

Background Of The Birth Of Islam

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This text explores the social, political, and cultural climate of Arabia before the advent of Islam. The author provides a detailed analysis of the religious and cultural practices of the pre-Islamic Arab society and highlights the significance of the Prophet Muhammad's message of monotheism and social justice in that context. The book also delves into the early history of Islam and the challenges faced by the Prophet and his companions in spreading the message of Islam.

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Preface

The well-known writer and analyst of historical developments, the late Martyr of Islam, Ayatullah S. M. H. Beheshti, better known as Shaheed Beheshti to his innumerable admirers, both in Iran and abroad, narrates in an interesting free style the historical conditions attending upon the birth of Islam. In his book of the same title, "Background of the Birth of Islam" he sets forth the sociological, political and religious conditions in the wide area surrounding Arabia. Probing deeply into the ancient history of the neighbouring peoples and states and the two great imperial powers of the day, namely Persia and Eastern Roman Empire, as well as the Yemen, Egypt, Abyssinia, Jordan and Syria, Shaheed Bcheshti carries the reader on a wide-ranging journey around those ancient lands. Narrating skill fully the captivating tales of the fire-worshipping Zoarastrians and Mani and Mazdak religions of ancient Persia, the influence of Christian church in Egypt and Abyssinia and the pagan tribes of the interior of the Arabian Peninsula, the writer brings out the essentials of the socio-political factors which lead the more pronounced effects of the early days of what was to become the universal faith of Islam.

The book comprises a series of lectures delivered by Shaheed Beheshti during the years 1966–7 in the Hamburg Islamic Centre. Addressing predominantly a group of Iranian students in Germany every Saturday he attracted a general audience of international students and others interested in Islam. The last of those lectures was delivered on 28 October 1967. In the opening chapters of his book, Shaheed Beheshti has delved at some length on the characteristics of an appropriate research methodology to deal with religious subjects which he then follows in setting out his geographically distributed chapters concluding each chapter with brief question answer discussion and conclusion.

Undoubtedly this brief work will be a valuable addition to his other numerous writings and prove an inspiration for all while reflecting his devotion to research study and deep insight. May his soul ever rest in peace.

S. T. H. Khwarazmi

Method Suitable For Theological Research

The topic under discussion is understanding Islam and the world Muslims. But what I wish to discuss first is what research methodology is suitable for theological discussion; or, in other words the approach is research in religious matters.

Discussion of any subject itself dictates when that the method should be appropriate to that subject. For example, today, when a researcher wishes to discuss and carry out research of a particular disease, he selects a particular methodology, makes a survey of the symptoms and effects of the disease and its treatment, and recommends that a number of patients suffering from that particular disease should be placed under observation and subjected to various clinical tests of their tissues, blood, urine etc. and analysed to prepare a scientific table in order to diagnose the peculiarities of that disease and the manner of its treatment, and identify the bacterial factors and establish the cause of infection. Today if someone wishing to establish the symptomology of the disease and arrive at a diagnosis, instead of employing the necessary means such as well-equipped laboratories and hospitals, statistical data, and experiments on animals and human beings, declared that for the diagnosis he has decided to proceed by conducting a nightly study of the stars for forty nights past midnight to discover the symptoms and cause of illness and the procedure for treatment of that disease, he will be made fun of in the scientific circles.

He would be told that in choosing this course, even if he went to a well-equipped observatory to study the movement of the stars, their form, and how they rise and set, such activities and thoughts would not bear even the slightest effect on the patient, or the cause of his disease, on its effects nor its treatment. Or if he were to declare that for the purpose of studying this matter he had decided to place

an astrolabe in front of him and in accordance with special signs and calculations provided by the astrolabe and even computing by the art of arithmetical numbers, he will discover the cause and effects of that disease and its cure, again science would laugh at him, and say to him: To identify a disease as far as human intellect has been able to establish requires that a study of the patients be made and laboratory tests and experiments be conducted and their results compared in order to diagnose that disease.

If someone declares in a session how nice it would be to secure some information about the way the people lived in Indonesia three thousand years ago, and if the interest of those present in the session was aroused in studying the precise details about the life and beliefs of those people scientifically and thus, undertake a scientific project, naturally we would ask them about their approach to this research. If they answer that they have decided to confine a number of Indonesians in a hospital and give them blood tests in order to analyse these people's life three thousand years ago, this, too, would provoke laughter. For such proceedings as the blood and tissue tests, no matter how useful those might be for the diagnosis of a disease or its treatment, yet it would not be of the slightest value for learning about the life of Indonesians who lived three thousand years ago.

Let us take a step further. Among the various political systems which is the best system for organising and administering a society, the communist or socialist or the capitalist one; which is more valuable and beneficial from an economic point of view. Either democratic or dictatorial forms among the existing political systems are more suitable? How should a researcher set about this task? Someone might suggest that observation would be the best way to clarify this problem.

If we were to ask how could observation be applied, they would answer by carrying out calculations about the 'physics' of the society and see what form the society and its organism should take. But the research methodology used by an atomic scientist for atomic research would hardly be practicable for a study of various social systems, and its conclusions would be irrelevant. Thus, it is quite evident that the method chosen for the study and research in any subject must be appropriate for that subject.

A Methodology For Research In Theological Topics

The foremost issue in our discussion is what method without any prejudice, is suitable for gaining an understanding of a religion? In my opinion the proper method for an understanding of a religion is to get hold of the original source material of that religion, and work on it in the way of research in narratives and traditions – neither experimental nor intellectual approach – but rather as in the study of history which in modern methodology is called 'Historical Research Methodology'. Working on the reliable sources of that faith we can gain an understanding of it whether we believe in that religion or not.

Let us take the example of a religion which we do not believe in. For instance, wish to study Buddhism and know what Buddhism is. Neither intellectual, mathematical or scientific discussions, nor physical or chemical arguments would produce any result. Astrological or celestial discussions would equally be of

no value. The correct way to understand Buddha's laws would be to refer to reliable historical sources, and evaluate them from the viewpoint of authenticity and validity, and then compare them, and gather all that has been for and against the Buddhist faith, and through a comparative study draw scholarly conclusions about what Buddhism really is, whether we believe in it or not. This is the first consideration about understanding any religion.

Suppose we wish to know what Judaism is, and what is the religion of the Jews. Here exist two aspects: either the object is to know what the present-day Jews believe in and what are their actions and beliefs, or the purpose may be to know what the original Jewish faith was at the time of its appearance, and what had (Moses) Musa ('a) delivered to the Israelites as a religion. There are two different methods for these two aspects.

The research into the religion Moses brought for the Israelites, has no relation with physics, chemistry, mathematics, celestial aspects and the rest. Research in this aspect requires close study of the Old Testament, the interpretation of the Old Testament, and the books written about this faith by the contemporary Greek and Egyptian historians because unfortunately no other sources are available. To proceed with our study, we collect these sources make a comparative study taking into account all pros and cons about this faith to be able to conclude, in a scholarly manner, what had Musa ('a) really delivered.

But if the object were to understand the Jewish faith in the contemporary world, we should send a number of investigators to various parts of the world to see how the Jews practise their religion in their everyday lives. We should study their publications in various languages, interview their religious leaders, and collate all the information gathered to reach conclusions about the Jewish ideology and their practice in the present-day world.

Similarly with regards to Islam, if we wish to study it, irrespective of being Muslims, there are two approaches: firstly, when we wish to know what the Muslims believe in and how they practise it, and, secondly when our purpose is to study the Islamic faith, namely the nature of Islam which was delivered by Muhammad (S) Ibn Abdullah. If we wish to study the Muslims of to-day, or those of one, two or five centuries ago the approach is the same. To study their state to-day, we should travel to various countries. In this respect the Europeans adopt the proper method, and thus, most of their writings are accurate, since they travel to various places, and observe things closely, make personal contact, ask questions, take pictures and make films, and so they declare that the Muslims of certain regions live in such and such a manner. Of course, sometimes they make hasty judgment after visiting only a few towns and villages and announce their views, whereas such a conclusion does not conform to a scientific methodology. what they can conclude after such insufficient visits and observation is that in such and such villages and towns Muslims live in such a manner and not generalise it to include the entire Muslim population of the world, since such a generalisation would be incorrect and contrary to the scientific method.

If we wish to say what kind of Islam was brought by Muhammad (S) for mankind from Allah, we should first gather all the reliable sources including the Qur'an, traditions, contemporary history and writings of the Prophet's time, even those opposed to the Prophet, and after a thorough study, comparative research and evaluation conclude that this is what Muhammad (S) introduced as Islam. There is no other way, since none of the other scientific or investigative research methods bear any relation this topic which deals with the original form of a religion and its present-day practice.

How To Come To Believe In Religion?

The next issue is related to one's desire to accept a religion, or when someone sincerely wishes to follow a certain religion and be convinced of his choice. How should one proceed in such a case? In my opinion, in this case there is but one way and that is that once one out of conviction declares, "I believe firmly that so and so is a Prophet of God and what he proclaims is based on divine revelation, and he quotes the words of God. I believe in the sayings and teachings of this Prophet; I affirm that all these are true."

The point that merits attention is that when a person accepts a religion, the basis of his conviction is that he regards the Prophet to be a true Prophet and that his source is incontrovertible and certain. He knows that the Prophet speaks the truth. No scientific reason is needed to substantiate the Prophet's proclamation since the fact of his being a prophet is in itself sufficient reason. The Prophet's being righteous or that someone believes in him may not be scientific reasons but support his being a prophet. If one should accept the words of a prophet on the basis of sufficient scientific reasoning, it is fine and there is no harm in it, but this is not faith and we cannot call it religious conviction. Religious conviction means accepting the words of the prophet because he is a prophet. If I declare that Islam is a true religion and base this assertion on certain wise and ingenuous laws of Islam, it is fine there being no harm in it, indeed it is highly desirable, but yet it cannot be termed religious conviction. If, for example, on the basis of this Islamic law that ablution and taking a bath is necessary after sexual intercourse, I should enumerate a number of advantages and benefits for this bathing from the hygienic, medical and spiritual points of view, it would be fine and there is no harm in it. But should a polluted person resort to bathing because of those benefits, his action would not be approved as a religious obligation, since his washing would resemble washing the hand when it is dirty. Bath after a sexual intercourse is obligatory for every Muslim because Prophet Muhammad (S) ordered it and all Muslims follow it because Muhammad (S) is the Prophet.

Principally this is the proper religious attitude and belief; nothing else would be called a religious attitude whether a religion is true or not, and whether Islam be a true faith or otherwise. Therefore, a religious attitude with regard to this matter for a Muslim is that wherever he performs a sexual intercourse, he is obliged to take a bath and he does so because the Prophet said so. But if he resorted to reasoning, saying that pollution held many disadvantages on account of exudations from the root of every single hair and hence bathing was a wise and advisable thing to do and then added a number of other benefits

for his action, no harm is done but then what is the real motive behind cleansing the body for a Muslim? Is it on account of these benefits and qualities, or because the prophet said so? What motivates a Jew to stop work on Saturdays? If you ask him why he doesn't work on Saturdays, he answers that Moses ('a) has said so. It would not be right to call the Jew ignorant or stupid from a scientific viewpoint. Or should we then expect him to ponder philosophically about this matter in search of an answer.

With regard to the second point which is related to the belief in religion, the proper course is that as the first step using deep reflection and reasoning one should discover convincing reasons as to the existence of a God and then believe that Abraham ('a) or Moses ('a), or Jesus ('a) or Muhammad (S) is the Prophet of God. These two steps should be taken with the aid of intelligence and reflection. It is these two stages which warrant the application of our intelligence. If a person's reflection, intelligence, wisdom and knowledge fail him in securing a belief in God and in a prophet of God such as Moses ('a) or Jesus ('a) or Muhammad (S) or Abraham ('a) or Noah ('a) or in Buddha as a prophet, or in Zoroaster as a prophet, it would mean failure in his first step. But if after reflection, reasoning and applying his intelligence he developed a belief in one God and in a prophet of God, then the steps that follow would require no intellectual, or scientific reasoning, since thenceforth every word of the prophet would have validity for him and he would act accordingly. On the other hand, whosoever, in spite of convincing reasons, fails to comprehend that these are indeed the Prophet of God has lost in the first step.

Thus, the proper methodology suited to theological discussion is that while discussing belief in God, in a prophet and prophethood, we can apply intellectual and the so-called scientific reasoning¹. But as we descend from the level of God and prophet, and come to discuss such problems as the reason why pork was forbidden, our answer is: Because it is forbidden in accordance with such and such a verse of the Qur'an. This is sufficient reason and nothing more remains to be said. When they ask what is the reason for such and such a form of government in Islam, we answer: Because such and such a tradition, or such a historical record or such a verse of the Holy Qur'an say so. Or we may say that according to such and such a verse of the Qur'an, such form of Government is wrong in Islam.

There is no room for such discussions as are normal for social issues. Of course, it would be valid to say that we ought to understand each of these injunctions of Islam, since many of them have been misunderstood, or wrongly interpreted or not understood at all. This would be another approach. For instance, all of us accept the question of slaughter (of animals to food), but it is another matter to ask about its underlying philosophy and what has Islam ordained about it.

Let us choose a better example to make the subject clearer, namely the question of pronouncing the marriage vows or the marriage rites. Why is it that the marriage vows make a man and a woman lawful for each other? The answer is: Because this verse and that tradition say so. This is a sufficient reason. But then: What are the marriage vows? To comprehend this matter fully, it needs to be explained. In Hamburg a man and woman came to be married, both of them were Iranian Muslims. When I spoke to them about the matrimonial vows and explained the term and recited it to make their marriage legal.

When the rites were over, they said: “we wish someone had explained these things to us in Iran”. I asked how was that? They said, “what we have seen in Iran is that a number of men and women get together and a priest comes along and recites a number of Arabic phrases which no one understands, and then they declare that the concerned pair had become lawful to each other. This we do not understand”.

Naturally it is necessary to understand the meaning of the marriage vows, apart from the reason for it. Whenever the subject of marriage comes under discussion, does it mean merely the recitation of a number of Arabic phrases for half an hour or does it imply something different, if so, what is it? For a proper comprehension of these matters the field for free discussion is wide open to attempt to understand what Islam had said on the basis of the divine Book, traditions and history.

The third question is related to our desire to understand the benefits; virtues and or occasionally even disadvantages in Islamic injunctions. Should someone say that Islam has created a problem in forbidding the use of alcoholic beverages, here too, the matter is open to debate. Even if we were to make up a thousand and one advantages for the ban on alcohol, those still would not constitute a reason for the ban on alcohol in Islam, since the only real reason for it is the verse of the Holy Qur'an or a tradition.

Let us recapitulate the main points of the discussion Thus, far:

1. For a proper understanding of a religion, the basis is its original sources which should be studied in the manner of historical research and not experimental investigation nor philosophical inquiry.
2. To believe in a religion one should first acquire a belief in God and prophet through sufficient intellectual reasoning. Then in the next stage, whatever the prophet has said becomes religion for the believer; no other approach is of any consequence.
3. For a proper understanding of Islam and the spirit of its teachings or any other religion it is necessary to verify those subjects with one's personal and social life and then evaluate them in close interrelation. This is another field open for discussion for understanding the commandments of Islam or of any other religion.
4. One can freely discuss all the good or bad points of any precept of Islam or any religion which come to the mind. One is free to examine them. Should one count thousand and one defects, it still would not constitute a reason for its invalidity, nor would a thousand and one virtues be a reason for its validity. In this manner, I believe we could proceed to discuss. Any other approach to evaluate Islam, Judaism or Zoroastrianism would mean a deviation from the right path. For instance, if we begin to discuss the importance of fire from a physical and practical viewpoint or problems of life and such matters and thereby conclude that Zoroastrianism is a true faith, or vice versa, prove it to be a false religion, either approach would be a deviation from the right course.

A Supplementary To The Method

The question that arises here is, if a person in his choice of a religion wishes to know whether Islam was better or Christianity or Judaism and has not yet reached a decision, what should he do? As a supplementary to complete the method, we can add that at this stage all blasphemy is permissible and nothing is forbidden. Now if a total nonbeliever says that he has no faith, what should he do in his choice of a faith, should we tell him to go and make a survey of all the religions, and compare them and then decide which one is better and then make his choice? And if this procedure were necessary, would a person's lifetime and his capabilities suffice?

In this regard my answer concerning the choice of a religion is that this approach is not feasible. What he should do is to follow the phased method which I have indicated earlier.

First step: Is the person who is to be accepted as a prophet by the seeker as truly a prophet and a prophet of God, and is there really a God who has this man as his prophet? This is common to all religions, namely those which profess belief in one God. Here the word religion is used in a general sense to include those faiths which profess a belief in God and a prophet. If this seeker found adequate evidence that God exists then a comparison and survey of various religions would be to no avail or not of much use at the least not essential. What is important is the conviction that God exists and He has a prophet and it is essential that the teachings of that prophet be strictly followed. And should that prophet be followed by another prophet who I may believe has been sent by God, then it would be necessary to study this new faith and if it proved to be true then the new prophet takes precedence.

As for those whose prophet was the last prophet, no verification about subsequent claimants to prophethood is required. If sufficient evidence was provided by the acknowledged Prophet that he would have no successor, further verification is not necessary since our belief in him and in his declaration that he would not be succeeded by another prophet would be sufficient reason to believe in him. But had he predicted a successor to himself, the task before his followers would be easier and shorter. Therefore, a study and comparison of all religions is neither necessary, nor practicable and nor is it likely to produce any effect.

In Answer To Another Question

Question: For a proper recognition of a religious school, as you said, faith in God is a simpler method, but each divine religion explains God in its own peculiar way. So in order to identify which one is the true God, we must have recourse to the original prophet. In the present age it is no easy task to gain access to that prophet and verify his actual sayings.

Answer: Every person who wishes to acquire belief in a faith, must follow this process, whether it is a simple task or a hard one. Each person must study and confirm that a prophet called Jesus did actually exist or not and whether he was a prophet or not. If it was confirmed that Jesus ('a) was a prophet, it

would be enough, since you would be a reliable source. Having recognised that Jesus (‘a), Moses (‘a), or Muhammad (S) is a prophet, you must acknowledge his teachings and act upon them. Of course, which of his sayings we should act upon is the next stage, not our primary objective. However, what proof is there that Muhammad was a prophet? Our investigations in this case should proceed as for historical research with an extensive study of historical sources in order to acknowledge the fact that fourteen centuries ago, one Muhammad, had indeed existed who was a prophet of God. Other than this there is no way.

Where Do We Begin?

Concerning the fundamentals of religion, one can commence at two starting points: one of them is God, and the other the Prophet. Most people begin with the Prophet. In the case of Islam, they begin with Muhammad (S) as a man endowed with extraordinary powers and is in communication with a supernatural being. Thus, they come to believe in him. From here they deduce that the force that Muhammad (S) represents is God, and thus, most of them acquire faith. In the times of the Prophet himself a number of persons were seized with a belief about God Salman (Al-Farsi) was one of those who reflected about God, and then followed up this research. They realised that the teachings about God that prevailed around them were nothing but a set of illusions and superstitions When such individuals heard that a prophet had risen in Mecca who talked about God, they went there and saw that indeed he possessed both the merit to be God's representative as judged by his words, and also manifested the signs which proved that he was truly the Prophet of God. In this case their faith in God existed prior to their faith in His prophet, and even prior to their contact with the Prophet.

Then there were others who had no faith in God. They were materialists or naturalists, and did not believe in the existence of God at all. However, their contact with the Prophet altogether transformed them, and through the Prophet they acquired faith in God Of course, later they turned directly to God, but the foundation of their faith was initially laid by the Prophet. Thus, the principle of faith in God as well as disbelief in Him both co-exist among the Prophet's contemporaries. Through a comparative study of recognition of God as it appears in various religions, we can conclude that a certain religion conforms more appropriately with our intellect and reasoning yet it is not proof enough for believing such and such a person is a prophet.

Likewise, the prophethood of a prophet cannot be proved only through his sublime teachings pertaining to recognition of God. Let us suppose that a priest comes along and through theological discourse delivers excellent instruction about God, would he then be a prophet, and would his teachings be adopted as the way of faith? Certain great philosophers who had no belief in religion, made noteworthy statements about God. Would you then regard them to be prophets? Although they did not claim to be prophets, but what if they did? Therefore, this is no ground. To acknowledge someone as a prophet, we should study his life, his antecedents and his education, and when we observe that his mental, and spiritual personality is not an acquired one, only then we conclude that he has gained that exalted

personality from an extraordinary source, and that proves him to be a prophet.

That is why the Qur'an reiterates the fact that the prophet was unlettered. Therefore, we acknowledge our faith in God and the Prophet simultaneously without placing one before the other and declare one faith in God and the prophet at the same time. Then the words of that Prophet would have validity for us, and to reach this conclusion a prior study of comparative religions was never needed.

With this brief introduction, we can proceed to the main topic of discussion which is recognizing Islam and Muslims of the world under the title of "Islam and world Muslims".

[1.](#) We should say 'intellectual reasons' rather than 'scientific reasons', since it is not appropriate to use the latter term, and to a certain extent is not pertinent to the Prophet.

