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The Coming of Islam

*True piety is this: to believe in Allah,
and the Last Day, the angels,
the Book, and the Prophets,
to give of one's substance, however cherished,
to kinsmen, and orphans, the needy, the traveler, beggars,
and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer,
to pay the alms.*

The Quran
Sura II: 170-175

*Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry,
and the Christians...whoso believes in Allah and the Last
Day, and works righteousness...
no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.*

The Quran
Sura II: 59

In all of the years covered by the Biblical account and the Roman years afterward, the Arabian Peninsula exists as an almost silent backdrop to the events taking place in Palestine. Arabs are of the same Semitic stock as Jews. Traditionally, Arabs take their beginning from Abraham's first son, Ishmael. Biblical mention of Arabia is rare and often vague, for the Biblical writers seem to consider all of the desert to the south and east as "Arabia" and most desert dwellers as nomadic herders. Both Esau and Moses, who flee to Midian (which lies within the Arabian Desert), spend time as herders.

Trade Routes in Ancient Arabia

Fragrant frankincense and myrrh from the Hadramaut – the southern coastal area of the Peninsula, now within the countries of Oman and Yemen – are valued in the Holy Land and figure strongly in trade between the two regions. Traders moving between Arabia and the ports at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea use a route along the moist Hejaz, the mountainous western region of the Arabian Peninsula. Solomon receives a famous wealthy visitor from Sheba (now a part of Yemen), who rules in the higher and wetter southwestern portion of the Peninsula. Another tradition, however, places the home of the Queen of Sheba in Ethiopia. Whether from Yemen or Ethiopia, the Queen of Sheba would have traveled at least part of the way on this ancient trade route.

From the second century BCE to the first century CE, and thereafter as part of the Roman Empire, the prosperous trading kingdom of Nabatea operates from the almost impregnable fortress of the capital city of Petra in the northern reaches of the Arabian Desert. From Petra, the Nabateans can control the trade that passes both north and south, and westward to Egypt as well. The Nabateans are farmers as well as traders, and in the desert they use water conservation practices that the Israelis imitate in the Negev two thousand years later. Although the Romans conquer the Nabateans, they continue to value their skills and knowledge as traders. Archaeologists digging in Decapolis cities often find Nabatean coins as well as images of Nabatean gods.

Hiking in the desert south of Petra, in the area known as Wadi Rum, I come upon ancient rock art, crude but recognizable representations of camels and donkeys. The beasts have mounds on their backs, presumably goods, and underneath are messages in an incised script that bears little resemblance to Arabic. I am told the script is not Nabatean but is much older. The desert's mysteries await decoding.

The Arabians and Their Gods

At the beginning of the seventh century CE, most of the people of the Arabian Peninsula are not traders, however, but oasis farmers or nomadic desert dwellers. Most are Bedouin tribesmen, desperately poor, superstitious, and constrained by the tradition of blood feuds. They fear and try to placate a host of local gods of whom the most prominent is Al-lah. Al-lah is the god of Mecca, the trading city near the east coast of the Peninsula. He is worshipped at the Kaabah, the black cloth-covered cube that houses in one corner a meteorite. In ancient (pre-Islamic) times Arabians in and near Mecca believe that Al-lah and the meteorite are one. They circle the Kaabah in homage to Al-lah. But Al-lah has no moral authority; the ancient god does not offer a way for people to relate to one another. Al-lah is not *the* god of the Arabs, only one of many. Each tribe has its own god. As yet, the Bedouin have developed no theology, no sense that they are a god-inspired people. Nor have they ever been unified.

In Mecca, Medina, and other towns in Arabia, new ideas reach the Peninsula along the trade routes. There are communities of both Christians and Jews in these cities, foreigners who worship one all-powerful God. Although urban Arabs show little inclination to adopt the strangers' ways of thinking, they are not unaware of monotheism.

Muhammed

Muhammed is born into this milieu in the year 570. Muhammed's father dies before Muhammed is born, and he loses his mother when he is three. An uncle raises him. His family belongs to a

minor branch of the powerful Quraysh tribe, who control the trade in Mecca that has made them wealthy. The Quraysh, once desert-poor, are now urban dwellers, dissolute in their prosperity, and without moral restraint. Muhammed, who grows up to be a contemplative young man, realizes that his fellow tribesmen will come to no good if they continue in their ways. He worries about this but has no answer, no way of speaking truth to his tribe. Muhammed marries Khadija, the widow of a rich merchant, fifteen years his senior, and with her wealth he can now engage in trade himself.

Muhammed gains some familiarity with the Jewish and Christian faiths. He learns of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and of the God who once spoke powerfully to both the Jews and the Christians. How and where he learns of Judaism and Christianity is not clear. The most likely way would be through encounters with Christians and Jews in Mecca. But he is often away on trading ventures. His travels probably take him northward into the land of the Byzantines, and there, too, he could gain fragments of Judaism and Christianity. On the way, he could encounter Arab tribes on the fringes of the Byzantine empire who have converted to these faiths. By tradition, Muhammed can neither read nor write, but probably in caravansaries by candle light, he listens to stories that Christian or Jewish traders tell, and he carefully stores them in memory. In long, lonely hours on the trail and in month-long retreats in a cave at the base of Mount Hira, a few miles north of Mecca, he contemplates the ideas of monotheism and contrasts them with the dissolute ways of his fellow Arabs under polytheistic worship.