that had loved each other dearly, face to face in battles like Uḥud, Badr, and the like. This is not to mention the hatred generated against the members of other faiths that lived among the early Muslim communities, or in the neighborhood of the new converts.

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<sup>29</sup> Al-Ṭūsī, vol. 5, p. 195.

<sup>30</sup> Razi, vol. 8, pp. 11-12.