1. Birthplace Of Islam

- **A Brief Description Of Arabia**
- **Origin Of Arab Tribes**
- **Mareb Dam**
- **Cultural Situation**
- **Economic Situation**
- **Form Of Government In Pagan Times**
- **Role Of Judaism And Christianity**
- **Judaism In Arabia**
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- **Situation Of The Leading Tribes Of The Quraish**

In order to acquire a close familiarization with Islam it is necessary to know the environment in which Islam took birth and started to spread since such an understanding greatly aids the recognition of that entity.

It is possible to have a superficial knowledge of certain matters without being familiar with their knowing

their background or the conditions of their origin. But a profound understanding of a certain being or phenomenon depends wholly on a thorough familiarization of the background of that being or phenomenon. This applies equally to individuals or technical, artistic or social phenomena. For this reason, a deep understanding of the environments of Islam at the time of its birth is essential. The environments at the time of the birth of Islam may be misconstrued to mean the region including Mecca, or Mecca and Medina, or Mecca, Medina and Ta'if, or Hijaz or Arabia. It should be noted though that the noble Prophet of Islam from the very outset as he began his call to Islam while he was still at Mecca and Islam had not yet spread to Medina, began his call in the following manner:

“Come and embrace a faith the light of which will spread over Iran, Rome, Abyssinia and all other places.” Thus, from beginning the Prophet's call was a universal one addressing the civilised world of that time. Moreover, in the 6th year of (Hijra) migration, namely six years after the prophet's immigration to Medina, he wrote letters all of which are found in historical records namely to Khusrow Parviz King of Persia, Heraclius¹ ruler of a part of the Roman Empire, Mequqass ruler of Egypt², Najashi (or Negus) ruler of Abyssinia³, Ruler of Ghassan as a deputy of Rome⁴, and to the ruler of Hira of the tribe of Al-e-Mundir and a vice regent of the throne of Iran, inviting all of them to accept Islam. Thus, it becomes apparent that in order to know the background of the rise of Islam, we cannot confine ourselves to Mecca, Medina and Ta'if, or to the Arab Lands but expand our view to at least include all such regions as the Prophet himself called to accept Islam in his own time.

A Brief Description Of Arabia

The name Arabia is applied to a land populated by Arabic-speaking people. At the time of the birth of the Prophet, the Arabic-speaking region was not so vast as it is to-day; on one side it was bounded by the Persian Gulf much as it is to-day, since at that time, too, the southern borders of the Persian Gulf were inhabited by Arabs. In Iraq the boundary was almost along the Tigris and the Euphrates namely that side of the Tigris where Arabic is now the main language. In the region between Iran and the Tigris the main language was not Arabic, but Kurdish, Persian and some local dialects with Arabic as the main language that side of River Tigris.

In fact, the Arabs now inhabiting Khuzestan are not the original inhabitants but migrated to this region after Islam. In the north were the present countries of Shaam or Syria and Jordan where a number of Arab migrant tribes lived in the time of Islam, the period of that migration will be explained later. In the north, too, Arabic was not, unlike to-day, the main language, though a considerable number of Arab migrants had settled in the valley of the Jordan River.

It may be observed that at present the Arab land, have extended as far as Turkey, whereas at that time it was limited more to the south towards Jordan. The present Lebanon and Syria were not Arabic speaking. In Jordan, too, Arabic was not the main language, and only the Arab migrants spoke Arabic. In this respect Jordan resembled the present Khuzestan where a group speak Arabic and another speak

Persian.

In the west, in a significant part of Africa where Arabic is now spoken, the main language at the time was not Arabic. Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and even Abyssinia and other parts where Arabic is now spoken, Arabic was not the main language at that time. Thus, we see that at the time of the birth of Islam the region of Arabia and the Arab land from the viewpoint of the Arabic language was located in the south of the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman extending in the west up to the Red Sea – beyond which Arabic was not prevalent – and in the north till the Jordan River valley beyond which Arabic was not prevalent, and in the east to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This, then was the extent of Arabia at the time of the birth of Islam.

Here it should be pointed out that the language spoken in the regions beyond these frontiers, namely in a part of Africa, Shaam, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and to the east of the Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq, had been branches of Semitic languages, having a common root with Arabic – in the same way that Persian has a common root with German, Indian Sanskrit and Indo-European languages. The local languages of Somalia, Abyssinia, Egypt and a part of Jordan (which was Hebrew) and those of the present Lebanon and Syria (which had been Phoenician), and those of other parts (which had been Chaldean, Assyrian etc.) were all like the Arabic language Semitic in origin and are recognised as Semitic languages and both from the viewpoint of script as well as vocabulary linked together.

Georgie Zeydan, in his book, 'History of Civilisation⁵', narrates that at that time if someone went from Arabia to Abyssinai, or from Jordan or the Lebanon to Hijaz, he did not feel like an alien, the languages were so much alike that he could understand the local language without the aid of an interpreter, and if he stayed there for a little while, he could learn the local language – the same way that a Persian-speaking person visiting Kurdistan can learn the local language within a short time. Thus, the Arabic speaking region of to-day used to be the region of Semitic languages, which have common roots with Arabic, and is Thus, easily understood by their neighbours, while the Arabian Peninsula was the home to Arabs who spoke pure unmixed Arabic.

Origin Of Arab Tribes

The inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula who were generally called Arabs, were in two groups: Qahtani Arabs' and 'Adnani Arabs.' Qahtani Arabs were those whose original abode was Yemen. The Yemini and Yemen of that time included the present Aden, the Sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf littoral and the Sea of Oman.

The Adnani Arabs were centered around Najd and Hijaz that is to say around Mecca stretching as far as the Hijaz Desert. Both the Qahtani and Adnani Arabs share a common historical root, originating from the same ancestors. You can imagine an Arab family of three thousand years ago steadily multiplying in numbers, then branching into two sections The descendants of Ya'rib Ibn Qahtan went to Yemen. Others who went to Mecca – and founded Mecca – the descendants of Ismail, because they had an ancestor

named Adnan, came to be called Adnani.

Arabs who went to Yemen, the Qahtani Arab, had come to the land of good fortune, because Yemen was a better land compared with Mecca, Najd and the Arabian Desert from the viewpoint of natural potential climate and water. Accordingly in the lands of Yemen, civilisation and industry and urban development began much sooner. The history of urban development and civilisation in Yemen, the home of the Qahtani Arabs, dates several centuries before Hijaz and Najd, the home of the 'Adnani Arabs. It would be pertinent at this stage to consider how the factor of environment influenced the development of two branches of a common stock who shared common language as well as many other characteristics. According to historians, not only from the viewpoint of urbanisation and development, but also from the viewpoint of political organisations and government, Yemen and Qahtani Arabs were centuries ahead of Najd and Hijaz and the Adnani Arabs. Further explanations will follow about this aspect.

In Yemen the Hemyari Kings ruled as the crowned monarchs at the time when in Hijaz social organisations had not developed beyond tribal ways. Ya'qubi, the great Islamic historian narrates that the crown worn by Hemyar, founder of the Hemyari dynasty was made of silver with a large ruby set in the middle and such was the situation prevailing in Yemen several centuries before the establishment of a government in Hijaz, Najd and Arabia. From the viewpoint of technology and civilisation, long before the appearance of such developments over the ordinary tribal life in Najd and Hijaz, the historical 'Mareb Dam' had been constructed. In this regard a historian narrates that this dam was six kilometers in length situated between two mountains so that the winter rains and torrents would collect in the form of a lake. It had a number of sluice gates through which passed seventy irrigation channels passed for irrigating seventy agricultural sectors. Mareb Dam had been built eight centuries before Islam and as it happened two centuries before Christ, the object is to show the background of the birth place of Islam, as also to compare Yemen with Hijaz which was the location of the advent of Islam.

Mareb Dam

Mareb Dam played an effective role in the development of Yemen which flourished alongside of it. Strabon, the famous Greek geographer and traveller (about 63 B.C. to 26 A.D) whose name is mentioned frequently in the annals of history, has written many strange accounts about the city of Mareb and its wonders and fine palaces which have been quoted in various books of history. This city had attracted travellers from many parts of the world and flourished until the second century A.D. From the beginning of the second century A.D., it started to deteriorate. The interesting point which historians have recorded is that since individuals were unable to maintain the Dam, this task had to be performed by their governments, but as public authorities had become inefficient and were too busy feasting and drinking, they neglected their responsibility of preserving the Dam.

Consequently, it fell into disrepair. This shows that in those times the people of Yemen expected their government to undertake such tasks. Mareb Dam began to deteriorate in the beginning of second

country A.D. so that all realised that it would collapse within the next ten or twenty years. So the Qahtani Arabs of Yemen began to abandon their homes fearing that with the collapse of the Dam no water would be available for irrigation or farming. They were also alarmed that when the Dam collapsed it would release a torrent which would destroy their homes and fields and everything else that came in its way. Consequently such fears caused the Qahtani tribes to begin emigrating.

One group emigrated towards Hira and the land of Iraq and settled along the banks of the Tigris, and founded the government of Munadherah or Al-e-Mundher. The people of Munadherah, on account of their proximity to Iran, became tributaries of the Iranian governments possibly maintaining political relations with them. Another group migrated to the territory near the present-day Jordan, and settled in the flourishing Jordan Valley. They were the earliest Arabs to settle there and set up the Ghassani dynasty which normally had relations with Rome. A third group of them in their migration came to Yathrib (the present Medina) which was at that time home to the Jews, however this subject will be discussed later in the chapter related to Judaism. These last Arabs formed the twin tribes of 'Aus' and 'Khazraj' whose names appear frequently in the course of the history of Islam. These two tribes settled in Yathrib where some farming land and water were available. Another group, namely Bani Khuza'a, moved to Mecca and fought the Adnani Arabs of Mecca, drove them out and took control of Mecca themselves. Yet another group called Bani 'Addi went to Najd and became the rulers of the greater part of the desert.

What is noteworthy here is that a civilised people accustomed to urbanisation and well-developed social existence should as a result of an anticipated catastrophe, migrate from their home land, and then organise their communities wherever they set foot.

Those who went to Shaam, established the Ghassani rule; those who went to Hira, founded the dynasty of Al-e-Mundher, No'manian and Munadherah; those who settled in Medina, namely the tribes of Aus and Khazraj, will be discussed in subsequent chapters; and the group that went to Mecca, pushed away the Adnanis who were the least developed. These were the ones who went to the desert, dominated the waste lands of the Arabian Desert. The remaining Arabs who stayed back in Yemen, either on account of laziness or hoping that no calamity such as the collapse of the Dam would occur, were annihilated by the well-known flood of 'Arem in the end of the second century A.D. which has been mentioned in the Chapter of Saba of the Holy Qur'an, where a brief history of Yemen is narrated.

Thus, the structure of Arabia in the second century A.D. consisted of the government of one group of Arabs in the present-day Jordan neighbouring ancient Rome; another group building a city state in the present Iraq and Hira set up a state neighbouring Iran; another group settled in Yathrib as neighbours of the Jews, and lastly another group of Qahtani Arabs settled in Mecca and its suburbs. This then was the situation four centuries before the birth of Islam.

Cultural Situation

All historians are agreed that the highest manifestation of the development of Arab culture in the century preceding Islam was poetry which was not known before that time. A well-known historian named Ya'qubi has written that poetry among the Arabs had taken the place of science, philosophy, history and everything else⁶. If an Arab had a bright idea he would give it the form of a few verses and thus, express it. Thus, if someone should question what Arab culture was at that time, the answer would be 'a few stanzas of poetry'.

The Arabs were a people with a poetic bent even though their land was no land of flowers and nightingales, but only thorns and sand, yet it nurtured many a poet. As poetry was esteemed by them to be the highest manifestation of culture, their poets were on the lookout for a suitable spot to present their poems. The finest of their poems were then inscribed on posters and hung on the walls of the Ka'aba in the annual rendezvous of the Arabs. They called these posters 'Mu'allaqat' meaning 'hanging verses'. Such display on the walls of the Ka'aba was the reward for the poets, who as a result became famous. Amra' al-Qais and other contemporary poets of early Islam were among the poets Thus, honoured. They were the authors of 'the seven hanging pieces' that had found place of honour on the walls of the Ka'aba and in history. Beside poetry there was another cultural source in the Arabia of that time, namely Jewish culture which will be discussed in detail later on.

Economic Situation

The leading aspect of the Arabs economy of that time from the viewpoint of production was animal husbandry and agriculture wherever it was possible. As far as trade and exchange were concerned, their main trade was with foreign lands. Both the Arabs of Yemen and Hijaz were engaged in this activity, but since foreign trade must have links with home trade in order to exchange home-made products with foreign goods, the Arabs of that age resorted to the same practice in keeping with the level of their civilisation as they do in modern times.

In the developed world of today one of the most significant essential and effective of economic practices is the organising of commercial and industrial fairs. The Arabs, too, at that time arranged fairs in the form of seasonal bazaars. In the same way that today in each season a fair is held in a city or locality in relation to local conditions, the Arabs, too, followed the same practice at different times and in particular places. A few examples of the extensive and famous exhibitions which were held in Hijaz and Najd were as follows:

1. The 'Dumatul-Jandal Fair', held in the month of Rabial-Awwal under the auspices of two local tribes of Ghassan and Kalb near Shaam.
2. The Mashqar Fair' held in the month of Jamadi-al-'Ula in a place of the same name, under the auspices of Banu-Tim tribe⁷.

3. The 'Sahar Fair', held on the first of the month of Rajab⁸.
4. The 'Ria Fair' following their Sahar Fair' in the same month of Rajab, under the patronage of the Jalandi tribe and its ruler⁹.
5. The 'Aden Fair', held at the beginning of the month of Ramadhan. According to historians since this fair dealt exclusively with perfumes and scents, it was the great market of perfumers¹⁰.
6. The 'San'a Fair', held in the middle of Ramadhan
7. The 'Rabia Fair', held in the present Hadamut.
8. The 'Ukaz Fair', held in the month of Dhil-Qa'dah near Tal'if
9. The 'Dhil Majaz Fair', held when all other fairs had concluded and the merchants who had been busy making a round of these fairs during those months, finally headed to Mecca, making a pilgrimage to the Ka'aba in the month of Dhil Hajjah, and dispersed after performing the Hajj ceremonies.

These fairs and seasonal bazaars were the most valuable and cherished commercial events in Arabia of those days. The merchant class who profited from those fairs did their best not to let them become mere exhibitions. They organised colourful ceremonies and musical shows and other celebrations as well as exhibits of literary works, poetry and arts. Thus, these exhibitions were show places worth a visit both for those who intended to buy new and fineries and goods, or listen to the latest and the finest pieces of verse, or fine music. Thus, the poets, too, were drawn to these exhibitions to recite their poems before judges who judged their poems. In this manner the fairs served both as commercial shows and literary societies.

Form Of Government In Pagan Times

Sociologists say that in those days when man lived alone (if indeed there were such days!) he had no need of a master, since he was his own master and servant; his own ruler, his own government and his own nation. But as soon as he emerged from this solitary state and formed a family, and as soon as their number rose to four, there rose the question of who headed the family and who was the chief.

Sociologists claim that in most parts of the world headship belonged to the men while in certain parts to the women, that is to say the father acting as the head in the former case, and the mother in the latter. As the family grew larger, several families formed a group, called tribe, the family then acquired a tribal form. Thereby the question of the chief, the elder, the senior and the 'grey-beard' of the tribe came up who should settle the affairs of the group.

When several tribes took form, the issue became more extensive and there came into existence national government, and the issues in turn became international though yet such a government has not appeared.

With the rise of several tribes, these tribes that lived alongside each other neither knew their common ancestors nor did they regard each other as kith and kin. As they coexisted in one area and shared common interests, they found that they had need for a government in order to preserve their social system. Thus, the formation of a government from the viewpoints of history and sociology began with the tribes' realisation of a need for a guardian to safeguard their common interests and social system. This guardian then became their government.

From the viewpoint of political process, this was the most critical phase, namely the transfer of power from the tribal system and tribal chief to a central government. This critical phase had been accomplished in Yemen many centuries before Islam where a central government in its true sense had been formed and this was also the case in Ghassan and Hira where governments ruled. On the other hand, in the interior of Arabia such a government did not exist except in very rare instances.

Ya'qubi says in his book of history: "The tribal disputes or problems between individuals were usually settled by a number of persons known to be wise and far-sighted as well as unprejudiced and impartial. They settled the disputes through elderly intervention and arbitration. Such arbitrators were called magistrates. Ya'qubi mentions in his book of history (Vol. 1, p. 337) the names of a large number of such magistrates, who were not heads of a government but only arbitrators who adjudicated in the matters of disputes. In the history of the corresponding period in Arabia we come across only one or two cases when government is mentioned in connection with the interior of Arabia, namely in Hijaz and Najd. Among these accounts a Jewish historian writes that in the fifth century A.D., that is one century before Islam, Abu Karab, king of Yemen had assigned his son as the regent of Median. Since this governor had been installed by the ruler of Yemen, it could hardly be called the government of Medina.

Thus, at that time while there existed governments along the borders outside of Arabia, such as the Chassanis and Mundherian, and those who had remained in Yemen and in the coastal regions of the Persian Gulf, no progress had been made from a tribal society towards a central government in the central parts of Arabia.

Role Of Judaism And Christianity

In order to make a thorough study of the history of Islam, we should also make a survey of the part played by Judaism and Christianity in side Arabia.

We are not altogether certain of the date of the Jews migration to Arabia, however the writer of the 'History of Judaism' writes in this connection: "There are different views concerning the migration of the Jews to Arabia and its causes and factors, but there is little doubt that most of the Jews abandoned their homes owing to the oppression of Roman rulers and sought refuge in Arabia. If the Jews had been denied peace and tranquility in Palestine, Europe and in the Roman holdings, in Arabia on the contrary their living conditions were satisfactory, since there they were no longer subjected to threats and persecution by Christian priests, being treated kindly by their neighbours.

What is certain is that owing to the remoteness of the Hijaz and Najd regions, a number of Jews had migrated to Arabia centuries before the birth of Islam, and in all probability concurrent with the appearance of Jesus ('a) Christ or in the second and third centuries A.D.

According to the existing books of history, their migrations to the Hijaz must have begun at least about five centuries before Islam, that is to say by the end of the first century A.D. The Jews had realised that in that region they could live freely far removed from the oppression of Roman governors. The most important center of Jewish settlements was Yathrib, the present Medina. The Jews who came to Arabia, found that there was land and water in the Yathrib region, so they built a fort for themselves and settled down. In Mecca, too, the Jews were present but in small numbers.

Those who migrated from the north to the south found their way to Yemen, where the number of the Jews was not so great, but there occurred an event as a result of which Judaism became the official religion of Yemen. It so happened that Abu Karab's son was the governor of Yathrib, when his father was king of Yemen in the fifth century A.D. The inhabitants of Medina rose in revolt against this governor and killed him. Abu Karab, despite being engaged in a war with the kings of Iran over Yemen, on his way came to Yathrib and in order to punish the Jews and Arabs of Yathrib who had risen against him, and thereafter to proceed to the war with Iran. When he reached Yathrib, the inhabitants went inside their forts and shut the gates and took refuge within: Abu Karab besieged the forts, and as the siege drew on, the people in the forts were faced with acute shortage of food. At this time a number of Jewish rabbis came out of the forts and approached Abu Karab and declared that only four foolish men had killed his son, and begged the king for his forgiveness. In this meeting they started reciting some Jewish teachings for Abu Karab who was a heathen; their ardor so influenced him that he embraced Judaism and at once returned to Yemen. When Abu Karab and his courtiers accepted Judaism as their religion, they began to propagate that faith. After Abu Karab died some time later, one of his sons, named 'Dhunavas' or 'Dhunuvas' became the king of Yemen and formally and zealously propagated the Jewish faith in Yemen and so it became the official religion of Yemen where they set about building a number of synagogues for the Jews. This happened about eighty or a hundred years before the rise of Islam.

Thus, we witness that in the Arabia of that time, in the north existed the Jews and Christians, in the east the Zoroastrians and followers of Mazdak, the Iranians' religion, in the south and in a part of Yathrib the Jews, and in other parts were idolaters and Sabeans and followers of numerous other religions.

Judaism In Arabia

The author of the 'History of Judaism' has recorded that the Arabs treated the Jews kindly and associated with them treaty resulting in frequent intermarriages among them. On the whole the Jews exerted a great influence upon the Arabs since, firstly, they were well versed in economics and could hence manage the economy of those regions and, secondly, compared to the Arabs lettered and a people of the Book and consequently possessed higher learning than the Arabs who were quite illiterate.

They could narrate tales and talk about many topics with the Arabs and hence gained considerable respect. While the Arabs could neither read nor write, most of the Jews were familiar with reading and even writing to some extent. Judaism exerted such a strong influence that a group of the Quraish tribe, namely Banu Kananah had embraced Judaism.

