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978-0-521-29131-6 - Islamic History: A New Interpretation - I, A.D. 600-750
(A.H. 132)

M. A. Shaban

Excerpt

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I

THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION
IN ITS ENVIRONMENT

It is difficult to write objectively about the rise of Islam or, for that matter, of any other religion. Leaving aside personal convictions, the historian is usually confronted with a great deal of obscurity about the origins of the religion concerned. If any details about the early development of the religion survive, they are, in most cases, highly coloured and often exaggerated, so that it is difficult to distinguish fact from myth. Islam is more fortunate than Christianity in so far as we have more information, at least about its founder. Yet the material we have about the condition of Arabia at this time is so tantalizingly fragmentary that it does not allow us fully to understand the history of this period. Much has been written about the life and career of Muḥammad, and every detail has been adequately scrutinized and fully analysed to the extent that we are now generally assured about the basic facts of his activities. Nevertheless, these facts by themselves do not explain all these activities nor do they make it any easier to understand his motives. Of course any explanation is subject to the interpretation of these activities and it is only natural that historians should differ in such interpretation. The problem is that because of the scarcity of material about the rest of Arabia, these interpretations are mostly conjectures rather than adequately documented historical analyses. Thus E. A. Belyaev was relying on the arguments of Friedrich Engels rather than on our sources when he wrote, "thus Islam arose in Arabia, a new ideology reflecting considerable changes in Arab society, namely inequality in property, slavery and development of exchanges. The rise of this new ideology was due to the formation of a slaveholding regime within a decaying primitive-communal society".¹ Undoubtedly it was a new ideology and undoubtedly there were considerable changes in Arab society, but the rest of the argument

¹ E. A. Belyaev, *Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate*, tr. Adolphe Gourevitch, London, 1969, p. 115.

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is not supported by any shadow of evidence in our sources. On the other hand W. Montgomery Watt writes, "the essential situation out of which Islam emerged was the contrast and conflict between the Meccan nomadic outlook and attitudes and the new material (or economic) environment in which they found themselves". Watt continues to say, "With (the) breakdown of morality and failure of public opinion was connected a deterioration in the religious life of the Meccans. The traditional morality of the desert had become irrelevant in Mecca."¹ There is much to commend Watt's argument, but unfortunately he limited himself mainly to study and discussion of Makka and Madina. He did not pay enough attention to investigating conditions in Arabia as a whole. Such investigation is essential if we are to understand conditions in Makka and the activities of Muḥammad in both Makka and Madina. But this is a very difficult task and, in all fairness, the insufficiency of research in this respect is mainly the fault of previous scholarship. Fortunately more attention is now being paid to these problems and it is to our advantage that we have the badly needed work of such scholars as M. J. Kister.² A picture is now emerging of highly complex relationships in Arabia prior to the rise of Islam. These relationships linked the inhabitants of Makka with the inhabitants of most of the rest of Arabia, both nomad and settled, in expanding trade. This was international trade on a large scale which involved the two great powers of the time, the Sāsānian and Byzantine empires. Naturally their interests had far-reaching effects in Arabia itself. The Sāsānians were more inclined than the Byzantines to use force to safeguard their interest in this trade. Although they occupied Yaman c. A.D. 570-5 and established their control on both sides of the Persian Gulf, the rest of Arabia eluded their domination. They tried to make use of their vassals, the kings of Ḥira, on their south-west frontiers to subjugate by force the tribesmen of the central Arab plateau, but this policy only served to disclose the weakness of the kingdom of Ḥira and the result was its fall. It was no coincidence that the fall of Ḥira was concurrent with the rise of Makka to new wealth and power.

The Byzantines were perhaps more realistic in their Arabian

¹ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muḥammad, Prophet and Statesman*, London, 1961, pp. 48-51.

² References are made below to Kister's well-documented articles; with some modification his explanations of hitherto unexplained phenomena and his exhaustive references to the sources provide the basis for this present interpretation.

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policy. While they themselves refrained from any military adventures in Arabia, they witnessed and probably encouraged the attempt of their co-religionists the Abyssinians to conquer Yaman about A.D. 525 and then to attack Makka itself soon afterwards in order to establish control over the Yaman-Syria route. After the failure of this venture the Byzantines satisfied themselves with diplomatic manœuvres aimed at extending their sphere of influence southwards, if not at establishing a vassal regime in Makka like that of the kingdom of Ghassān in southern Syria. When this did not succeed they were only too happy to treat with the Makkans in order to guarantee the flow of trade.