Christianity In Arabia

The position of Christianity was a special one in Hijaz and in the Arabian Peninsula. This religion had not made any inroads into Arabia till about the time of the Prophet of Islam, that is to say about a century and a half before the birth of Islam. Just as today the Christian missionaries go to African and South American lands and penetrate into the forests to propagate their faith, at that time, too, they went to the dry deserts of Arabia with the object of spreading their religion. The first group of Christian missionaries went to the Najran area. They so greatly influenced the people there that the first Christian sector took shape in Arabia. The Christians of Najran commenced their missionary work, and alongwith other missionaries who arrived from outside, founded a center of propagation in the interior of Arabia. At this time, as it has already been stated, Dhunuvas, the King of Yemen had embraced Judaism. Then there occurred a collision between this Jewish king who applied much pressure to spread Judaism in Arabia and the Christians of Najran. This clash had a political background in that the Emperor of Abyssinia coveted Yemen, the neighbour across the sea.

To retaliate this clash, Dhunuvas came to Najran to wipe out the Christians of Najran. This episode has been narrated in the Holy Qur'an under the title of "the story of Ukhdood"¹¹ where this deed has been condemned. Dhunuvas killed many of the Najran Christians and burnt a number of them alive. This roused the Christian Emperor of Abyssinia as well as the Roman Emperor to come to the aid of the Najran Christians. But as the Emperor of Rome was too far from Yemen, he asked the Emperor of Abyssinia for help and asked him to take the revenge of this massacre from Dhunuvas and the people of Yemen. That is how the episode of Abraha and the Abyssinian campaign to Yemen occurred. Abyssinian troops reached Yemen and captured it. Dhunuvas and a large number of Yemenese were killed, and thus, Christianity replaced Judaism in Yemen by the order of the Abyssinian governor officially churches were built there, eventually resulting in the story of Abraha and 'Amul-Feel.'

In this way, in Arabia at the time of the rise of Islam, Judaism took the first place, Christianity the second, Zoroastrianism third, Sabeans, who followed a kind of idol worship reaching as far back as the creeds of the time of the Prophet Abraham ('a) came fourth and some local faiths followed fifth in place as mentioned in the Holy Qur'an¹². Thus, from the viewpoint of religion, the Arabian Peninsula of that time was under of influence of multiple faiths.

To get better acquainted with the peculiar conditions prevailing in Mecca, Medina and Ta'if, the three cities closest to the birthplace of Islam, further explanations are in order As already stated, in the second and third centuries A.D. the Qahtani Arabs migrated to various parts of Arabia, and a group of them

named Banu Khuza'ah went to Mecca and seized the reins of affairs there however, before the arrival of Banu Khuza'ah group, various Isma'ili tribes of the 'Adnani Arabs had dominated that region, the most important of whom were the Quraish tribe. Till that time however, this tribe had not assumed the importance it gained later on.

When Banu Khuza'ah gained predominance in Mecca and secured control over the affairs of the Ka'aba, a child was born in the house of Quraish named Qussi Ibn Kalab, whose mother was of Banu Khuza'ah and father from belonged a branch of the Quraish tribe. As Qussi grew up, he decided to take back from the non-Quraish all the positions which had been taken away from the Quraish family at whatever the cost. This included the custody of the keys and coverings of the holy Ka'aba, positions that were highly esteemed and which position should have been inhabited by his uncle on the mother's side. Qussi's uncle was a drunkard and a libertine¹³. Qussi as it happened, bought this position from his own uncle for a wine skin and one camel to barbecue and this idiotic deal became proverbial in the history of Arabia¹⁴. Thus, the phrase 'Qussi Deal' implying an infamous and a stupid deal.

Qussi was a competent youth who gradually came to dominate Mecca completely and took control over all its affairs. From the time of Qussi Ibn Kalab onward, although no government had been formed, however a set up in Mecca takes shape as a result of his policies and ideas. According to his views the various tribes of Mecca, especially the branches of the Quraish tribe were involved into creating a central organisation and establishing a relative order in the society.

Situation Of The Heading Tribes Of The Quraish

The Quraish tribe had many sub-tribes, however the leading ones were: The Hashemis, Umavis, Nufelis, Abduddaris, Asadis, Timis, Makhzumis, 'Adavis, Jamhis and the Sahmis.

There were the prominent sub-tribes' branches, but there were also others, less significant clans. At that time there existed only two or three positions in connection with the Ka'aba. To make these clans to co-operate with one another, Qussi Ibn Kalab created a number of new positions, giving each of the clans a position to be content with, and so abstain from internecine fighting. Thus, it would appeal that the creation of designations had a long precedent! Concurrent with the birth of the Prophet of Islam there existed about 15 positions in Mecca, each of which pertained to one of the prominent clans of the Quraish as follows:

1. Position of the Keeper and custodian of the Ka'aba was the top most in first-rate precedence.
2. Position of the provider of water to the pilgrims. During the pre-Islamic pilgrimage those who visited Mecca were not familiar with the water wells, and as they all needed water, the task of bringing water from the neighbouring wells and offering it to pilgrims was assigned to a branch of the Quraish to act as wardens over water Georgie Zeydan narrates that they devised open tanks of hides and filled them with water for the pilgrims to take.

3. Position of reception and hospitality. To attract more visitors to Mecca and make their market brisk, as well as to preserve the Arab custom of acting as lordly hosts, they laid out feasts for the pilgrims as their guests, and this task was assigned to a particular branch of the Quraish tribe. For this purpose, they collected contributions to provide free meals to the pilgrims.

4. Position of flag-bearer. Mecca had a flag called the Eagle banner which was used in the time of war. This flag was kept in the family whose chief would bring it out in the event of war. In the time of the Prophet this banner was in the hands of the Bani Umayya.

5. Position of Dar-un-Nadwa or Dar-u-Showra. One of Qussī's initiatives was to build a house near the Ka'aba, called Dar-en-Nadwa¹⁵. Dar-ul-Nadwa means a meeting place or assembly for consultation. Whenever an issue of importance rose for the Quraish in general, their chiefs and elders who were truly the people's representative assembled in that place, discussed the matter and came to a decision about it and whatever the majority's decision carried it out. What is noteworthy however is that according to the laws of elections of Qussī Ibn Kalab, one of the pre-conditions was that the tribes and clan's representatives should not be less than forty years of age. Today young people could well protest against such a law on the plea that it meant favouring the old people as they accepted only over forty years old. In those days, however, they wished to have well tried and experienced peoples' representatives, though at the same time we read in the biography of the Holy Prophet (S) of Islam that Abdul Muttalib took Muhammad (S) as a child along with him to Dar-un-Nadwa, even though the admission of a person below the age of forty was forbidden. The first time Muhammad (S) was taken there, they were displeased, but after that they agreed that he could enter – but that is another story.

6. The charge and leadership of trade caravans was held by the Bani-Umayya.

7. The institution for the payment of blood-money and compensation. Sometimes when a member of a tribe was killed by someone from another tribe, in the first place was a demand for compensation and indemnity or a fight would ensue. Thus, the fine had to be collected, and one of these families was responsible for this task of determining the share, collecting them, and handing them over to the claimants. This was in fact a kind of office for public funds related of course to blood-money and reparations.

8. Administration of the arsenal. This was a large tent where arms and weapons were collected in the event of war and distributed judicially among the soldiers.

9. Management of army stables: a task given to a branch of Quraish tribe to take care of the remounts such as horses and camels necessary for the war effort.

10. Assigning of envoys or ambassadors: Sometimes it became necessary to dispatch envoys abroad. As we shall see later, envoys were required to travel to Abyssinia to pursue the question of Muslim emigrants to that country.

11. Position of administering justice was given to a special committee of Arabs.

12. Position of the Key Bearer of the Ka'aba, as distinct from the position of the custodian. As you may be aware, pilgrims to the holy shrines often made offerings of gold coins in the holy shrines. The pilgrims who visited the Ka'aba often brought vowed offering for dropping them within the sacred grille. Once a year or every six months the custodian would open the door of the Ka'aba, collect whatever had been offered and then divide that amongst the various clans.

13. Position of the repairs and maintenance of the holy Ka'aba and other buildings of Mecca which were entrusted to one particular clan

14. Position of "Ansab and Azlam", which could be called the office of lottery. There was a custom among the Arabs called "Isar" (from "Yusr" meaning ease and plenty) incidentally the Arabic word is also related to 'gambling and lottery' At present, too, in winter there comes a time when a villager has consumed whatever he has in store, is left with nothing, and is in dire need Such conditions often occurred in Arabia during winters particularly when rainfall was scanty in spring and summer Such a custom also exists in remote parts of Iran near the annual spring festival. So, to provide relief the Arabs resorted to a measure by which a part of the wealth of the rich would be contributed to help the needy. Such practices are common among people who have not developed a secure economic system and are faced with straitened circumstances.

The Arabs invented a lottery as a game of chance This game of luck was played as follows: They took ten wooden shafts, on seven of which they wrote a number of shares from one to seven serially and the remaining three were left blank. These shafts were then handed over to a trustworthy man. Then a camel was bought, and the price of it was paid by drawing lots with these wooden beams which determined the share of the money to be paid by the participants. With this money the camel was bought and slaughtered, and the meat was distributed on the basis of lottery members again. These wooden shafts were called 'Ansab' which in from 'Naseeb' meaning destiny. They also had another form of lottery called 'Azlam' which served for divining whether a step should be taken in a matter or not.

Here they prepared seven small wooden shafts on each of which either a positive load as 'do it', or negative indication such as 'don't do it' or 'to your advantage' or 'to the advantage of the other side' etc. were written and one of them was left blank. Whenever a person was undecided about what he should do in a matter, he would go to a diviner who employed these shafts for fortune-telling, and drew a lot from under a cloth, and that shaft indicated to him what he should do.

The above systems of 'Ansab' and 'Azlam' were entrusted to another clan of the Quraish tribe. Thus, the allocation of the said positions was intended to prevent disputes and war, but clashes nonetheless occurred from time to time. However, sometimes disputes would rise and through the application of this organisation, albeit defective, they managed to prevent wars.

After Qussī Ibn Kalab no armed clashes occurred between the branches of the Quraish tribe, except an

old one and that too a minor one. The period following Qussī in Mecca was a period of transition between the tribal and control government's establishment. For, as you can see, in this period discussions regarding types of organisation, positions, division of responsibilities and political order were taking place in Mecca. That was the situation as it prevailed in Mecca.

Ta'if, on the other hand, was more or less under the influence of a single tribe named Bani Tha'qif. It was a small but a flourishing city controlled by that tribe. However, Medina offered an interesting perspective. As already stated, it has been predicted at the beginning of the second century A.D. that the Mareb Dam would collapse, consequently a large number of the Qahtani Arabs of Yemen migrated to the north and north-east. Two of these clans namely the Aus and Khazraj having reached Yathrib, found it to be a suitable place and decided to settle down there. But before the arrival of the Arabs, the Jews had chosen it to be their home, and thus, they were its original residents. The new-comers, namely the Aus and the Khazraj were delighted at the beginning to pay tribute to the Jews because they were weak, alien and emigre guests. Meanwhile the Jews, too, were politically astute and for a long time coexisted with the newcomers.

After a time, the Jews found a rather powerful and despotic ruler who encroached upon the Aus and Khazraj, giving rise to continued fighting between the Jews and the Aus and Khazraj tribes. The latter, owing to their relations with the neighbouring Arabs who had a common race and spoke the same language, grew in numbers and enhanced their influence, as well as received assistance from their Arab allies in their conflicts with the Jews. Gradually therefore the power of the Arabs went on the increase while that of the Jews diminished in Medina. So long as the Aus and Khazraj remained united, everything was in their favour. But an incident occurred that caused a rift between them resulting in a war. The sly Jews made the utmost use of this difference, and did their best to intensify this dispute.

Close to the time of the Prophet's ordainment, this dispute between the Khazraj who were the larger tribe and the Aus who were the smaller, carried on. The Khmazraj who were sub-divided into several clans, decided to choose a king for themselves. As you are aware, Mecca was then passing through a transition phase between the tribal and centralised governmental systems, and Medina, too, was passing through a similar process trying to pass from the tribal phase to a governmental stage.

Thus, for the first time in the history of the Arabs in Medina, this became the common topic and ground was prepared that all should swear allegiance to Abdullah Ibn Abi, a respected man among the Khazraj tribe, and make him the king and make ready a throne and crown for him. This matter had a lasting effect from various aspects on the future history of Islam. This subject which might appear small and trifling, was really quite consequential and will be discussed further. It was under such socio-economic and political conditions and the state of religious beliefs that the Prophet of Islam declared his mission in Mecca inviting people to the new faith.

This was the brief situation in Arabia concurrent with the rise of Islam with reference to its historical background which bears relation with our subsequent discussions.

- [1.](#) Heraclius the First (about 575–641 A.D.), Emperor of Byzantine (Eastern Roman Empire) from 610 to 641 A.D. Mo'in Dictionary Vol. 6.
- [2.](#) A name given by the Arabs to Cyrus, governor of Alexandria Mo'in Dictionary 6.
- [3.](#) Negus is the title of rulers of Abyssinia, similar to Khusrow for Iranian kings, and Caesar for Emperors of Rome. (Various Arabic sources).
- [4.](#) Haaris bin–Abi–Shemr, a Ghassani king residing in Damascus who died in the year of capture of Mecca, (Similar Arabic sources.)
- [5.](#) “.... Moreover, the language of the Arabs was similar to those of their neighbours, having the same Semitic root. And as it can be seen to–day, much as in that period, the Arabic, Chaldean, Assyrian, Hebrew, Abyssinian and Phoenician languages are similar, their relation resembling the relation between colloquial and the scholastic Arabic. At that time if an Arab travelled from Hijaz to Iraq or Abyssinia or Phoenicia he could follow the local language without an interpreter,” History of Islamic Civilisation, Gergie Zeydan. Translated by Javaher Kalam, p. 9.
- [6.](#) Ya'qubi recorded: The Arabs placed poetry above all knowledge and philosophy and if a poet understanding and discerning poetry was found in the tribe, they invited him to their seasonal markets of the year such as their pilgrimage to recite his poetry in front of various tribes, and considered this a sign of honour and distinction for themselves. They had nothing else to give but poetry. History of Ya'qubi, Vol. 1, p. 342.
- [7.](#) Ya'qubi's book gives this name as Bani–Teem, sub–tribe of Mundher Ibn Sawi, but the correct name is Bani–Tamim, because Mundher Ibn Sawi was Tamimi and not Timi, Book of Mustadrak Hawashi, p. 531.
- [8.](#) A village in Yemen where Sahari cloths were made. Ya'qubi History, Vol. 1.
- [9.](#) Ruler of Omman, History of Ya'qubi, Vol. 1, p 349.
- [10.](#) Ya'qubi speaks of 'Shahr Fair' before this one under the patronage of a tribe of Qada'a, called Malhreh History of Ya'qubi, Vol. 1, p 35.
- [11.](#) Refer to the Holy Qur'an, Sura Al–Boruj, 85:4 and Verses onwards.
- [12.](#) Refer to the Holy Qur'an, Surah Al–Baqara, 2:62, Surah Al– Ma'idah, 6:69, Surah Hajj, 22:17.
- [13.](#) Abu Ghubshan, History of Ya'qubi, Vol. 1, p. 307.
- [14.](#) Akhassa min–Safqat–e–Abi Ghabshan, History of Ya'qubi, Vol. 1, p. 307.
- [15.](#) This house was preserved for a long time, but I don't know whether it has survived as an important historical monument.

2. Iran Before Islam

- **Ancient Iran**
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The starting point for our discussions has been chosen from an aspect which in fact marks the origins of Islam, and from another viewpoint, is inseparably linked to the study of ideological, social and practical problems. This approach is also more compatible with the natural course for pursuing these studies. In order to study Islam in its correct, historical perspective, for obtaining a clearer understanding, it was appropriate to have begun with a familiarisation with the region of its birth, namely the Arabian Peninsula incorporating Saudi Arabia (Hijaz and Najd), Yemen, the sheikdoms along the Persian Gulf littoral and the Sea of Oman. We also generally commented on the geographic, social, racial, lingual, religious and economic conditions of that region.

Henceforth our discussion will be related to those civilised regions which bounded the Arabian Peninsula of the time.

These civilised regions could basically be divided into two parts: in one part consisting of small free status, linked with the Arabian Peninsula and possessing small local governments, which should however be regarded Arab settlements though most of them were installed by great powers. One of these which had parts of Iraq under its influence was the government of Hira (or the Nu'manis and Munadherah) under the hegemony of Iran.

Another was Yemen which, being within the Arabian Peninsula, had an independent government. For about 150 or 200 years this government had been installed either by Iran or Abyssinia till about the time of the rise of Islam. In the other part were the states in the western part which included the present-day Jordan and Israel. This was the Ghassani government which was under the hegemony of Rome. We will have a short and brief discussion about these three small governments in their proper place, since these three states happened to have a significant role in the contemporary history of the rise of Islam which

merits particular attention.

Ancient Iran

The Arabian Peninsula of that time was bounded by four powerful, strong and civilised nations with rather well-established governments. Of these four countries, two could be rated as first class and the other two as second-class powers. One of the first group was Iran which extended on one side as far as the Tigris and Euphrates and Shatt-al-Arab, namely up to the middle of the present-day Iraq and included the Caucasus and the present Iran itself; and on another flank included Turkestan, Afghanistan, a part of Pakistan as far as the Hindus (Sind) River valley. In these regions there lived a people with a long and civilised past which had undergone many tribulations and change, and were regarded as the great neighbours of the Arabian Peninsula. The fact is that if we wish to speak on the basis of common usage, Arabian Peninsula was just a stretch of desert to which no one paid any attention, and the use of the word 'neighbour' could hardly apply to Iran with its immense size and grandeur as compared with Arabia. But here the discussion is not about great or small but only to become familiar with the geographic neighbours of Arabia.

The second great neighbour was Rome which also neighboured Iran. It was a great power including northern Iraq, present-day Turkey and the Balkans, and was known as Eastern Rome. When we mention Rome in this discussion it implies the Eastern Roman empire, since western Rome with its seat in Italy neither remained a great power at that time, nor had any relation with Islam. Of course, western Rome of that time included Italy, a portion of Yugoslavia, Albania, some part of Spain and even a part of France. Thus, Europe of that time was only one country under Rome. Other people's living beyond its limits were called Berbers¹. Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire possessed such greatness at that time that it was far above comparison with the other Rome. Western Rome rose to greatness after the Muslims had overthrown Eastern Rome, and the caliphs, namely the Ottoman rulers and kings, had captured the city of Istanbul or Constantinople. It was then that in the 15th century A.D. learned men of Eastern Rome fled to Western Rome and became instrumental in causing the Renaissance and provided the base for the present civilisation of Europe and the western world, because during the period which we are discussing, Western Rome was hardly great and indeed was regarded as a second-rate power.

These were the great neighbours of the Arabian Peninsula. The other two second-rate neighbours were, firstly, Egypt which included the present-day Egypt, Libya, Tunis and some part of Sudan. Although this country held some importance from Islam's viewpoint, yet it was not considered a great power such as Iran and Rome.

The next neighbouring country was Abyssinia which included the present-day Abyssinia and some part of the Sudan. In this region, too, there was no powerful government, though in Islam's times it was an empire with a considerable past having a civilisation and characterised by noteworthy social and

religious freedom².

As is evident while surveying these countries, only two other regions remained in the entire civilised world, namely China and India, and beyond these two we do not find any other place in the world which could be termed civilised. This detail has been mentioned here because certain people, especially among the educated class whether in Iran or here in Germany raise the question whether the prophet brought Islam as a universal religion, and if so, how much did he know about the world outside the Arabian Peninsula?

The answer is: firstly, that we do not call a person 'prophet' on account of his having been formally educated or having studied books and maps etc. A prophet to us is a person who acquires all the necessary knowledge through divine revelation, and this is without bounds or limits. Secondly, the Prophet ('a) in his own time, had sent communications to the rulers of these regions and hence the question whether the Prophet was aware of the other non-Arab nations and their basic needs would seem to be a childish question.

History has recorded that the Prophet ('a), in the third year of his ordainment, was commanded by God to make his call to Islam public and declare it to all his neighbours, relatives and the Quraish. For this purpose, he issued an open invitation inviting all to his house, and declared that they would soon have a religious code which would open the gates of the palaces of (Khusrow, the Emperor of Iran) and of Caesar and other rulers. Also, in the sixth year of his ordainment, he sent letters to the rulers of the three small regions of Hira, Ghassan and Yemen; first to Bazan king of Yemen, then to Khusrow Parviz emperor of Iran, then to the emperor of Eastern Rome, then to the ruler of Egypt (Maquqass), and next to Najashi (Negus) king of Abyssinia. All these letters have been recorded in history, and there is no doubt or question about them.

What remains to be said is whether the Prophet of Islam knew of such places as India and China or not. Anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with Arab's history would know that one of the principal occupations of life for Arab merchants was the transportation of goods. There they carried from China and India via the Sea of Oman and Hijaz to Europe, i.e., Rome. Thus, not only the prophet but Arab traders as well were familiar with India and China and even their products such as spices, perfumes, handicrafts and China ware which were the industrial and agricultural products of India and China at that time. Trade in such commodities was a part of the commercial pre-occupation of the Arabs of that time.

Therefore, in discussions should someone raise the question whether the Prophet of Islam was aware of human civilisations existing in the world or not, becomes quite irrelevant. It is likely someone may ask Prophet knew of the inhabited regions of the earth, though we could not possibly answer this question, since we do not believe that he knows everything but rather that whatever he needed to know was provided to him through revelation. I really cannot imagine if the Prophet (S) needed to know about all these places in those times.

Geographical Situation

The reason we brought up Iran for discussion is firstly, there are certain pertinent points about the Sassanid period such as the rise of the Mazdaki code of life that needs be studied and emphasised. It is an interesting discussion which will be pursued for a comparative analysis subsequently. From the point of view of natural environments, if we were to compare Iran with Arabia, it could be said that Arabia as the birthplace of Islam was a poverty stricken, dry and deprived region whereas Iran or at least some parts of Iran were populated, flourishing and affluent. Incidentally, the areas of the great Iranian plateau which were contiguous to Arabia were all green and included the western slopes of the Zagross mountain range and parts of Lorestan, Bakhtaran, Hamadan and present Kurdistan, as well as part of Mesopotamia along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates, all of which are green and full of palm groves, so that in those times the Arabs called these lands the Black Land's.

This was so because as of the dry, sandy deserts came to this part, they would notice a dark horizon which in fact was the palm groves and other trees, whereas in their own dwelling places there were only old trees in the rarely found oases. During one journey which I happened to have undertaken I noticed how poverty stricken the region was. Concerning the region along the east coast of the Red Sea, one comes to realise how unprivileged it is since despite its proximity to the Red Sea, no habitation or even a tree could be seen from Jordan right down to Jedda.

The seashore, too, totally barren, has nothing more to offer than sand and ground. I don't know whether it is the soil that is bad or the wind which blows in the direction of Africa and carries the vapours of the Red Sea towards Africa because if there were no winds, some of this vapour might have remained to produce rain fall. However, all the vapour is carried towards the opposite side of the sea, namely to Somalia and Abyssinia which derive full benefit. In any case if we were to make a relative study of the area, it will be seen that the region which is adjacent to Arabia in the east is the best part of Iran from the viewpoint of natural environment next of course to the Caspian Sea littoral shores which is a thriving and populous region.

It is interesting to know that the average population density in the regions of Gilan and Mazandaran is 100 persons per square kilometer, whereas for the whole of Iran the average is 16. The approximate area of these two provinces is 30,000 square kilometers, and they are so flourishing and populous that about three million people live³.

Aside from this prosperous region which was not contiguous to Arabia, the western regions of Iran and eastern part of Iraq which neighboured Arabia, were comparatively prosperous and utilizable from the aspects of climate, vegetation and other environmental factors.

From the viewpoint of area, the border of Iran reached the Sind River valley including the greater part of Afghanistan as far as the Oxus and Jaxartes Rivers and above the Araxes River which included the present Caucasia up to and including the Shatt-al-Arab. There were the boundaries of Iran then and

hence Arabia stands no comparison with Iran. At the time of the rise of Islam and even before that, the eastern regions of Iran were called Khurasan in general, a name which is derived from 'Khor-Assa' meaning the region of sun rise, owing to its being situated in the east of Iran. Thus, the eastern part of Iran of those days included Khurasan, southern Turkestan, Afghanistan, Baluchistan and Sistan, all of them together bearing the name Khurasan.

Civilisation

The Iranian civilisation is considered to be an Aryan civilisation, having a precedent of eleven and even twelve centuries prior to the rise of Islam, after having evolved from a nomadic and tribal society to a central authority, whereas Hijaz had not till then reached the stage of a central government. The first government established in Hijaz was under Islam, whereas the government of Media (Ecbatan) had been set up twelve centuries before that of Islam, in Hijaz. It will be an interesting example to quote from an inscription by Darius at a public works project. This inscription is naturally composed in a royal and a pompous style usual in that imperial age, however the content of it is rather interesting. Darius ruled in the years 550 to 529 B.C. The first Iranian inscription dates back to his reign, that is to say prior to him there were no such inscriptions. After a short period of chaos and disorder, Darius was able to establish a vast empire in Iran extending as far as Egypt including the entire region of Shaam, Syria and Egypt, and had thus become a neighbour of Greece.

At that time the Eastern Roman had not risen, but there was the Roman Empire in the west which had not till then gained any importance. In the time of Darius the two countries of importance were Greece and Egypt. When Iran conquered Egypt, it also brought Greece under pressure. In the wars of that time, Darius frequently waged against the Greeks, he had to employ the sea route since the Greek territory consisted of a number of islands and land campaign would not have been feasible. As the Iranian ships had no access to the Mediterranean, Darius decided to open a sea way for the Iranian warships to reach the Greek shores. Thus, he ordered a canal dug which was the precursor of the Suez Canal linking the Mediterranean Sea via the Nile River to the Red Sea. Darius describes the history of this canal in an inscription as follows:

“Ahura-Mazda, the great lord who created the lofty sky, created Man, created Man's good fortune, raised Darius to kingship, has assigned to King Darius this great empire with all these precious horses and multitudes of people⁴. I am King Darius, great king, king over many varied races, king over extensive and remote domains, son of Vishtaspa of the Achaemenids; so, declares King Darius: I am a Parsi. I govern Egypt from Pars. I decreed this canal be dug to link the between a river called Nile which flows in Egypt to the sea which reaches Iran⁵. This canal has been dug by my command and the ships have sailed via this canal from Egypt to Iran as I had desired.”

Thus, we see that twelve centuries before the rise of Islam in Arabia, a great and powerful government existed as its eastern neighbour. There is little doubt that amongst the past rulers of Iran Darius was an

outstanding figure from the standpoint of ideas, capabilities and policies. This is especially true in connection with his attitude towards the conquered lands since, unlike other great conquerors of the world, he gave more importance to the administration of his domains than merely to conquer them. After retrieving his ancestral territories i.e., the domain of his ancestor Kurosh, he had no inclination to add further territory to his realm, and only wished to create to an extent a welfare administration for his subjects in the extensive realm of Iran of those days.

This is a notable aspect of the life of Darius, and thus, according to the writings of orientalists, his accomplishments in that age are definitely outstanding, though this point is not relevant to the present discussion.

Class Structure And Social Divisions

Briefly then, such a government existed in the region, in the eastern neighbour of Arabia, about twelve centuries before the rise of Islam, however the basis and nature of those civilised governments were quite different from the Islamic government that followed. In fact, these two were essentially unlike each other, since that civilised realm was characterised by a deep class system⁶. In the extended period of human life, vestiges of which can still be observed in backward societies, people were since birth divided into various classes or castes so that the children of the lower class were naturally condemned to remain inferior and had no right to ascend to a higher class. Such was the class structure then existing.

This class structure existed in Iran, too. As far as I can recall from my studies in history, the seat and center of this caste system was in India, and since the civilisations of Iran, Greece and Rome have been Indo-European in origin, this Indian concept of class society travelled wherever Indian civilisation asserted an influence. But the cruelty and severity which were observed and are still to some extent prevalent in India in enforcing this system, have not been observed elsewhere or in Iran.

In Iran of that time, class system and social attitudes and perceptions took the form that the king was absolute and the concept of 'Shahinshah' or king of kings was introduced in the time of the Medes well before Kurosh and Darius.

The royal class was considered super-human, and other classes were related to common people who were divided into several classes: In the time of Darius the upper most class were those on whose shoulders rested the pillars of the ruling monarchy, namely soldiers who were held above all others in being given social privileges. The second class comprised the farmers⁷ and in the third class were included the artisans. Thus, there were three classes in the Achaemenid time. History does not mention any organised group named clergy as such in that period, but of course there have been priests in the same way that there had been a faith and religion⁸.

The clergy as a class made its appearance in the Sassanid time, and as it will be explained later, this class of priests came to be regarded as the first class, warriors and soldiers as the second class, clerks

and civil servants as the third class with the farmers artisans and craftsmen falling in the fourth class.

In his epic 'Shahnameh', Ferdowsi, has this to say about these classes:

There was a group called Katuzis (priests) who were engaged in worshipping,

The next in rank were the Neissaris (military) who were warriors, lions of battle, honour of the army and country;

Then came the Nassoudi (farmers) to whom all are indebted; for, they plough, sow and reap that they may not be blamed;

The fourth group were the Ahyu-Khashi (artisans) who used their hand to shape unruly substances, and employed their ideas and intelligence.[9](#)

The above were what Ferdowsi has described in his Shahnameh, but according to Tho'alebi¹⁰ there were the following classes:

1. warriors,
2. priests and physicians,
3. clerks and government employees,
4. farmers, craftsmen and artisans.

Tho'alebi's description appears to be historically more reliable, since Ferdowsi's Shahnameh is mostly based on hearsay.

In a letter written by one of the governors of northern Iran to the king of Tabarestan, priests have been accorded the first class, warriors the second, clerks the third, and labourers the fourth class; a classification which differs from Ferdowsi's.

In any case the Priests and soldiers constituted the first and the second classes or vice versa; clerks and government employees the third class, and farmers and artisans made up the fourth class.

In such a society the class implied that the child of a farmer, or artisan or tradesman could when grown up become a good farmer, or artisan or tradesman, but he could never entertain the thought of raising his social status to that of a clergyman, a warrior, a clerk or a government servant; he did not belong there and he did not have the right to hope, except in very exceptional cases when a person could be elevated by the king's special decree to a higher class. This of course meant an upgrading limited only to that person's lifetime for the education of special talents and skills.

This social system with such limitation was quite contrary to what Islam introduced later on. The class system has purposely been discussed here because in the discussion of various faiths and creeds especially in the Sassanid period of time, this subject will gain importance and deserves particular attention.

Progress In Learning

We will deal later with the state of learning and progress in this field during the Sassanids period as concerning scientific and industrial progress in the Achaemenid period in Iran, no substantial evidence is available. However, what is certain is that Darius could not have succeeded in administering such an extensive realm, without a stock of knowledge and learning. However, are particular aspect which occurs in historical evidence is that the sovereigns of Iran seemed to have cherished the idea that all the civilised lands of that time would eventually become part of Iran even though two other states existed¹¹. Thus, we witness that the great physician of that time is a Greek, and the renowned geographer who was sent to the Sind valley by Darius to survey that land, and prepare a report, was, too, a Greek.

Even the best and the finest of warriors of that time were Greek, the reason being that in Darius' mind these subjects were not non-Iranians, but were regarded as citizens of the greater Iran. Therefore, it did not occur to Darius and other kings that the people of central region who lived close to the seat of the government should remain among the artisans and tradesmen of the fourth class, while physician, clerks, and warriors should be from Greece, Egypt and outlying regions! So, the scholars were brought from the outer regions of the empire while locals comprised the artisans and craftsmen. It is for this reason that the history of that time fails to indicate any outstanding Iranian scholar who was not of Greek, Egyptian or Indian stock.

That does not mean of course that such individuals did not exist. Very little historical evidence is available and addedly, most of the available sources are of Greek origin, and the Greeks were not behind others in holding nationalistic prejudice – if anything, they were well ahead in this respect. Therefore, it becomes difficult to reach a verdict in this matter.

Anyhow from the point of view of academic learning, no distinguished scholars in particular fields appear in Iran or in India or in Ionia, in the south of Turkey near the Mediterranean, who could equal the personalities from Phoenicia, Chaldea, Assyria, Greece and Egypt. In Phoenicia, which included a part of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and a small portion of Jordan as well, we come across such individuals who were superior to Iran in learning. From the economic aspect, too, they enjoyed better conditions, and were richer and more prosperous than Arabia.

Religion In The Achaemenid Period

In Iran, according to available sources, there existed a faith called Mizda'i which professed faith in one god named Ahura-Mizda, a name, having a root which is similar to a Greek word, meaning 'great and possessor of wisdom', hence Ahur-Mizda would mean the great god of wisdom and reason. This faith professed belief in god as the unique creator of the world, and a belief in a number of secondary and tertiary gods, and in angels, in the resurrection which is all very significant, and also in good deeds as something very essential. Thus, it is a highly interesting point of note that as a result of such basic

religious education in ancient Iran, Islam spread so swiftly eastward.

The Mizda'i religion during subsequent periods became corrupted with superstitions so that a man called Zoroaster appeared to reform the Mizda'i religion. His place of appearance has been a subject of controversy in history¹².

Of course, Zoroaster is not a prophet but a reformer of the Mizda'i code. As to the appearance of Zoroaster quite odd accounts are related in history about the place and the date of his appearance, though generally historical indications place his appearance about six centuries B.C. simultaneously in regions which had a common origin and similar conditions, namely India and Iran. In Iran Mizda'i faith is an ancient religion, and in India Brahmanism is an ancient faith, but no evidence is available about the date of origin of either of them.

Mizda'i faith was later on corrupted by superstitions, and Zoroaster as the reformer makes his appearance in Iran. In India Brahmanism, too, gets mixed with superstitions, and a man named Buddha appears to reform it. There is a great resemblance between the life of Zoroaster and Buddha in all the phases from the beginning to the end. In the Semitic regions, too, six centuries later, namely concurrent with the rise of Jesus¹³ Christ ('a) the main faith had been the monotheistic religion of Judaism.

This religion to faith was spoilt by superstitions, and a man named Jesus rose to fight those superstitions. In this way the life of Jesus Christ ('a) resembles those of Zoroaster and Buddha. I do truly wish that I could have delved in deeper study in the similarity present, especially in the case of Zoroaster and Buddha, as both of them have a fifty percent resemblance with the life of Jesus. There is another common characteristic between the lives of Jesus and Zoroaster; the history of Christianity shows that Jesus was ordained as a prophet at the age of thirty. It is said that Zoroaster, too, rose at the same age as a reformer to correct the Mizda'i code by the order of Ahura-Mizda.

Before the rise of Zoroaster, according to the available testimonials of history a class named the Magi held responsibility for religious practices in Iran especially in Azarbayjan, as keepers of the fires. It has been said that Zoroaster himself was at first either of the Magi class or in contact with them and had even wished to become a Magus. There is a frequent mention of Magus and Magi in the Achaemenid inscriptions, but no mention is made of Zoroaster. In Zoroaster's hymns, called 'Gathas', no mention has been made of the Magi except in one place, and no mention is made of Darius and Achaemenids at all. Thus, it is not clear for us whether the religion in the time of the Achaemenids and Darius' era had been Mizda'i faith or zoroastrianism or different schools of Buddhism. What is certain, however, is that Judaism had existed as a religion and then had been patronised by Darius¹⁴. This point is mentioned in the Jewish holy books as well as historical records¹⁵.

What also appears certain is that in those days in the realm of Iran various faiths had been prevalent, and there may not have been a formal or a state religion as such especially since no mention is made of Zoroaster in the inscriptions of Darius, nor has there been a mention of the Achaemenids in the 'Gathas'.

This could lead us to deduce that state and religion had separate existence, allowing people to practice their own religion and letting the government proceed with its own function. It is in the Sassanid period that religion gains the government's support and there is a state it became the religion of the country. This aspect warrants an exclusive and objective study of the Sassanid period since it is closely related to the age of the rise of Islam.

To sum up, this eastern neighbour of Arabia was twelve centuries ahead of Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, in extent, greatness, power, natural resources, social, technical and administrative progress and attainment of central governmental organisation and also historical precedence. How, then, did it happen that such an advanced country should succumb so easily to a newly-risen movement originating in Hijaz, is the topic for our further discussion.

Iran In The Sassanid Period

Iran under the Sassanids went through a glorious age distinct in its history. Observations related from this period reveal why Islam spread so rapidly in Iran. Also to be kept in mind, there had existed their natural propensity, dating back three or four centuries for the acceptance of such a faith as Islam. This subject, too, will be discussed briefly.

In the year 224 A.D. almost four centuries before the rise of Islam in, Iran the Sassanids succeeded the Ashkanian dynasty¹⁶. The Achaemenid rule had its root in Fars, but the Ashkanis were not from that region. The Sassanids once again rose from Fars, and a chief named Ardshir Babakan who was a descendant of Sassan and a governor of Ardavan V, the last Ashkani king, decided to set up a central government modelled after the Achaemenid dynasty with greater Fars as its base including the present Khuzestan.

Within a short time Ardshir managed to gather forces and mobilise them and seize the control and then, after much struggle, establish the government of Iran on the same model and the same extent as the Achaemenid realm.

Supremacy Of Religion And Political Power

Ardshir was a descendant of Sassan who was a priest, and as such in his psychological, hereditary and personality make up, it asserted decisive influence so that at the assumption of power he decided to establish a government on the basis of religion, and make that religion the state religion of the country so that the two pillars of power, politico-military administration and religion should form as the foundation of his rule. Whether this concept originated from a personal inspiration of Ardshir attributable to descent from a priest, or whether it was a social dictate of the time which his observations led him to believe and which would make his rule smoother, is not an easy question to answer.

What is certain, however, is that, though in the Achaemenid period a religion existed, yet a religious

freedom existed in the whole of the Achaemenid empire, each group practising its own religion. Though the prevalent religion was Zoroastrianism, yet alongside of it Judaism and some other local faiths also existed. Christianity had not till then made its appearance. If we were to regard Sabean as an ancient faith, it, too, existed in the region of Syria and Phoenicia. During the Achaemenid period there was no religion as the state religion, although the priests were regarded as a distinguished class, yet they had no official recognition. During the Ashkani period, too, the position was the same.

Zoroastrianism As The State Religion

Ardshir got the idea of giving a state religion to the country and that the government should have an official religion, and this religion was Zoroastrianism. There may have existed some evidence to show that this matter was based on a social necessity in the sense that Ardshir intended to revive a kind of Iranian nationality based on past history, and link his lineage to the Achaemenids and so prove himself as a kin and descendant of Kurosh; also, as Zoroastrianism was an Iranian religion with a considerable following, he figured that by reviving that religion, he could exploit both the lines of propaganda to expand and reinforce his rule. If this was the case, then by establishing a state religion and linking religion with politics was a dictate of his time. Or perhaps these considerations were never relevant and the matter was wholly personal. In any case with the assumption of power by the Sassanids, a new factor entered the social life of the Iranians, namely that the government recognised a state religion that is Zoroastrianism.

During the Achaemenid period, Greece was a powerful rival of Iran on its western frontiers, a Greece which frequently included parts of Turkey and Syria. Although until the rise of Alexander no strong government existed in Greece, yet even those small governments asserted some weight. For instance, even though Athens was much smaller in area and population as compared with Iran, still it held a high position from the viewpoint of philosophy, civilisation, political concepts and naval power and military potential. Thus, they were always a source of trouble for Iran. In the Achaemenid time other antagonists on the western borders were Chaldea, Babylon and Assyria in the region of Iraq, and Syria and a part of Turkey, but the Achaemenids removed these obstacles and conquered them, leaving Greece as a strong opponent. In the Sassanid period there was no powerful Greece any more.

In the Achaemenid period, although there were governments in Rome and Italy, yet they were not of much importance. But during the Sassanid period that is for eight centuries, there rose a powerful government and a great empire in that part of the world with its center in Rome. This empire, too, had a state religion which was Christianity. In north Africa, Egypt still retained its position as an ancient civilisation, and the islands of Crete¹⁷ and Sicily¹⁸, too, possessed an ancient history and civilisation.

On the whole southern Europe was under the control of a strong government with its center in Rome and Christianity as its state religion. But whether the wide influence of Christianity at that time or thereabouts and its recognition as the state religion had been a pressing necessity and an effective

factor in influencing Ardshir in adopting an official religion for his government, is a question that requires further study. But anyhow the Sassanid empire had as its western neighbour a vast and powerful government in the Roman Empire where Christianity was the state religion.

Between the Persian and the Roman empires were situated the remains of Chaldea, Assyria and Babylon which kept on changing hands between these two. The middle east as far as history can recall, has never been a quiet region, especially at the time when the empires of Iran and Rome were engaged in playing vital roles in the world. What is known for certain, however, is that the Sassanid government began its work on a new basis, namely the recognising of a state religion, a religion which was patronised by the ruling class and was attended by elaborate ceremonies by the Zoroastrian priests and their organisation which was able to exert pressure upon religious minorities and followers of other religions. This was actually the case in many of the Sassanid years when non-Zoroastrian minorities remained under duress.

In the discussions related to religion tolerance in Islam and before Islam, it is worth remembering that during the 427 years' rule of the Sassanids in Iran¹⁹, almost no tolerance was shown. The Iranian government recognised a state religion dominated by a powerful organisation of Zoroastrian priests which kept the religious minorities under duress. This of course was the situation for most of the time.

Meanwhile during the period when Iran was formally recognised as a Zoroastrian state, there appeared signs of influence of different views and faiths, namely the influence of Buddhism, certain Indian creeds, Christianity and Judaism upon the thoughts and beliefs of Iranians. This is the first characteristic of the Sassanid rule which lasted four centuries before the advent of Islam.

The Administration Of The State

The second characteristic of the Sassanid rule was its administration, possessing a developed organisation with official bureaus, correspondence, decrees, accounts and records to a greater extent than before. It could be said that with the arrival of Alexander in Iran and afterwards, Iran went through an evolutionary period in this respect. Thus, in this period the influence of tribes who were called 'clerks' or 'secretaries' and worked in government offices, grew much greater during the Sassanid rule than before, and they played a significant role. The art of writing in the Sassanid time was not only limited to government business, but was also important in religion. In the early years of this dynasty's rule 'Avesta' which had till then not been compiled and existed only in memorised form that was transferred verbatim from person to person, was compiled with the endeavours of the Zoroastrian priests and even commentaries were added in the form of 'Zand' and 'Pazand'. In this way the principles of faith became defined and organised. Here we quote from a text by the head priest and religious authority of the time of Ardshir Babakan, the first Sassanid king, to show the influence of religion and ecclesiastical organisation in the Sassanid system of government. It says:

“The Mazdai faith was strengthened by my hand, the learned men were rightfully elevated to high places.

Those of the 'Magi' who were seized with doubts and uncertainties, were punished by me, or were pardoned after they had confessed their errors and sins²⁰. Fire-temples were built by me and the Magi were assigned to them. God, the King and I confirmed their appointments²¹. Numerous fire-temples were built throughout Iran. Intermarriage between kinsmen and near relatives was once more forbidden²². Under my guidance those had worshiped demons, turned back to God. Crowns were removed from the heads of many a sovereign²³. Faith and religion found glory and splendour, and God's command overshadowed everything. If I were to write down all the tasks which have been accomplished, it would prove a lengthy process. Wherever our army stepped, a fire-temple was set up. In Antioch, Talis, Armenia, Georgia ... everywhere we set up fire-temples.”²⁴

Thus, it would appear that in these conditions the Sassanids assumed power in Iran and the influence of clerks, secretaries and government recorders as well as clergymen was paramount. To show the influence of the scribes and clerks, we will quote from Henri Masse, a well-known European Orientalist²⁵:

“At the head of the government was the Grand Vizir who, under the direct command of the King, administered the country and acted as his deputy when the king was away on travel or engaged in the battlefield. Next to him was the Zoroastrian high priest. This shows that in those days ministerial position and chancellorship served the king and acted for him, whereas previous to this, the Army commander came next to the king in precedence. At this time, although the field commanders and generals held importance, the highest authority in the administration of the country was vested in the Grand Vizir and Chief of scribes and secretaries.”

In order to further illustrate extent to which the people's political life was mixed with religion, we will quote another part from Henri Masse's writing: “A large number of clergymen intervened in the affairs of the people and controlled their daily life, thereby gaining much wealth, and extending the sphere of their influence, and becoming an independent state within the state. Occasionally they would even form a front against the king in collaboration with the nobility, and such, confrontation weakened the Sassanid rule.”

The purpose of quoting these points is to show the degree of influence religion exerted in the social life and in governmental affairs and administration of the country. All this paved the way both positively and negatively, for the spread of Islam into Iran.

Generally speaking, the two characteristics of the Sassanid period were: the mingling of politics and the government, with religion and the extraordinary degree of influence of the clergy and their religious organisations to such an extent that it would be interesting to note at that time a seminary and a college of logic existed alongside in the city of Rey, for the training of religious students for various positions. Another important point was the high degree of influence the clerks and government employees and keepers of records had in the society.

As it has been noted earlier, the social life of people was always divided into various clans and in this period the order of classes was undergoing a change.

Social Class Structure

In the Sassanid time the division of the population into the 'haves' and 'have not' became more apparent. The distinguished classes were made up of the clerks, clergy, military and nobles, while the ordinary classes included artisans, farmers and tradesmen. These upper classes during the most famous and brilliant period, namely in the time of king Khusrow Anushiravan I, enjoyed the most privileged life and were exempted from the payment of taxes and from conscription in wars. All these burdens were placed upon the class of artisans and tradesmen and especially upon the villagers. The artisans and tradesmen class paid taxes only, while the villagers had to give both money and their lives in return for a meagre livelihood. In this manner there existed a great class difference during the Sassanid rule, especially among the ordinary classes which were made up of rural population and the tradesmen and artisans.

Foreign Policy

During the four centuries of the Sassanid rule, from the viewpoint of foreign relations, wars between Iran and Rome were the most significant events in the pages of history. In these wars there were several points worthy of attention, the foremost being the intervention of religion in the conduct of wars.

At the beginning of the 5th century A.D. under the leadership of a priest named Nestorius²⁶ a sect called Nestorians came into being among the Christians in the region of Syria. This sect differed from the other Christians in their beliefs, and for that reason they were condemned for heresy and excommunicated by the powerful church of that time in Constantinople, whereas the sect had a large following in the Middle East. Although Zoroastrianism was at that time the state religion of Iran, the government gave asylum to the Nestorians in order to gather a group of supporters between its own realm and Rome, its powerful neighbour. This support enabled the Nestorians to build churches in the realm of Iran and engage in propagating their religion.

The other point is that when the Roman Emperors saw that the powerful and centralised government in Iran had become a source of trouble for them, after revealing its intentions of conquering all of the Roman empire and moreover, owing to its distance from the territories of Iran and its inability to maintain watch over its distant frontiers, a powerful emperor of Rome named Constantine²⁷ decided to establish an eastern capital for himself. This coincided with the time when the Iranian emperor, too, had determined to establish a western capital at Tysphon in the territory of Iraq, while the Romans chose the city of Byzantine which later on became known as Constantinople. This change of capital from Rome to Constantinople produced many changes in the past history, the main factor of which was the vicinity of the two powerful neighbours who were engaged in constant dispute, not about any ideology, but about expanding their respective realms and conquering the world, namely personal motives.

Thus, the foreign policy of Iran in this period was firstly dominated by religion, and secondly by the continued wars lasting four centuries. For one hundred years, there existed a peace pact between them, but for the rest of the period, namely for three centuries they were continuously in a state of war which became quite intense at the end of the sixth century A.D. That is in the time of Khosrow Parviz when intense wars raged between him and Heraclius, the Roman emperor. Both these emperors were contemporaries of the Holy Prophet (S) of Islam who sent written communications inviting them to embrace Islam. The war between the Emperors of Iran and Rome continued so long that they were losing their last ounce of strength. We will discuss these wars in more details later on when the subject of the birth of Islam comes up.

The Appearance Of Manichaeus

As mentioned earlier, the rule of Ardshir, began with the recognition of the Zoroastrian faith. After his death, Shapoor the 1st, his son, became king who after further expanding the realm of his father, dominated the situation. He learnt that a man named Manichaeus²⁸ had risen claiming to be a prophet. Shapoor 1 received Manichaeus in court and after a few sessions fell deeply under his influence.

Manichaeus was an Iranian who was born in Iraq in a village by the Tigris. He was familiar with Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, and by mingling these three faiths created a special creed and declared himself its prophet. After meeting Shapoor in Khuzistan and influencing him in favor of his religion, he obtained from Shapoor a directive to all his governors to allow Manichaeus and his missionaries freedom to propagate their religion.

Manichaeus rose as a reformer of the Zoroastrian religion, but he offered a set of teachings which were a combination of the ideas of Zoroaster, Christ and Buddha. For thirty years Manichaeus and his missionaries carried out their mission, winning numerous followers until in the time of Bahram II in the year 277 Manichaeus was arrested and in a court held by the Zoroastrian high priest he was charged with heresy in religion. He was thrown in prison and after 26 days he was killed there in an atrocious manner. His skin was then filled with straw and hung in front of Bahram's court as a warning to anyone who committed heresy in religion.

The question is what led Shapoor to favor Manichaeus' religion? Historians explain that Shapoor had realised that the Zoroastrian faith did not fulfill the needs and spiritual expectations of the people, and was inadequate in satisfying their religious spirit, and for this reason he gave Manichaeus a free hand as a religious reformer. This shows that Zoroastrianism, which some people wish to revive now and make it replace Islam in some parts of Islamic lands, was as early as so many centuries before the advent of Islam, as ineffective a creed that it could not satisfy the people, and thus, the king allowed a religious reformer like Manichaeus to become active. It should be remembered that at that time a religious vacuum existed in the realm of Iran. Manichaean faith has had a strange fate and has had many ups and downs, not as much as a religion, but as a philosophy it sent ripples as far as China on the one

side, and as far as Europe including England and France in the other direction but that in itself is a long story.

The Rise Of Mazdak

Another interesting development from that religious viewpoint in the Sassanid period is the rise of Mazdak. In the time of Qubad, father of Anushiravan, a man named Mazdak rose with a new religion. In Mazdak's faith a new aspect of faith is discernible that did not exist in the former religions. In Zoroastrianism attention was paid to moral aspects such as truth and honesty and spiritual matters and worship of God, and sacrifice etc., but it did not deal with rights and social problems, and not only accepted class divisions but also supported it.

The Manichaean faith, too, despite proposing reforms in religious matters, introduced no social changes. But Mazdak dealt with both religious and social matters. On the one hand with its inclinations towards Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity, namely towards asceticism, abandonment of carnal desires, and isolation from worldly affairs by leading an ascetic life, and with such views about social matters, Mazdak threatened the social order of the time. About his philosophy and religion, Mazdak used to say "True bliss for human beings lies in a peaceful environment free from rancour and enmity. But the disputes and wars which occur among people are either over wealth and enjoyment of affluence, property, water, trade, capital, luxuries or over women. In order to remove these disputes altogether, wealth and women should be commonly shared^{[29](#)}.

This creed threatened the system of social class structure and quite naturally, it found numerous followers among the deprived classes. Qubad, too, as a young ruler who was opposed to the influence of priests, nobles and upper classes, and felt that their influence would hinder the proper administration of the country, supported Mazdak faith, and patronised Mazdak very strongly. In this way about the year 484 A.D. that is about 125 years before the advent of Islam, a revolutionary religious fervour governed under which the deprived masses tore up the former bonds of class life and formalities and adopted to an extreme extent the ideas of communal sharing of everything including women and abolition of family and marriage and proprietorship, with the result that chaos and disorder reigned everywhere, since such ideas both from the viewpoint of religion and social rights and internal politics were not acceptable to the people of that time, even though Qubad supported Mazdak to diminish the deep influence of the ecclesiastical organisation.

However, the clergy's influence succeeded in rousing people to revolt. On the other hand, Mazdak's ideas, too, about family and wealth sharing were so extremist that they shook the foundations of the existing system since they were contrary to human nature. Therefore, they could not endure for long, and when Anushirvan assumed power in the year 531 A.D. Mazdak was executed. His followers were scattered or destroyed, and once more the Zoroastrian faith and its priests gained dominance over the situation^{[30](#)}.

Conditions Prevailing In Iran At The Time Of The Rise Of Islam

At the time of advent of Islam, the government of Iran had become strangely weak, and after Khosrow Parviz within a few years he was succeeded by several male and female rulers until Yazdgerd the 3rd assumed power³¹.

In brief, to the east of the region of the birth of Islam there existed a vast realm with an ancient civilisation spread over twelve centuries. In Iran the central government had existed a long time and several religions appearing during this period which had exerted profound influence and found many followers had not survived for long. Neither Zoroastrianism, nor the religions of Manichaeus nor Mazdak could stand against Islam. In that environment there was a kind of readiness and thirst for destroying the existing order both socially and spiritually, and thus, Islam entered Iran in an environment that was all set to accept the new faith. Those who attribute the rapid spread of Islam to the use of the sword are not sufficiently familiar with the history of that period. The fact of the matter is as the historians write: In most cases before the soldiers of Islam reached the cities which they had conquered, the populace would throw open the gates for them from within and welcomed them. What is certain is that Iran had fallen into a state of deterioration in all respects whether political social or religious at the time of the rise of Islam.

Questions And Answers

Question 1

You said in your discourse that in the present world environment there are no societies based on classes, but classes exist in a modified form.

Answer

Not in that form. In the class system certain people are explicitly told that they have not the right to even think of entering a class of an upper status. The hardest and ugliest obstacles that could be imagined exist in such systems which to put limitations on the thinking of a group. It is true that indirect pressure has considerable effect, but the very existence of indirect pressure shows that the worth of those placed under pressure has gone up to some extent. If they tell you that you cannot directly and openly strike a person, it means that the said person's personality has grown in relation to you so that you cannot directly strike him. Of course, even today there exist indirect restrictions in the world, though term, class could not be applied to them; they might be called communities. Communities under indirect pressure do exist although these could not be compared with their previous form. You could never think of what a class society actually meant.

Unfortunately, among the aristocrats in Iran, sometimes you would see the son of a farmer or villager who, despite his education and worth, is not given the chance to raise his status, simply because of his lineage. This is a vestige of those old class divisions which is a system based on man's inherent

selfishness. Therefore, you can never uproot it fully, even though its effect might diminish. Now can you imagine if such a system found legal support, how comical it would be. The existence of such a law which would prevent a farmer or tradesman from rising up to the class of warriors and that he would be punished even for entertaining such a thought, would seem ridiculous and incredible to us. They say that in India there still exists a class system. I cannot bring myself to believe it until I saw it for myself. For us, Muslims such a situation is unthinkable; for, since our birth and growing up we have been accustomed to the concept of Islamic brotherhood and equality. But there is no doubt that there exist groups that always seek to preserve their interests in one way or another.

Question 2

How did the Holy Prophet (S) write his letters? The Qur'an says that he was unlettered and untaught. Did he remain like that till the end?

Answer

The letters were not in the Holy Prophet (S)'s own handwriting; they were written by his scribes. According to historical sources the Prophet was able to write during the last years of his life, therefore those letters which were written in the sixth year of his migration, namely three or four years before his demise, are said to have been written in his own handwriting. But we cannot claim that all of them were written by him, since we know whose handwriting, they been. Maybe the writers of the other letters would be also discovered³².

Question 3

Were China and India. protectorates or independent at the time of the rise of Islam? Has there been a mention of dispatch of letters to these lands by the prophet?

Answer

China and India were independent, and the holy prophet sent no letters there. According to some historical sources, the Prophet in the last days of his life sent, not a political but a religious delegation whose members were also merchants. These men entered Tibet after the Prophet's demise in the time of Abu Bakr and began to deal in commodities. This is mentioned occasionally in notes and obscure sources of history, and need much hard work.

Of course, India and China have both passed through tempestuous times, and their governments were not local like those of Iran and Rome except in China for short periods. But I cannot be sure that this has been the case in the time of the Prophet. However, it may be said that even if they resembled Iran and Rome in having a well-established government, the Holy Prophet (S) would most likely not have written to them. He was concerned first with Mecca and then with Medina, and it took him six years to establish order in these two places. Therefore, the idea of writing letters to China or India would not appear likely,

since as a Prophet who claimed to have power, he had to dominate his near regions first, though a remark is attributed to him saying: "Seek knowledge even if it is found in China."

Attention to the entire civilised world of that time is obvious in the teachings of Islam but not in the form of writing letters, since firstly it is not clear whether a central government had existed there at that time, and secondly, even if such a government did exist, it would not have been of much use for the Prophet to take such a step before bringing his surrounding regions under central. On the whole, the time of writing letters is related to the years when Egypt, Abyssinia, Rome and Iran became the political neighbours of Islam, and it was then that the Prophet wrote to them and to several other smaller rulers in Yemen, Ghassan and Hira which were dependencies.

Question 4

How were the original inscriptions of Iran deciphered?

Answer

Three European scholars who were Orientalists worked jointly and completed each other's tasks³³. This is how they proceeded: the first orientalist who was not familiar with the topic of the inscription, succeeded in reading only the proper nouns by means of distinguishing the signs, such as the word 'Darius' and 'Pars' and gradually some letters such as P, A, R, S, I, D, V were deciphered. What was fortunate was that in these inscriptions the Greek and Babylonian translations occurred side by side, thereby providing three texts and this made deciphering much easier than if there had been no translation accompanying the inscription. Thus, the expert was able, with the aid of those translation, to read the proper names since they have a similar sound in both languages, and then gradually decipher the letters. One of these scholars spent much of his life collecting this information. Then after the stage of proper names, the subsequent stages were not so difficult, and the next two scholars completed the task. About three experts devoted their whole lifetime in extracting the meaning and finally translating the texts.

¹. At first the Greeks applied the title 'Berber' to all non-Greeks, using it to mean wild, uneducated and coarse. The Romans used it for all nations outside Greco-Roman culture. Brukhaus Encyclopedia; Wil Durant's History of Civilisation, Vol. 4, p. 30.

². In a subsequent discussion, it will become apparent that Abyssinia played a noteworthy role in the history of Islam in that period.

³. According to the statistics for the years 1976 and 1986 the two provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran had the highest population density, whereas the population density of Iran excluding Urumia Lake but including the unpopulated desert areas, the average was 20.5 per square kilometers for 1976, and 30.3 for 1986. In the year 1976 Gilan had an average of 107, and in 1986 141.9. Mazandaran came third with a slight difference after Hamdan. The total population of Gilan and Mazandaran for 1986 was 5,536,018. The population of Tehran has not been taken into account owing to its attraction and numerous other appeals. For Tehran the average in the year 1976 was 194.2, and for 1986 it was 301 per square kilometers. Source: Iranian Center of Statistics.

⁴. It would appear that for King Darius, horses had more value than the human beings since he has mentioned horses before human beings.

5. Meaning through the Red Sea via the strait of Aden to the Sea of Oman and the Persian Gulf, either of which lay in Iranian domain.
6. The word class system should not be applied to what exists today, since there is almost no such thing to-day, with India's exception. The use of the term 'classes' in connection with civilised countries would be wrong. One could use the word 'group' or 'existing groups' instead.
7. Here we are dealing with the time of Darius.
8. Ancient Iran, by Hassan Pimia, Vol. 2, p. 1,500.
9. Shahnameh, Ferdowsi, Vol. 1, p. 26.
10. Shahnameh of Tho'alebi's, translated by Mahnloud Hedayat, p. 6.
11. In the time of Darius, western Rome was of no significance, and the civilised lands of those days included a small Greece, and to some extent the island of Sicily and southern part of Italy and Rome which were collectively of little account.
12. History has referred to Azarbayjan in one case as the place where Zoroaster made his appearance, and Susa (Shoosh) capital of the Achaemenid kings as another spot, and again elsewhere in eastern Iran in the deserts of Baluchistan.
13. History of Judaism in Iran, Vol. 1, pp. 25 onward.
14. Ancient Iran, Hassan Pimia, Vol. 2, p. 52.
15. In the Torah the name of Darius, son of Histaspes, has been mentioned in a few places: once in the Book of Azra, Chapter Six, Verse 1, saying: "Then King Darius ordered a search in the library of Babylon which held treasures". and then in Verse 15 of the same chapter related to Darius' order for building a temple: "This temple was completed on the third of Azar in the sixth year of Darius' reign." Likewise, the Book of Prophet Zachariah ('a), too, mentions, him in Chapter 1, Verse 1 and Chapter 7, Verse 1. It should be mentioned that in ancient times, we come across the names of two other Dariuses, namely the Median Darius the last Median king, and Darius the 2nd or 3rd who was vanquished by Alexander, and they should not be mistaken for Darius the Great.
16. All calendar years given here must be approximate, since the calendar took an exact form only a few centuries ago, Calendars used to be carried owing to the different ways of Compilation and thus a difference of one or two years is possible. Although these dates are related to a source, yet that source itself may have variation.
17. Crete, the old name of which was Kandie, is a Greek island in the south of Greece, with an area of 8,618 square kilometers.
18. Sicily, an island with an area of 25,740 square kilometers, was colonised by the Phoenicians, then Greeks and in 241 A.D. by the Romans. Later on, the Vandals and Normans invaded it, and finally in 1860 it was annexed to Italy.
19. The Sassanide rule began in 224 A.D. and ended in 652 A.D. with the murder of Yazdgerd III.
20. It seems that the system of inquisition had existed in the Zoroastrian ecclesiastical organisation.
21. This shows that the assignment of ordinary attendants, too, had to be confirmed by the King as well as the head priest.
22. This is one of the Zoroastrian injunctions.
23. This remark shows the degree of influence wielded by the clergy and religion in the government of Ardshir Babakan, founder of the Sassanid dynasty.
24. Antioch was a famous ancient city built by Slukus I about 300 B.C. and named it after his father Antiochus. This city was occupied and pillaged by the Sassanid king, Shapour I in the years 258 and 260 A.D. Antioch held importance owing to the Christian religious councils convened there. Delhkhoda Persian Dictionary.
25. Henri Masse (1886–1969), born in Lorraine where he was educated, and for further studies went to Nancy and then to Paris in the school of Oriental Studies at the Sorbonne University. He became familiar with Sanskrit and Pahlavi languages and archaeology. He learnt Persian from Mirza Muhammad Mahalati, the eye specialist and assistant professor at the same school, and from Clement Huart. He visited Iran five times, and more than half of his 62 works are related to Iranian literature and history, especially about Sa'di, Hafez and Ferdowsi.
26. Nestorius (380–451 A.D.) Bishop of Constantinople (428–431 A.D.), unlike the bishops of Alexandria who believed in the divinity of Jesus, believed that Jesus was the son of a human mother, and the unity of divinity and humanity in Jesus resembles the unity of a man and woman after marriage, namely two separate natures in a single body. He was exiled to the Lybian desert for this belief and excommunicated.
27. Constantine the 1st (274–337 A.D.), vanquishing Maxence by the walls of Rome in 312 A.D. caused the recognition of

Christianity as the official religion of the Rorhian empire, transferred the capital to Byzantine which was given the name of Constantinople. This city was in 45 A.D. captured by Sultan Muhammad II of the Ottomans. Eastern Roman empire existed from 330 to 1461 A.D. – Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary. Vol. 5 and 6.

[28.](#) Manichaeus (215–276 A.D.) in his youth studied philosophy, science and various religions, and at the age of 24 he claimed prophethood. After being treated with disfavor by Shapoor the 1st, he was exiled from Iran, and he travelled to India, Tibet and China, and in 272 A.D. returned to Iran after Shapoor's death. Hormoz, Shapoor's successor, allowed him to propagate his faith freely, and he found many followers in a short time. He was killed by Bahram I after Hormoz. Among his works are the books of Shapoorgan in Pahlavi and Arjang in which he employed pictures to attract the illiterate, thereby he was nicknamed 'the painter' – Dehkhoda Persian Dictionary Vol. 6; History of Iranians and Arabs in the Sassanid time, Theodore Noldke, pp. 123, 611 and 615.

[29.](#) Of course this communistic idea of sharing wealth and women has a Platonic root, a matter which is questionable.

[30.](#) Khosrow I Anushirvan became king in 531 A.D. When the question of whether Anushirvan or Kavous should succeed Qubad was being decided in a religious session, the Mazdakis were defeated and the soldiers who had encircled them, killed them all including Mazdak and his leading priests – Rise of Mazdak by Nasrollah Falsafm, and History of Iranians and Arabs in Sassanid time, by Abass Zaryab, p. 688 onward.

[31.](#) Between the death of Khosrow Parvis II (627 A.D.) until the succession by Yazgerd the 3rd, these individuals reigned in Iran: Ghobad II, Shiruya son of Khosrow Parviz (627–629 A.D.), Ardshir III son of Shiruya, Khosrow III son of Ghobad I, Javanshir son of Khosrow Parviz (629 A.D.), Purandokht daughter of Khosrow Parviz (630 A.D.), Goshtasb–Bandeh son of Ghobad I, Azarmidokht daughter of Khosrow Parviz, Hormoz V grandson of Khosrow Parviz, Khosrow IV grandson of Khosrow Parviz, Firus II grandson of Anushirvan, Khosrow V grandson of Anushirvan, (631 A.D.), Yazgerd III (632–652 A.D.). The Sassanid rulers were 37 in number, eleven of whom after the death of Khosrow Parviz, ruled only for six years of the total life of this dynasty which was 429 years.

[32.](#) For further information refer to "Makatib–ar–Rasul" translated by Ali Ahmadi Mianji, and "Muhammad and the Kings" by Ahmad Saberi, and "Watha'iq" by Muhammad Hamidullah.

[33.](#) The process followed in reading the inscriptions was in the following manner. Carsten Niebuhr published copies of the three lingual inscriptions in the year 1788, and then in the year 1798 Gerhard Tychsen, a German scholar, based his theory on the assumption that the inscriptions were in three different languages.

In 1802 a Danish scholar, Friedrich Munter, took another step in deciphering the inscriptions. The man who succeeded in discovering the key to the ancient Persian writing was a young German teacher named Friedrich Grotefend who presented his discovery to the Scientific society of Gottingen. The Danish scholar Rasmus Kristian Rask (1787–1832) professor of Oriental languages of Copenhagen University in 1826, and ten years later in 1836 the French scholar Burnouf, and later on Christian Lassen completed this research. The three scholars mentioned in the above text must have been Grotefend, Rask and Burnouf. For further information refer to "Silent Languages" by Johannes Friedrich, p. 54 onward; also: Brookhaus German Encyclopedia, Vol. 15, and British Encyclopedia, Vol. 8, under Rask.

3. Ancient Egypt

- **Civilisation**

- **Laws, Traditions And Religion**

- **Government In Ancient Egypt**

● Questions And Answers

As regards the environment attending the birth of Islam we have already discussed brightly about the Arabian Peninsula, making a survey of the particular conditions prevalent in the Hijaz and Najd region. Also discussed were the eastern neighbour of Arabia, Iran and the northern neighbour, Rome. It is now intended to deal with its western neighbours, one of them being Egypt which will be discussed in this chapter.

Civilisation

Egypt is an ancient land about which abundant scientific research has been carried out owing to its wealth of ancient monuments and archaeological treasures that have survived intact and much has been written about them. Among the many countries engaged in such studies, Egyptology has become a leading branch in archaeology.

The monuments existing in Egypt reveals to a considerable extent, the Egyptian history for about 6500 years, a condition which is hard to find in any other part of the world. Some of the relics which are found in the tombs and pyramids (which, too, are really tombs) belong to 2000 to 4000 B.C. For instance, it would suffice to mention that the first calendar found in Egypt belongs to the years 4241 to 4238 B.C. Such a find elsewhere is unlikely.

The main point of this matter is related to the tombs and the pyramids and the belief and desire of those ancient people in Egypt for building massive tombs which should remain undisturbed. The original name of this land was not 'Egypt'. Likewise, the name, Egypt, and 'Aegypten' used in Persian, Arabic and European languages are not the original names of this land. Its original name of this land in local language had been 'Kemt' or 'Kemte' which meant 'black land'¹. The name Egypt has a Hebrew origin, and the Hebrews, namely the Israelis, gave it a name which stuck and later on took the form of 'Egypt' in Arabic. The name given to it by Europeans has a Greek root from the word Aigyptos, given to it by the Greeks after the name of one of the local kings.

In the territory of Egypt, as far as history reveals, there had existed social units since ancient times, and this condition prevailed in Egypt even in pre-historic times since the beginning of history. Villages had existed in pre-historic times as a unit of civilisation in the Nile River valley.

What should be considered is the existence of higher levels of social communities in Egypt. The central government, according to available sources, had existed for about 6500 years in Egypt, and these sources are mainly the royal tombs. Thus, 6500 ago Egypt was a state having kings, rulers and a central government. Obviously where ever a central government is formed, such things as architecture, large buildings, communications, writings, script, industry, art etc. follow.

All these things existed in ancient Egypt, since ages ago so that even a kind of medical science of a type existed in Egypt comparable with the level of Greek medicine during the years 2600 to 2400 B.C.; this information has been discovered by historians from the scripts which have been found. Chemistry, embalming and mummifying of bodies around which the science of chemistry had developed, as well as armoury, glazed tiles, ship-building and evidence of arts' industry and technical trades have been the other aspects of life about four or five thousand years ago in Egypt.

The central government of Egypt of that time possessed a regular army, so that king Ramses II who ruled about one thousand years B.C² had a regular army and legions that he dispatched to various parts, and even hired soldiers from such countries as Libya, Turkey and Syria. It is interesting that in that age ministers managed the affairs under a central government and the king. The king was regarded as God, a god incarnated in human body who appeared amongst the people, who regarded themselves as his servants. The priests and ministers were intermediaries between that god, or god-king and his subjects. Accordingly, the 'vizier' was the contact between man and god.

Of course, the king was not the only god, and there were numerous other gods in Egypt, such as the god of man, god of life etc. to the extent that the god-king himself was expected to repose his faith in those gods. Some of these gods were human, and others were non-human, the king belonging to the first group. Non-human gods had idol-temples where a number of priests served them. The priests possessed special powers; they were regarded as the greatest power in Egypt, the power of god-king included. Usually, some rivalry existed between these two power centers. In the following discussions (elated to the manner of spread of Islam in this region, we will examine how Islam succeeded in sweeping all these away, and replace them with entirely new concepts.

Laws, Traditions And Religion

Laws and traditions that existed in Egypt accorded the king a divine position, but no laws about justice and equity Courts did exist which were however held by the representatives of the minister and the feudal lords to see to the claim of the subject. According to Iranian writers at that time in Egypt no laws existed even to compare with the 'Code in Chaldea and Assyria³.

Among the traditions existing in ancient Egypt which seem odd to us was the legitimacy of marriage with close relatives, and even marriage between a brother and sister. This was particularly in vogue in the royal houses.

The religion prevalent in Egypt was idolatry, and, like the present-day India, there seems to have existed a predisposition to idolatry which gave no ground to any other beliefs to make headway. The deviational education of the Egyptians had prepared them for receiving the religion of idolatry. In the time of the pharaohs two of these rulers who belonged to priestly families and believed in the One God, wished to propagate this faith in Egypt. This God was called 'Aton⁴.

But they were not successful in this task, and when the second pharaoh died, the people and priests joined hands and revived idolatry, and burnt the body of the second pharaoh for heresy against their formal religion. This idol worship persisted until the third century A.D. It is noteworthy that in the third century as Christianity found its way into Egypt, in the same century the concept of Christian trinity took shape in the school of Alexandria. Thus, the best and the most comprehensive and scholarly⁵ analyses and definitions of trinity were formulated in the third century A.D. in the scholarly and philosophical seminary of Neo-Platonics of Alexandria⁶. Thus, it becomes apparent that even as Christianity spread into Egypt, it accepted the form of plurality and trinity already existent in that country.

Government In Ancient Egypt

Egypt had passed through various periods of government, most of which had been of local rulers. Certain points here merit attention: For about one century Egypt was ruled over by Iran and since Darius and Xerxes conquered Egypt, Egypt was administered by a governor appointed by Darius to represent the Iranian government. After a time, local governments took control there. Next Egypt was conquered by the Greeks and Alexander of Macedonia who built the port of Alexandria. After Alexander's death, the Ptolemies who were his followers governed Egypt for several centuries⁷. Then once again local governments Greek ruler exchanged power, and this struggle continued for a long time.

In the time of Anushirvan, Egypt was ruled for a period of ten years by Iran. During all these periods that the imperialist powers of the age, Iran, Greece and Rome conquered Egypt, none of them were able to assert any influence there to the extent that Islam and the Arab Muslims did. In this historical survey, one of the essential aspects is to show the degree of influence that Islam succeeded in asserting in various regions including Egypt; for, firstly the natural conditions for the acceptance of the faith of monotheism were not favourable in Egypt, and secondly in the different periods that Egypt had been under the Iranian, Greek and Roman rule Egypt had not accepted foreign domination and nor did those foreign rulers find much stability in that land, or influence it to any extent.

How did it happen, then, that for the first time when Omar dispatched only four thousand soldiers Egypt succumbed readily in 641 A.D. when the Muslims entered Egypt the prevalent religions was mainly Christianity in the north, and idolatry with a small mix of Christianity and Judaism in the south. Since Judaism was a nationalistic faith, it did not easily spread into non-Jewish regions. Thus, at the time of the rise of Islam, Egypt did not have a single faith. This was the general state of affairs in Egypt, a neighbour of the birth place of Islam. When the prophet of Islam began to propagate his faith in Arabia, governors were ruling in Egypt whose names are mentioned in our history books. One of them was Maquqas to whom the prophet addressed a letter in the sixth year of his migration; this point will be discussed later in connection with the Prophet's letters to various kings and rulers.

In brief, Egypt had an ancient civilisation and was far ahead of Arabia from the viewpoint of science and arts etc.

It should be borne in mind that, that part of Arabia, namely Hijaz, was then at a tribal stage prior to the birth of the prophet, and had not till then attained an organised form of government, whereas Egypt had had such a government for several centuries in addition to a regular army, science, industry and was familiar with different schools of philosophy. It should be added that Alexandria had been a great center of learning for nine centuries before the rise of Islam, and how did a country with such a background fall so easily to the army of Islam will be discussed later.

Questions And Answers

Question 1

It was stated that Judaism was a nationalistic faith. What does that imply?

Answer

You know that the Jews themselves claim that Judaism was a faith brought by Moses ('a) to save the Israelis and they don't normally say that he came to save the people of the world. But we, Muslims, never declare that Muhammad (S) came to save the Arabs. We never think like that. The Jews consider themselves as one nation, and the word 'Jew' is a tribal word meaning the nation of Jews.

Question 2

What was the social environment within Egypt from the viewpoint of class divisions before the birth of Islam and during the rise of Islam?

Answer

As it was explained briefly, the roots of idolatry still dominated the life of the people. It might appear that Idolatry had no effects on everyday life, but in reality, it plays an important role in shaping social conditions. As one reads in history of Egypt the Pharaohs who were named god-kings and their high priests resisted so tenaciously against the concept of monotheism. What was the motive behind this resistance? They resisted because their vital interests were threatened, since monotheism is not just a simple idea but a new concept leading the way of human life.

Thus, Egypt was typical idol-worshipping country in its social life in which the rulers enjoyed absolute power and besides them were the high priests and clergy, the military and the feudal lords who exercised a relative degree of power. Egypt was wholly feudal, and even till recent times some of the towns were governed by local lords. Slavery that existed there had the most inhuman form which has even existed in the history of the world. For every one of the stone blocks placed in the pyramids, fifty slaves lost their lives. It has been narrated about ancient Egypt how earth works and pathways were laid out and how huge blocks of stones were pulled by a thousand slaves altogether under command of an overseer by means of ropes and pulleys and beams.

Why was all this trouble taken? Only to build a tomb for the mummified corps of a god-king and his accompaniments for the life in the hereafter, so that the Pharaoh would face no problems in his eternal life, and also to protect the tombs intact from interference of times. So many lives were wasted for the sake of a futile wish, while those slaves did not even get enough food to perform such hard labour, just enough to keep their bodies and souls together for the performance of the labour as if so many flies had been killed off. Of course, the social environment in Egypt was not so severe during the last few centuries before the rise of Islam, but anyhow these were the situations the like of which, in so far as history can show, did not exist in ancient Iran, even though exploitation of deprived classes did exist there. Slavery had its most inhuman manifestation in Egypt, whereas in Greece or Rome it never reached such a cruel and violent degree.

At the time of the rise of Islam, the internal situation in Egypt was chaotic with political unrest. The social order was shaking, though this was not the first time that Egypt was seized by such turmoil and instability. Such periods in the history of the world are discernible. We see this in the case of Iran which fell under foreign domination several times. How far did Alexander penetrate Iran? Was the influence of Greek civilisation similar to the spread of Islamic civilisation in Iran? Are they comparable at all? Is the comparison conceivable?

In the periods when Iran came under the Turks and later the Mongols, it was weakened socially and politically. From one side came the Qur'an while from the other side came the code of Chengiz. But has anything remained of the code of Chengiz? In this context a small book has been written entitled "The Rapid Spread of Islam"⁸ is a highly readable book by an Italian lady who is a university professor. Though the subject has not been discussed at length in this short work, yet the writer is a researcher of history who has been impressed by the rapid expansion of Islam. This point will come up for discussing later, but no other factor but the universal nature of the teachings of Islam could be the cause for its rapid spread. Even the compilers of encyclopedia of Egypt have stated that the Christians of Egypt welcomed the soldiers of Islam with open arms.

Question 3

Following the rise of Islam and its movement, Christianity organised centralized authority which had no precedence, and as Islam spread with such unparalleled rapidity, was Christianity's centralisation and mobilisation intended to be used as a check?

Answer

The system of centralisation of Christianity in the prevailing form dates back to the period before Islam and is related to Constantine. The councils held by the cardinals in our time are a reminder of the great conventions which were held at that time by religious leaders in order to propagate Christianity in the world. They reached decisions and amended procedures and all these activities were related to the days of Emperor Constantine, several centuries before Islam⁹.

Of course, as you have observed, Christianity organised itself against the influence of Islam assuming a more aggressive form. In the history of Egypt, it has been recorded about ancient Rome, that the Roman Emperors during their domination of Egypt for several centuries, used Egypt as the granary for the empire. Of course, Europe of that period was a different Europe altogether. Today Europe lives in very odd conditions: it is a continent which cannot provide subsistence for all its inhabitants at the level they are used to. If the doors of Europe were to be closed so that its own inhabitants would have to provide for themselves by the strength of their own scientific and technological efforts, and could not estimate how far their standard of living would be lowered.

They employ all means fair and foul, to maintain and raise their standards of living. In my view, a realistic view about them is that they are an active and a determined people equipped with the weapons of science and technology for raising their standards of living and protecting their position in the world by using all fair or foul means. They employ their perseverance and initiative in the most profitable manner. This is my view of Europe, a picture that you can see reflected in the past history of Europe in different shapes. For example, the Greek were a people equipped with science and technology who invaded other lands in order to secure what they could not find in their own country to suffice their needs. Rome had a different aspect, but there, too, a similar situation existed. I have not studied the east extensively to be able to express my views about aggressive tendencies from that quarter. On the face of it the Mongol invasions would appear to be of this type, but a superficial view is not enough, especially as historians have ascribed other causes for the Mongol invasions.

[1.](#) With regard to the naming of Egypt in connection with the Greek word Aigyptos which has appeared in different forms in European languages, there are numerous interpretations. One of these is the etymology of a Greek word meaning 'dark' which led to the deduction that the use of this word for the land of Egypt is due to the fact that the colour of the waters of the Nile near the delta is dark, and it is supposed that the word Kemt which has been the original name of this land meaning 'black' conforms with the above appellation.

[2.](#) Ramses is the name of a family of Egyptian pharaohs from the 19th and 20th dynasties. Ramses II was the third ruler of the 19th dynasty, and one of the most famous pharaohs of Egypt. Qamus, the holy book, mentions him as a contemporary of Moses ('a), his son who pursued the Israelis, and was drowned, to be his thirteenth son. It should be remembered that the word 'pharaoh' is the Common name of all the rulers of ancient Egypt whom the Greeks called Pharaoh. The word may have entered Arabic through Syriac language. The pharaohs were spread over 26 dynasties with a history of almost three thousand years.

[3.](#) Hammurabi is the most famous king of Babylon who united the whole of that realm. Historians used to believe that he lived in about 1900 B.C., but recently the date has been revised to a period from 1728 to 1686 B.C. He carried out great administrative reforms which are described as his famous code. These laws were discovered in Susa in 1902 A.D., and are kept in the Louvre Museum. "Silent Languages" pp. 34–35, and German Encyclopedia of Brookhaus, Vol. 8.

[4.](#) The word 'Aton' means the sun, but it is not clear whether their god had been the sun, or whether it was regarded as the greatest thing for man and as a sign of God. In my studies, I have not come across any specific information, however, some people consider it to be a sign of God.

[5.](#) Scientific from the viewpoint of Christianity.

[6.](#) The Neoplatonics were a group of scholars in the Alexandrian academic circle who, in one respect, revived Plato's and in another respect produced new research in philosophy and learning as an independent subject. The founder of this school was Ammenius Saccas of Egypt who lived at the end of the second century and beginning of the third century A.D. in Alexandria. The philosophy which is attributed to the Neoplatonics is related to Plotin, an Egyptian Greek who had originally

been a Roman, living in Alexandria. He had the opportunity of contact with Ammenius Saccas.

[7.](#) The Ptolemies were the descendants of Alexander's generals from Macedonia fourteen of whom ruled Egypt after Alexander' s death (323–30 B.C.). In Roman language a king was called Ptolemy.

[8.](#) By Laura Veccia Vaglieri, professor of Arab Literature And Islamic Civilisation at the Naples University of Italy, translated into Persian by Sayyed Ghulam Reza Sa'idi.

[9.](#) Since 312 A.D. when Christianity became the state religion of the empire.

4. Abyssinia Before The Birth Of Islam

- **General Conditions**
- **Re-Discovery Of Abyssinia**
- **Abyssinia Before The Birth Of Islam**
- **The Story Of Abraha**
- **The Episode Of 'Am Ul-Feel**
- **Migration To Abyssinia**
- **Questions And Answers**

Following the study of the close neighbours of Arabia, namely Iran and Egypt, our discussion turns to Abyssinia which has an important role in the history of Islam in comparison with other neighbours.

General Conditions

Geographically there has been only a minor variation between the Abyssinia of the past and the present; it included the Eritrean coast on the Red Sea as well as British Somalia and French Somalia which have now become independent, as well as a part of the Sudan.

Abyssinia of that time was an extensive realm with an old history, but its civilisation did not even equal the level of the other neighbours of Arabia, and was at par with Yemen. The rulers and people of Abyssinia belonged to a race south and west of the Red Sea, who were called the 'Habish' and 'Habash'. In early Islam the word 'Habish' was applied to those who came to Mecca from this region, and from that word the word Abyssinia is derived, a word which is closer to its root than Ethiopia which is now used for that country in European languages and papers and other publications. It was applied to those who migrated from the shores of the Red Sea to this land, and settled there.

Abyssinia itself is an extensive land having various natural divisions. A considerable part of it is desert with little agriculture and sparse population; the other part has high mountains and mountainous land with abundant water and trees, with gold, silver and copper mines and flourishing agriculture. About one thousand years B.C. Abyssinia had a central government. I mention this point to show that all the neighbours of Arabia including Hira and Ghassan had a central government, while Hijaz, the birthplace of Islam, lacked an organised government and was socially well behind all the countries surrounding it. Yet it made a sudden leap forward to establish a central government and its own special quality of democracy and freedom. What I would like to do is to see how did all this take place in such a short span of time, and what caused this quick change? And to what extent does it influence our life today?

In Abyssinia numerous races existed in a scattered way, with their local governments. At the same time Abyssinia had central monarchy which was strong and powerful enough to be obeyed by the neighbouring rulers, and here and there also existed autonomous governments. Yaqubi, in his book of history which was written in the third century Hijri has recorded that there were many independent governments existing, while the central government of the Najashies (Neguses) exercised some control over them, and received tributes from these small local governments¹.

The present population of Abyssinia is about 21,000,000² according to the last (1960) statistics, of which 12.5 million are Muslims and the rest are either Christians or idolaters, but in the present situation the government is in the hands of the Christians³. This population consists of different branches to one of which belongs the Najashi group who ruled as emperors. They have emigrated from Yemen.

The lineage of the emperors of Abyssinia reached Prophet Solomon ('a) through his marriage with the Queen of Shiba. Thus, this family regarded themselves as descendants of Prophet Solomon, the son of Prophet Dawood (David). In the constitution of 1932 of Abyssinia, it is stated that kingship belongs permanently to this family, each branch of which possesses a different name. However, it is not clear to what extent this claim is a fable or based on historical fact. My study of the Abyssinian history did not confirm the correctness of this claim, even a detailed source uses the phrase "It is said", showing that the writer is doubtful about its authenticity. I must narrate an historical account which is quite interesting and also disturbing.

Until the fourth century A.D. Abyssinia was a land of idolatry and idolaters, having some local jungle beliefs, and the Jews, too, seem to have asserted some influence, though this matter is never publicly admitted or discussed in detail. In those days a good deal of traffic existed between Yemen and Abyssinia and some kind of historical relations, showing that Judaism had been more or less recognised there, though the number of its followers had been rather small⁴. However, the common religion of the Abyssinians was idolatry. In the fourth century, namely in 340 A.D. a Bishop of Syria – a Syrian was dispatched from the church of Alexandria to Abyssinia as a missionary⁵. This industrious bishop succeeded in converting a group to Christianity in the 4th century A.D., about 240 or 250 years before the birth of Islam.

Thus, it would show that in Abyssinia did not have a precedence of more than two and a half centuries before the rise of Islam. Churches were built there, and thus, Abyssinia became a Christian base. According to the description by one bishop of the church, Abyssinia is an island of Christianity in a sea of polytheism, since at that time no other religion existed there. The influence of Christianity spread so far that the emperor himself embraced that faith, and Negus who was a contemporary of the prophet of Islam was a Christian. According to one European writer, with the rise of Islam the connection between Abyssinia and the Christian world was severed, and this separation continued for nine centuries so that the Christian world knew nothing of Abyssinia and of their being Christians.

Re-Discovery Of Abyssinia

When we say that the Christian world knew nothing about a place called Abyssinia, it is due to the fact that it is so recorded in a document that in 1520 A.D. John II⁶, Emperor of Portugal, heard that on the other side of the world there existed a country with Christian religion and a wealthy emperor. The Portuguese emperor was overcome with a desire to find out who this Christian emperor was on the other side of the world, without being aware of his geographical whereabouts. He ordered a number of adventurers and seafarers to proceed to discover that land for him. Eventually two navigators departed for that country, and found it and sent a report to the emperor. In Abyssinia the ruler welcomed these envoys of Portugal and told them about his helplessness in confronting the Muslims there, and asked the king of Portugal to dispatch some troops to aid him against the Muslims.

Thus, the first military negotiations took place between the two countries, and the emperor of Portugal sent a fleet in aid of the Abyssinians. This fleet reached Abyssinia and remained there for six years. Another present from the Portuguese emperor was a religious mission that organised a base in Abyssinia and engaged in religious propagation. The head of this mission was a priest and a writer who wrote a long book about Abyssinia which, according to current European writers, is the most valuable source of information⁷. This mission returned, and once again after some years the Abyssinian emperor asked for further military assistance. A large Portuguese fleet based in India was dispatched to help the Abyssinians.

This fleet had 450 riflemen, a significant force at that time. It also had several old guns. With their aid, the Abyssinians attacked their Muslim neighbours and vanquished them in battle then drove them back to the waste lands near the seashores. From this time on other European countries, too, began to regard Abyssinia with interest. Thus, the way was opened for relations between England and Abyssinia, and then between Italy and Abyssinia. An agreement was reached first that a port on the Red Sea coast should be given by Abyssinia to England to be used as a base like Aden in later years, for dispatching naval forces to India⁸. By the beginning of the 19th century colonialism found its way into Abyssinia, and during 19th century several wars occurred between Abyssinia and England and sometimes with Portugal. Later, Italy, formally declared Abyssinia its own colony, and this condition lasted until recent times when Abyssinia found its independence.

The Abyssinian language has a Sabaean root which is mingled with local dialects. Today seventy languages are spoken in Abyssinia, and this number reaches 200 if local dialects are included. But the official state language which is the tongue of the family of the emperors, is Amharic⁹.

Abyssinia Before The Birth Of Islam

About one century before the birth of Islam, Abyssinia played a significant role in the region of Arabia, more influencing than that of the other neighbours. Two centuries before Islam, namely at the end of the fourth century A.D., the king of Yemen embraced Judaism, and thereby Judaism became the state religion of that land. Then a man named Dhunuvas in Yemen decided to put pressure upon everyone who did not follow the Jewish faith. Then reports reached him that in Najran, a city in neighbouring Hijaz Christianity was spreading. Dhunuvas launched a campaign against Najran, and started persecuting and killing people. He had trenches filled with fire and cast the Christians of Najran into those.

One of the Christians of Najran fled to the court of the Roman emperor, and said to him “You call yourself the emperor of Christians, see what are they doing to us Christians there.” The Emperor answered that he was too far from that land, but “We have a coreligionist in the Emperor of Abyssinia to whom I will write to come to your assistance.” This incident has been recorded in Islamic as well as European sources in an identical manner. The Emperor of Abyssinia dispatched an army to Yemen under a commander named Eryat. among whose officers was a man called Abraha. The army entered Yemen and Dhunuvas was defeated, who in his flight jumped into the sea with his horse and met his end. In this way Yemen became a colony of Abyssinia, and Eryat. its governor. They tried to propagate Christianity in Yemen which led to an incident between Eryat. and Abraha which we will proceed to recount in the following.

The Story Of Abraha

Abraha was a competent officer in Eryat's army who did not think much of his commander, and so he decided to wrest power from him, and with the aid of his subordinates rose against Eryat.

The Abyssinians got divided into two groups: one group supported Abraha, while the other favoured Eryat, and got ready to fight. On the day of battle Abraha sent a message for Eryat, saying that it was futile for the Abyssinians to kill each other, and added: “As the dispute is between you and me, let the two of us have a man-to-man fight, and let the victor take the command of the army” Eryat agreed and in the fight, he was killed and Abraha took the reins of power in his hands. Negus, emperor of Abyssinia, was enraged on hearing that the second in command has killed his appointed supreme commander, and swore that he would not rest until he had trampled upon the soil of Yemen and pulled off the hairs of Abraha.

The report reached Abraha that the Emperor was greatly annoyed with him. He filled a box with the soil of Yemen and ordered the hair of his head be shaved off and sent it to the Emperor along with a number

of gifts and presents. He sent an accompanying message that he was sorry that the Emperor had become annoyed with him whereas he remained his loyal servant. He added that two of the Emperor's officers had a fight and one overcame the other and that the honour of the Emperor was in no way involved. He appealed that in order to honour the Emperor's oath, he was sending both his hairs and Yemeni soil for the Emperor to trample on. The emperor was so pleased at this cleverness that he confirmed him in his appointment as commander in Yemen, and Abraha proceeded to impose Christianity upon the people¹⁰.

He decided to spread Christianity in Yemen and uproot Judaism and every other faith in the land. Abraha's close associates told him that all his efforts were just confined to Yemen whereas the people of the Arabian Peninsula were devoted to another place, namely the Kaaba in Mecca, owing to its age old standing and high prestige and that he should take steps in that direction. Incidentally Abraha had built a very fine church in the capital of Yemen and has adorned it with the most beautiful stones, including the stones remaining from the ancient palace of the Queen of Shiba. But when he noticed that his beautiful church had little attraction for the people against the simple stone structure in Mecca, he decided to do whatever possible to end the influence of the Ka'aba.

The Event Of 'Am Ul-Feel

Meanwhile a rumour spread among the people that Abraha had decided to demolish the Ka'aba. This caused a commotion among certain Arab people, and one Arab, hearing of Abraha's intention, went to Yemen, entered the church at night and polluted it with his urine. This incident enraged Abraha and the Christians. They told him that, that was how much the Arabs respected his Church! Abraha asked what was the reason for that? They replied because they were devoted to Ka'aba in their heart of hearts and the news that you intended to destroy the Ka'aba had reached them. Abraha said that if that was the way it was, when it was no more than a rumour, then he was decided to destroy Ka'aba.

He mobilised his forces and proceeded towards Mecca, and on his way vanquished all the Arab tribes that offered any resistance. On approaching Mecca he sent a messenger to find out whoever was the chief of Mecca and to summon him. He was informed that the chief of Mecca was an old man named Abdul Muttalib. But before he could be contacted, Abraha's soldiers plundered all the sheep, cows and camels around Mecca including two hundred camels belonging to Abdul Muttalib. After consulting his friends Abdul Muttalib decided to pay a visit to Abraha. The latter arranged a formal audience, sitting upon a throne and surrounded by his officers. It is said that when Abdul Muttalib entered, Abraha was so impressed by his dignity and bearing that he descended from his throne, sat down on a mattress and asked Abdul Muttalib to sit beside him. This dignified carriage is what the historians call the radiance of prophethood in the bodies of the prophet's ancestors.

Abraha said to him: "I have no issue with the people of Mecca. I have only come to destroy the Ka'aba, and if you do not confront me, I will carry out this task and turn back, without shedding any blood." Abdul

Muttalib advised him against his intention, but he refused to change his mind. Abdul Muttalib then asked him why had he been summoned there, Abraha said that he had come to see him, did he want anything of him. He had thought that Abdul-Mut.allib might come up with some bargaining to save Ka'aba. Abdul Muttalib said that he had no request to make except to demand the return of his two hundred camels which had been seized. Abraha expressed surprise at this trifling request, and said that he had expected him to intercede for the city and its people and Ka'aba. Abdul Muttalib answered the reason why he did not intercede for the Ka'aba was that he realised that the people of Mecca had no power to resist Abraha's forces, and Ka'aba had its owner who is Allah and He would take care of His own house. Abraha was moved at these words, but he felt that he had come to carry out a mission.

So, he ordered the return of Abdul Muttalib's camels to him, and warned the people of Mecca to evacuate the city and take refuge in the neighbouring hills. The people evacuated the city at once to prevent the loss of life, and Abraha prepared to demolish the Ka'aba with the aid of his army and the elephants which he had brought with him. This story has been narrated differently by Arab and European historians. The Greek and European version is that an epidemic of typhoid and smallpox at that time so annihilated Abraha's army that they could not carry out the attack.

But the Islamic historian's version which is based on the Qur'an and what eye-witnesses had reported, is, according to the Arab captives in Abraha's army, that a vast flock of small birds like swallows, carrying pebbles in their beaks darkened the sky and pelted them down upon the heads of Abraha's army causing deep puncture-like wounds killing many. It is also said that at the same time for the first time in Arabia, the diseases of typhoid and smallpox appeared in Arabia affecting the whole army. Abraha himself suffered from smallpox, and remained alive only until he reached Yemen and died there. This is the theme mentioned in the Holy Qur'an, Surah al-'Feel (Elephant) as follows:

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ

Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the possessors of the elephant? (105: 1).

أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضْلِيلٍ

Did He not cause their war to end in confusion (105:2).

وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ

And send down (to prey) upon them birds in flocks (105:3).

تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِنْ سِجِّيلٍ

Casting against them stones of baked clay (105:4).

فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ

So He rendered them like straw eaten up? (105:5).

“Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the possessors of the elephant? Did He not cause their war to end in confusion, and send down (to prey) upon them birds in flocks, casting stones of baked clay, so He rendered them like straw eaten up?”

There is a perfect harmony between what the Greek historian who is the original source of European version, and Islamic historians who have narrated this episode except that the Greek historian makes no mention of the birds. It needs no emphasis however, that the report of eye-witnesses would be far more reliable than the narration of a historian sitting hundreds of miles away from the scene of occurrence and above all the text of the Holy Qur'an itself leaves no room for doubt.

Anyhow, Abraha and his Abyssinian army returned to Yemen, and this part of Arabia, namely Mecca and Medina, remained as before¹¹. But despite the strained relations between the Abyssinian government and the people of Mecca and Medina, trade relations continued between them until the birth of Islam.

Migration To Abyssinia

In the fifth or sixth year of the Prophethood, pressure upon the Muslims of Mecca intensified. The Prophet said to the Muslims: “Now that the enemies of Islam have begun to torture you all. They are sparing me and my family on account of Abu-Talib's (Prophets' Uncle) support, I deem it advisable for you to migrate to Abyssinia.” This emigration of early Muslims to Abyssinia is a very important event in the history of Islam, and although the prophet's migration to Medina was adopted as the commencement of the Islamic calendar, yet the Muslim emigration to Abyssinia had an extraordinary result.

The Prophet remained in Mecca actively propagating Islam. He sent twelve Muslims to Abyssinia, not to seek assistance, since history makes no such mention. As he spoke to them: “I have heard that the Emperor of Abyssinia is a liberal man. You should go there to find temporary refuge as defenseless Muslims and live in peace and above all preserve your faith”.

Thus, the Prophet sent them there to relieve them from the pressure in the center of Islamic faith, namely Mecca, to live in the Christian land of Abyssinia. With just twelve refugees there was never a question of starting a movement with this step. The next time when the pressure upon the Muslims increased, the Prophet ordered a larger emigration, and it is said that the time there were seventy men together with their wives and children. In the second emigration about two-thirds of the emigrants belonged to the Prophet family who went to Abyssinia.

In view of the manner adopted by the Prophet to direct the Islamic movement, the second emigration may seem to have been an attempt to find a quarter other than Medina as a base for Islam. The first emigration was a simple change of home, but the second emigration included persons such as the sister of Mu'awiah, daughter of Abu Sufyan (Umm Habiba) who had embraced Islam and was a very devout Muslim, and was later to become a consort of the Prophet. Also, Uthman Ibn Affan and Ja'far Ibn Abi Talib went among the emigrants.

So, this emigration seemed to have been based on a plan, especially since the Prophet's trip to Ta'if proved of no avail for the founding of an Islamic center, and in Mecca, too, he was faced with failure, and he did not entertain much hope about Medina as such a center. The spread of Islam in Medina is related to a later time, subsequent to the Abyssinian emigration. The Prophet had also contacted a number of tribes for a place of refuge to propagate his faith, but no positive response was given to him.

Thus, when those twelve of the first group of emigrants found Abyssinia a suitable place to live in and keep their faith there, a few of them returned to Mecca and described the favourable situation to the Prophet. They encouraged him to order a larger emigration. The Prophet, appreciating the dangers in Hijaz and the probability of a closed door there, saw little hope for Islam, and considered the second emigration a necessary step. As we see this decision had far-reaching effects on the progress of Islam.

This migration of the Muslims so demoralised the enemies of Islam that they became anxious that the emigrants may not gather strength and return to cause serious trouble. They worried that, since the emigrants were like Abraha's horde but Meccans like themselves, they might overcome them. Therefore, they took immediate steps to check them. Thus, the infidels of Mecca dispatched 'Amru. As with another bearing numerous presents for the Emperor of Abyssinia to request him to extradite the Muslim refugees by force. These envoys reached Abyssinia, presented themselves in the court of Negus, and levelled many charges against the Muslims. Ja'far Ibn Abi-Talib acquitted himself magnificently during this audience and successfully countered their charges, and the envoys returned to Mecca disappointed. The Muslims remained there for a number of years in peace and security. The prophet did not allow them to return until some years after his own migration to Medina and setting down there. These events reveal what a significant role was played by this neighbour, otherwise weaker of the great neighbours of Arabia, in the history of Islam.

Questions And Answers

Question 1

Concerning the outbreak of epidemic of smallpox as narrated in the episode of Abraha, has any mention been made about the Arab inhabitants of Mecca and its suburbs?

Answer

This statement of Arab historians about the first appearance of smallpox in Mecca seemed somewhat dubious to me, too. But at that time, no Meccan died of small pox. And there is sufficient historical evidence to show that signs of typhoid and smallpox occurred only in the dead of the Abyssinian invaders. Even the Greek historians have made no mention of an epidemic in Mecca itself even though it is affirmed that in that hot weather the invaders came so close to Mecca that they stole the camels of Abdul Muttalib from the pastures of Mecca.

Question 2

Were that group of refugees who had emigrated from Mecca to Abyssinia, able to establish a center there?

Answer

No. The migration to Abyssinia is an interesting event which took place in peculiar conditions. When the prophet dispatched individuals to Medina, he would tell them to propagate Islam, but in the case of Abyssinia, there is no evidence of propagation. It seems that the purpose of this migration had been solely to seek a refuge so that if Islam lost all its strongholds in Hijaz, at least one shelter would remain. But the manner of using that refuge was a matter that would be seen to later on. Basically, they had been expected to go and live there and continue to practice their faith and that was all.

Question 3

During those years of the Muslims' stay in Abyssinia did they convert anyone to Islam? Is there any mention of this in history?

Answer

The possibility is there, that some might have become Muslims but I do not recall it. However, this is quite different from having a religious mission. The absence of religious mission is interesting in view of the fact that the Prophet calculated everything as a leader, and here I am opposed to the idea that all the progress made by Islam was due only to a divine design of the prophet. Of course, there is not the slightest doubt according to explicit verses of the Holy Qur'an that the Prophet and Muslims enjoyed divine support, as without any doubt he was the Prophet of God. But a great deal of the progress was due to his wisdom and prudence, an asset that even now the Muslims can utilise.

The concept of migration to Abyssinia had been a very beneficial measure, since in view of the danger which existed for the Muslims and even for the Prophet and his household, despite Abu-Talib's protection, the Prophet wished to do something to enable his group of helpless Muslims to gain some social security and to have a place as a refuge. In this respect the prophet's action was very wise and

effective indeed.

Question 4

As the Ka'aba at that time was the home of idols and totally defiled by their presence, would it not have been better to let Abraha destroy that house? What reason existed that that bastion of polytheism be preserved?

Answer

Yes, but who should have destroyed it? Should it have been destroyed by Abraha? Or should it have remained till a man come and revive its original sanctity cleansing it of desecration. This is a matter of historical importance. The house could be rebuilt, but what would be the implication of Abraha's victory over Mecca? It would have meant the victory of impurity over purity, a mixing with impurity. It is true that he was a Christian, but his faith was polytheistic Christianity, a Christianity which Islam was to combat to cleanse it of polytheism. What would be the good of letting one form of polytheism replace another form of polytheism? It may be said that had Abraha demolished that place, one base of idolatry would have been eliminated but what would have been its consequences in the minds of the people of that time? What we are talking about is ideas and beliefs; otherwise, a house itself could not be guilty of an offence to justify its destruction. The general effect would have been that evil had been replaced with evil. But as it happened, after this event the house of Ka'aba suffered ruin in an accident, and it was in the time of the Prophet himself that it was rebuilt.

The demolishing of the Ka'aba was not important. What was of consequence was by whose hands and to what purpose. The way adopted by Abdul Muttalib in dealing with Abraha is significant, as he said: "Since we have not the power to protect the Ka'aba, we will evacuate Mecca." Thus, he set aside the question of idols, and said that the house belonged to the One God. In a branch of the Arabs, monotheism was still in vogue and the family of Hashem followed this belief and Abdul Muttalib and some others were indifferent to the idols.

Muslims and even Sunni historians narrate that when the people had evacuated Mecca, Abdul Muttalib and a few others stood beside the Ka'aba, he raised his hands in prayer, saying: "O God: Here is your House and there be Your enemies. If we had the force, we would have protected it, but You are aware of their numbers and of ours. We leave the House to you, and beg You to defend it in such a way that no falsehood would ever vanquish the truth in people's minds." Historians have also narrated poetry recited by Abdul Muttalib¹².

However, it is not my concern whether this is true or not, what is significant is that in the intellectual milieu of those days what mattered was what stood against what? Abraha, the overly ambitious, wanted to spread Christianity by force in Yemen. It is true, the Ka'aba suffered a ruin some years later as a result of a natural disaster. But its forcible destruction at the hands of Abraha would be a different

matter. If it were to be destroyed as a bastion of idolatry by someone who was against idolatry, it would make it logical. But there would have been no logic in a destruction at the hands of a despot who for the sake of protecting his church wished to raze it to ground.

Question 5

Why was the Ka'aba built originally in Mecca?

Answer

No special reason can be given for it, since it could have been built anywhere in the world for a given reason. But according to our traditions, and even in the Nahj ul-Balagha¹³ it is stated that this House was built in a land which would offer no pleasure and amusement for anyone to visit it, but only for the sake of spiritual beliefs. It was built in a land that was poor and waterless and lacked all recreational attractions so that it would draw people of the faith as the foremost factor. Even now a pilgrimage to this land as compared to other recreational and tourist places is quite different from the viewpoint of expense and endurance of hardships.

¹. Ya'qubi's History, Vol. 1, p. 235 onward.

². Those statistics belong to the year 1960. In 1986 the population was 42,289,000. Defense and Foreign Affairs handbook, 1986, etc.

³. The last Abyssinian emperor, Haile Selassie, had to abdicate in 1974, and was superseded by a Marxist government after a coup d'état.

⁴. In the north of Abyssinia around lake Tanasea live a group of Jews. They are black-skinned and are called Falasha. They consider themselves to be descendants of Menelik, son of the Queen of Shiba and Prophet Solomon. Through this group many Hebrew words have entered the Abyssinian tongue. In the government of Jafar Numeiri in Sudan and with the aid of the Marxist government of Ethiopia and on the pretext of this uncertain lineage. twenty thousand of this group have been transferred to occupied Palestine.

⁵. The name of this priest is recorded as Fromentius who was appointed by Anthanasius, a famous bishop of Alexandria as the head of the Christian mission in Abyssinia.

⁶. In 1487 A.D. John II sent two men named Alfonso de Paiva and Petroda Covilha in search for Yuhenna, a priest and mythical ruler. In their travel to the east, these two obtained information, to the effect that Yuhenna is the emperor of Abyssinia. They also gathered information in Aden about the naval route to India.

Paiva died in this journey, but Covilha managed after much trouble to reach the court of Eskander, Emperor of Abyssinia (1478–1494) who died soon after. Lebna Dengeh, successor of Eskandar (1508–1540) prevented Covilha's return, and this led to an exchange of letters between him and Queen Helena, the next ruler of Portugal. In this correspondence the Abyssinian emperor asked the aid of the Portuguese for confronting the Muslims. As during this time Vasco da Gama had gone round Africa and had reached India, the king of Portugal sent a new mission via this route to Abyssinia in 1520 A.D. Fischer Weltgeschichte, Vol. 32, (Afrika), 1983.

⁷. The name of this priest was Francisco Alvarez who was sent as a member of the Portuguese military mission to Abyssinia in 1520 A.D. He wrote a detailed book about this period of Abyssinian history.

⁸. At the time of this discussion Britain still held Aden as a naval base in southern Yemen.

⁹. In ancient Abyssinia the most important language was Ge'ez which is now used as a literary language by the clergy of Ethiopian church. This language together with Arabic and at least seventy other living tongues (such as Tigre', Tigrinia, Amharic etc.) are prevalent in Ethiopia, and they are regarded as Semitic tongues. The most important of these since seven

hundred years ago when it was a national language, is Amharic which is spoken by many millions. Das Moderne Laenderlexikon, Vol. 1.

[10.](#) In any discussion with Christians who claim that Islam had been spread by means of the sword while Christianity was a religion of love and peace, or that Judaism had such and such advantages, they should be reminded of these historical facts and the extent to which force and sword had been employed in the spread of Christianity.

[11.](#) The Abyssinians ruled over Yemen for 72 years, namely Eryat for 20 years, Abraha (killer of Eryat) for 23 years, Yeksoom son of Abraha for 17 years, Massrouq another son of Abraha for 12 years when Vahraz with his Iranian army killed him in the year 570 A.D. Yaqubi's History, Vol. 1, p. 204.

[12.](#) As he recited: "O God, everyone defends his own house; so You, too defend yours. Let not the Cross and their forces unjustly overcome Your forces. If You do this, it must lead to a situation when You accomplish Your tasks through them." Ya'qubi History, Vol. 1, p.329.

[13.](#) 'Nahj ul-Balagha', translation by Feyzul-Islam, pp. 31 and 1,187; Forou' al-Kafi, Vol. 4, Book of Al-Hajj; Bihar-al-Anwar, Vol. 96; Book of Al-Hajj wa al-Umra.

5. Factors Of Success

- **Conclusions**

- **Principal Factors For The Movement's Success**

- a) **Unshakable Faith**
- b) **Competence And Efficiency**
- c) **Decisiveness**
- d) **Peculiarities Of Prevailing Political Environment**
- e) **Decisive Response**
- f) **As A Herald Of Freedom**
- g) **Filling The Existing Socio-Political Vacuum**

In the previous chapters the main topics of our discussion comprised of a survey of the political and social conditions attending upon the birth of Islam and the situation at its commencement. Detailed description covering the environments prevailing in Arabia and the Hijaz region as the birth-place of Islam followed by pertinent information about Yemen, Oman and Iraq which at that time was under the government of Hira, and then about the regions of Shaam, Lebanon and Jordan a part of which was ruled by the Ghassanis having an Arab government.

This was followed by a description of the empire of Iran as the eastern neighbour comprising present Iran, a part of Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Russia and even a part of modern Turkey. Then followed the description of Roman empire comprising Syria, the Lebanon, Turkey, Bulgaria and present Greece. This was followed by a survey of Egypt which had only sparse population in the south, which too developed after Islam. Then we dealt with Abyssinia comprising the present Abyssinia and a part of Sudan.

Outside this circle of neighbouring territories, there remained two relatively civilised regions, namely India and China which were remote from the land of Islam and had almost no connection with the Islamic movement. For this reason, no details have been discussed even though in the Prophet's time certain groups were sent to China specifically as missionaries to Tibet to invite people to Islam where they reached Tibet in the time of Abu Bakr.

In this part of the discussion, it is intended to reach certain from the preceding discussion.

Conclusion

The leading conclusion from the preceding discussion is that the movement of Islam began in centrally located region which is now the geographic heart of the Islamic world, and was at that time completely backward civilisation. Scientific and technical resources were nor existent, nor did it have wealth or any form of a government. Its people led a tribal life. The original base of the Islamic movement was surrounded by neighbours all of whom were well ahead in their civilisation and paid scant attention to this area because of their historical precedence.

The king of Persia Khusrow Parviz, had written to his envoy to go and see who was the one to have dared to write to him asking him “to accept monotheism in order to enter the garden of bliss”. He wanted to know who was it that had the courage to address him at all! And ever if he had something to communicate, he should have given due consideration to established protocol. He upbraided his governor in Yemen desiring him to chastise the writer for having addressed the Emperor of Iran!

The neighbouring countries regarded this region (Arabia) too worthless to maintain any contact with it. Even today no communications exist with neighbours and if one was to come out of Mecca and Medina, one would come across no habitation or water for a radius of several hundred kilometers, and although it borders onto the Red Sea, this sea is to no avail as it affords no source of irrigation. It was too backward culturally and economically and even politically to have been able to influence any of its neighbours. In view of these conditions, what was it in the Islamic movement that enabled it to spread so rapidly and extensively in less than a quarter of a century and overcome all the neighbouring lands?

The causative factor may be considered from two angles, firstly about its effects on the people of Arabia itself and the deep transformation which resulted among them. What was it that made them undergo such a radical change?

How did the movement give them the competence and the ability to promote the mission of Islam? How could they so suddenly change from a tribal society into an organised central government, so that within two or three decades it came to be regarded as the model of a powerful state in the world? Whichever history one read one would witness mention of 'Umar Ibn Khattab as a powerful and intelligent ruler.

Secondly, what attraction did the movement of Islam possess that it spread so rapidly over all the neighbouring lands? In a previous discussion it was stated by one of the participants that possibly the reason for such rapid progress was that heralded freedom and its breaking of social bonds and any movement which declared these goals, would have spread just as rapidly as Islam. I postponed my reply to that question until now and I had purposely delved into the details of early history to show that had 70 or 80 years before the movement of the Prophet of Islam, the Mazdaki faith made its appearance in Iran allowing a good deal of freedom and even license, but it failed to make any headway.

The faith of Manichaeus which gave an ideological code and which had appeared two or three (in one doubtful version about five) centuries before Islam in Iran, also gained no success. How was it, then, that this alien movement coming from a remote and strange land made such an overwhelming entry and so easily overcame all lands including almost the entire civilised world of the time?

To illustrate the importance of this matter, let us quote from a European subscriber to the Encyclopedia Britannica, also in order to know the point of view of an opposing source concerning the movement of Islam:

“Had a small Christian contingent been maintained in Arabia, that same emperor of Abyssinia along with the Christian government of that country would have been able to crush Muhammad (S) in his cradle and destroy him, and Abyssinia would have succeeded in checking a movement which was to change the social, political and religious conditions of the world and cause a revolution in the political, social and religious conditions of the world.”

This is the view of a Christian adversary whose observation “Muhammad would have been crushed in his cradle” reveals the degree of his animosity and rancour. It is therefore worth considering what spirit and moral power was inherent in this revolution that according to this Christian historian, even a small Christian contingent in Hijaz could have contained its progress in the initial stage.

Principal Factors For The Movement's Success

In conclusion it is intended to study what factors contributed to accelerate the progress of Islam as a worldwide movement:

A) Unshakable Faith

The leading consideration relates to the starter of the movement, namely the Holy Prophet (S) of Islam. He held unshakable faith in his mission; for without such strong intrinsic faith success would have been

quite uncertain. This is particularly true of a movement where success is in any case fairly risky.

B) Competence And Efficiency

The leader of the movement, namely the Holy Prophet (S) himself, possessed remarkable competence, efficiency and sagacity in discharging his tasks, and knew exactly what steps to take in every case. As recorded by numerous non-Muslim writers, his approach was methodical as of a highly experienced, capable and knowledgeable person. He handled his affairs with the expertise of a specialist.

C) Decisiveness

Owing to the two above mentioned personal qualities, namely unshakable faith and competence, the Prophet was never at a loss while faced with the events and crises in his life. The Prophet led the movement of Islam for 23 years, during all this period one does not come across even a single incident where he was uncertain or at a loss for a decision. On the contrary, he displayed utmost patience, coolness and decisiveness on every occasion. Among the various events in the course of the movement of Islam, some are related to the period before his migration to Medina where these qualities are evident and also certain events following the migration which reflect his decisiveness and explicitness.

As an example, after his migration to Medina in the “Hudaibiya” peace negotiations which occurred in the eighth year of Hijra, an unforeseen crisis arose for the Muslims. The Prophet had told them that they could proceed as the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in that year, consequently they left Medina prepared for the pilgrimage unarmed and unprepared for a fight. When they approached Mecca, the infidels of Mecca refused their entry saying all but the Prophet and the Muslims could enter Mecca. This refusal greatly displeased the Muslims, especially as at the time a state of peace existed between the infidels of Mecca and the Muslims. In response to the infidels refusal, most of the Muslims declared that they would fight their way into Mecca.

The Holy Prophet (S) was faced with a predicament, since firstly they were not armed for battle, and secondly a battle during the Hajj season would not have been good publicity for the Muslims, since it would be said that the Muslims showed no regard for Hajj. Moreover, the outcome of the battle was uncertain. On the other hand, the refusal to adverse effect on the Muslims.

What could the Prophet do in such a situation? With extraordinary finality he declared that he would renew the peace with the infidels despite their having revoked the earlier treaty and abstain from the exercise of force. It was such a strange decision for the followers of the Prophet, that 'Umar Ibn Khattab, one close follower, expressed that he had never doubted the Prophet's words to the extent of the day of the “Hudaibiya Peace Accord” –because he had said they would visit Mecca that year.

The matter of Hudaibiya Peace Accord is one of the most instructive episodes in the history of Islam, showing how the crisis was handled so adroitly by the Prophet. The Muslims turned back from the journey, but after a short time even those who had been opposed to the peace, came to realise how

politically favourable that peace had been for the Islamic ummah.

D) Peculiarities Of Prevailing Political Environment

Another issue which is directly related to the foregoing problems is that the Prophet's actions throughout the progress of the Islamic movement were appropriate to every stage under the prevalent conditions. During his 13 years of stay in Mecca, with the exception of one or two minor incidents, no armed clashes ever took place between Muslims and non-Muslims. One case was that occurred in those early years when the Muslims' numbers were small and at prayer time had no security, neither in their homes nor beside the Ka'aba or elsewhere. At home if the husband was a Muslim and his wife and children were idol worshippers, they would make fun of him whenever he stood up to pray, and a quarrel ensued. In the Ka'aba the idolaters would jeer at and often molest the Muslims. Thus, they were forced to seek privacy for prayers in the mountains where numerous passes afforded seclusion.

One day while a number of Muslims including Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqas. had proceeded to such a secluded place and were busy offering their prayers, when a number of infidels who were passing by, noticed them and began to jeer at them. The Muslims paid no heed and continued with their prayers, but when the infidels resorted to molest some physically, Sa'd got annoyed and attacked them with a stick or a camel's bone which he found there, and broke one person's head. This was the first bloodshed in defence of the Muslims, by a man who was later to become one of the commanders of the Army of Islam. However, this was an incident not war.

During all those 13 years in Mecca, the Prophet prudently paid heed to the political conditions. This point merits attention and understanding, since in those conditions prevailing in Arabia a lone man would be subjected to molestation and even his life would be in danger. But a person who had a family to rely on, or belonged to a tribe that supported him, no one dared hurt him. This was a particular condition then existing. With regard to the prophet, so long as Abu-Talib lived, he had his support and of the Bani-Hashim tribe and those of the tribe of Quraish with whom mutual relations existed. When Abu-Talib died, in the tenth or eleventh year of his prophethood, the conditions became difficult for the Prophet. Abu-Lahab became the head of the family of Bani-Hashim and he was from the first opposed to the Prophet, and thus, the Prophet was left without any political support. What could he do? He went here and there and contacted various groups to secure political support for himself.

However, by that time the number of Muslims had risen to between 60 to 80, even more including these who had migrated to Abyssinia. The infidels regarded the Prophet and his followers as a tribe in their own right political and military potential but the Prophet himself did not consider this situation satisfactory and sought stronger support elsewhere¹ to make up for the lost support of the Bani-Hashim.

When his contacts with a number of tribes produced, he began to prepare himself for migrating to Medina, and after some negotiations with the tribes of Aus and Khazraj of Medina during Hajj, he finally decided to undertake this epic journey. Thus, so long as the Prophet had not succeeded in creating a

new political institution as well as a strong political base that could sustain itself in Arabia, he sought support from other dependable sources. In the interval between the demise of Abu-Talib and the migration to Medina, which was not a long one, he was still protected by his relatives. For instance, if Abu-Lahab was his opponent, then 'Abass was a person of high status in the Bani-Hashim clan who dearly loved the Prophet, and Abu-Lahab, too, had to pay some regard to family relations.

Accordingly, it shows that the Prophet paid due heed to the political conditions then prevalent conformity which was another factor towards his success. When he arrived in Medina, contrary to the records of certain historians that there was no house where the Qur'an was not recited, there were many houses where not even one had yet embraced Islam. Although there was at least one Muslim in a number of houses, the Prophet initially practised his former way in the movement.

For instance, in the battle of Badr when he left Medina with the Muslims, he said to them: "We are going to attack a caravan." There was no mention of a war, but when they were out of Medina and the subject of war came up, he formed a council and asked them whether they were prepared for a war. Historians write that the reason for this question was that in the terms of his accord with the tribes of Aus and Khazraj, they had undertaken to defend him in Medina, whereas, then the question of a war outside Medina was proposed, and this matter, was outside the agreement. Therefore, he wished to know that apart from their accord whether they would agree to join him in a war or not? Such observance of established social traditions served as a factor for his success.

E) Decisive Response

Throughout the entire period of his invitation to Islam the Prophet gave a clear answer to all matters which were put forth. During his stay of 13 years in Mecca, one does not come across holy verses or topics related to administration, taxes, Friday and 'Id prayers and the like, since the main problems then were social conduct and related with divinity such as the manner of performance of devotional acts, prayers, fasting, ethics and the combat with polytheistic practices, selfishness and moral corruption. There was then little of political aspects. Of course, equality was practised within the group, and from the very beginning, the Prophet himself, lived like a brother with other Muslims. But when he came to Medina, fresh problems arose, and he showed full preparedness to deal with each one of them, and his decisive approach proved to be a factor for his success in promoting the movement.

F) As A Herald Of Freedom

From the very beginning the Prophet declared himself to be the herald of freedom, the herald of equality, justice and equity, and this proved to be a very effective factor in the success of Islam. He explicitly declared that an Abyssinian slave and a Quraish Sayyid of a noble house were equal before him. Equality justice and fraternity were without doubt his winning qualities which were related particularly to the Prophet and Islam.

G) Filling The Existing Socio-Political Vacuum

Another important point which served as a factor in the Prophet's success was that he commenced the Islamic movement in the environment of Hijaz where the great powers of that time did not have an important base, and where in fact a relative social and political vacuum prevailed. It is true that the Prophet's power as compared with the strength of the infidels of Hijaz was at the beginning quite weak, but, as we have said, he enjoyed the full support of Abu-Talib, and no one dared make an attempt on his life.

Even in the night of his emigration they could not attack him singly or a clan. They decided to pick a young man from each of the tribes so that all the tribes would share the guilt in the attempt on the Prophet's life, and they thought of this plot only as the Prophet had departed for Medina. In Mecca, therefore, it would appear there existed small and scattered power-groups that the Prophet could deal with and such great powers as Rome, Iran, Abyssinia and Egypt had no strong foothold in Hijaz to take any steps.

The extent to which the influence of these powers in Hijaz was still in the hands of the infidels and had not till then been captured by the Prophet and a peace treaty existed between them, and the Prophet felt easy in his mind that after the battle of Khandaq (Ahzab) they would be too afraid to resort to a fresh assault, the Prophet began writing letters to the rulers of neighbouring countries as we have earlier mentioned. He dispatched letters to the rulers of Hira, Ghassan, Jordan, the Governor of Yemen, the King of Abyssinia, King of Egypt, Emperor of Rome and to Khusrow Parviz, Emperor of Iran. This universal invitation to Islam was initiated in the sixth year of migration².

Those who presume that the Prophet had brought Islam primarily as a faith meant exclusively for Arabia and the Arabs, do not appear to know in what year he sent this invitation to all the regions neighbouring Arabia. He would dispatch one Muslim as his courier bearing his message. In the case of Iran, when his letter reached Khusrow Parviz and he saw that the letter began with the words: "From Muhammad, prophet of Allah, to Khusrow, King of Fars", he became very angry to see his name appear after that of the Prophet³ and tore the letter up. He directed Badhan, his Governor in Yemen⁴ to send a couple of his soldiers to Yathrib and arrest the man who had dared write such a letter to him and had made such claims, and have then bring him to the royal court.

This goes to show how little did Khusrow Parviz know of Muhammad (S) in Arabia and that he was completely ignorant about the Prophet's wars, a number of battles, victorious in all except one. Muhammad (S) was poised for further actions abroad, and he was not the one to be simply arrested by sending a pair of soldiers. This story shows the existence of a vacuum in the birthplace of Islam as regards the awareness of the great political powers of the time—which merits detailed study.

It was not only Khusrow Parviz who was ignorant about Muhammad (S); Heraclius, Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, despite his closer links with Arabia, was in a similar situation; when he received

the Prophet's letter, he said: "Go and see if there are any Arab traders in Syria who can give me some information about Muhammad (S)." As it happened, Abu Sufiyan, a sworn enemy of the prophet right to the end, and till then did not even pretend to have embraced Islam, was in Shaam. He came and speaking diplomatically began his criticism of the prophet but unintentionally mentioned something which interested Heraclius. Heraclius asked him what kind of a person he was in their community? Abu Sufiyan said that he was honest and had a good name. The main point is that Heraclius, too, had no knowledge of Muhammad (S), and even his courtiers had never heard anything about the Prophet. The persons who were better informed about the Islamic movement were firstly, Negus who had received two Muslim missions earlier, and Maquqass, king of Egypt.

The powerful rulers round about Mecca and Medina and Hijaz region had no interests in that land since it neither yielded revenue nor was it suited to exploitation and colonisation. The region was also remote from them and was nothing but a burning hot desert. Perhaps any new movement has the possibility of growing in a place where a relative political vacuum exists. This is, of course, not the sole condition for the growth of a movement, since there have been other movements which have grown in places devoid of such political vacuum and even under local pressure, however the possibilities of success grow more favourable in a state of a political vacuum so that dominant forces do not crush it is the offering.

In short, the movement of Islam was a perfectly comprehensive movement from an ideological viewpoint which could provide decisive response to all the questions, realistic response, useful and practical in every way. It was led by someone who had profound faith indomitable spirit forbearance and perseverance, a leader who had participated in every phase of the movement, and had fully shared all the difficulties with the rest, and was not the kind of a leader who would sit in a corner and issue orders to others. In addition, all this took place in a socio-political vacuum.

These Thus, were the original factors leading to the success of the movement, but naturally behind all these were the divine will and His aid from which the Muslims benefited repeatedly. But Divine pleasure is not a gift freely bestowed on everyone; as the Holy Qur'an proclaims repeatedly in various verses that there is victory sent by God, but one should also make an endeavour⁵, they made the endeavour and victory was theirs, as promised.

¹. These two years are mentioned in history as the period when the Prophet contacted other tribes in order to win their support.

². In the sixth year of migration many of the injunctions had not yet been revealed to the Prophet (S).

³. It is commonly seen that in royal decrees that the name of the sovereign is placed first at the top to be followed by the name of the addressee, even though from the viewpoint of composition the latter's name should come first but the royal prerogative forbids that!

⁴. At that time a part of Yemen was a satellite of Iran. This incident is related to the time after Abraha's campaign.

⁵. Refer to the Holy Qur'an, Surah At-Tawba, 9:25 and Verses onward.

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