It is impossible to think of Makka in terms other than trade; its only *raison d'être* was trade. It was first established as a local trading centre around a religious shrine. As a sanctuary, the visitors there were assured the safety of their lives and were required to suspend their feuds as long as they remained. To guarantee their safety *en route*, an elaborate system of sacred months, pilgrimage and religious rites was established with the concurrence of the surrounding tribesmen. The success of this system resulted in the expansion of trade, and this in turn led to the establishment of new market places. The notion of the sacred territory, *haram*, was extended to cover those markets which were also held in the sacred months in co-ordination with the pilgrimage.¹ Thus from the very beginning religion was inseparable from trade and the success of one only helped to enhance the success of the other. In such circumstances and in spite of the fact that each clan had its own deity it was inevitable that the Makkan sanctuary should hold a certain pre-eminence for the tribesmen benefiting from the Makkan trade system. To signify this the clans adhering to this system used to place symbols of their deities in the Ka'ba, the shrine of Makka. It was also inevitable that the Makkan deities should hold a higher status in this house of gods. Allah was certainly one of the Makkan deities, probably one of the earliest, although by the time of Muḥammad he was surpassed in status by other deities. In the first half of the sixth century, Makka was prospering and its local trade was dependent on its religious prestige, but this was in itself part of its trade system.

¹ This notion is adequately emphasized by R. B. Serjeant, "*Haram and Hawṣab, The Sacred Enclave in Arabia*", *Mélanges Taba Hwain*, Cairo, 1962, pp. 41-58.

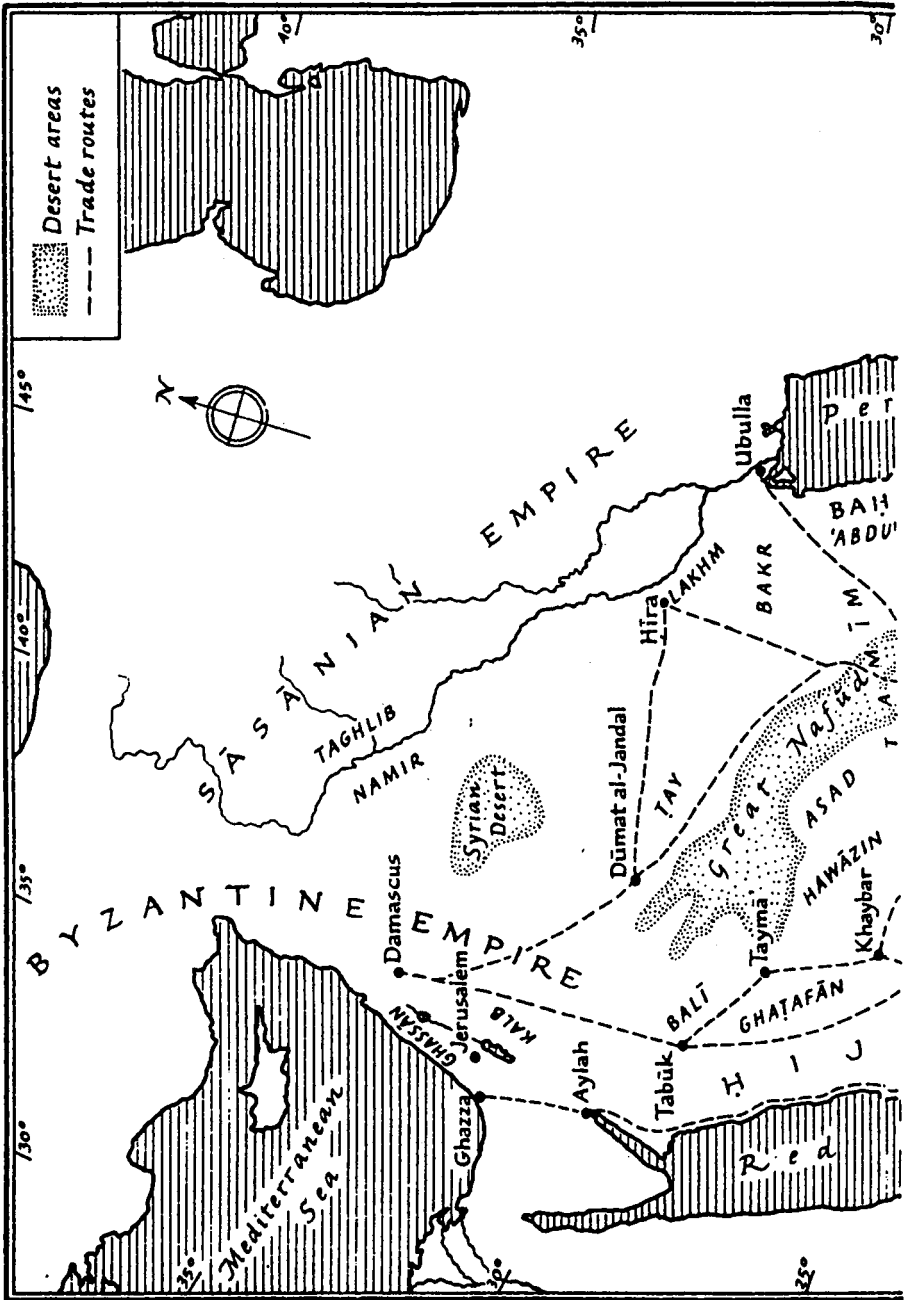
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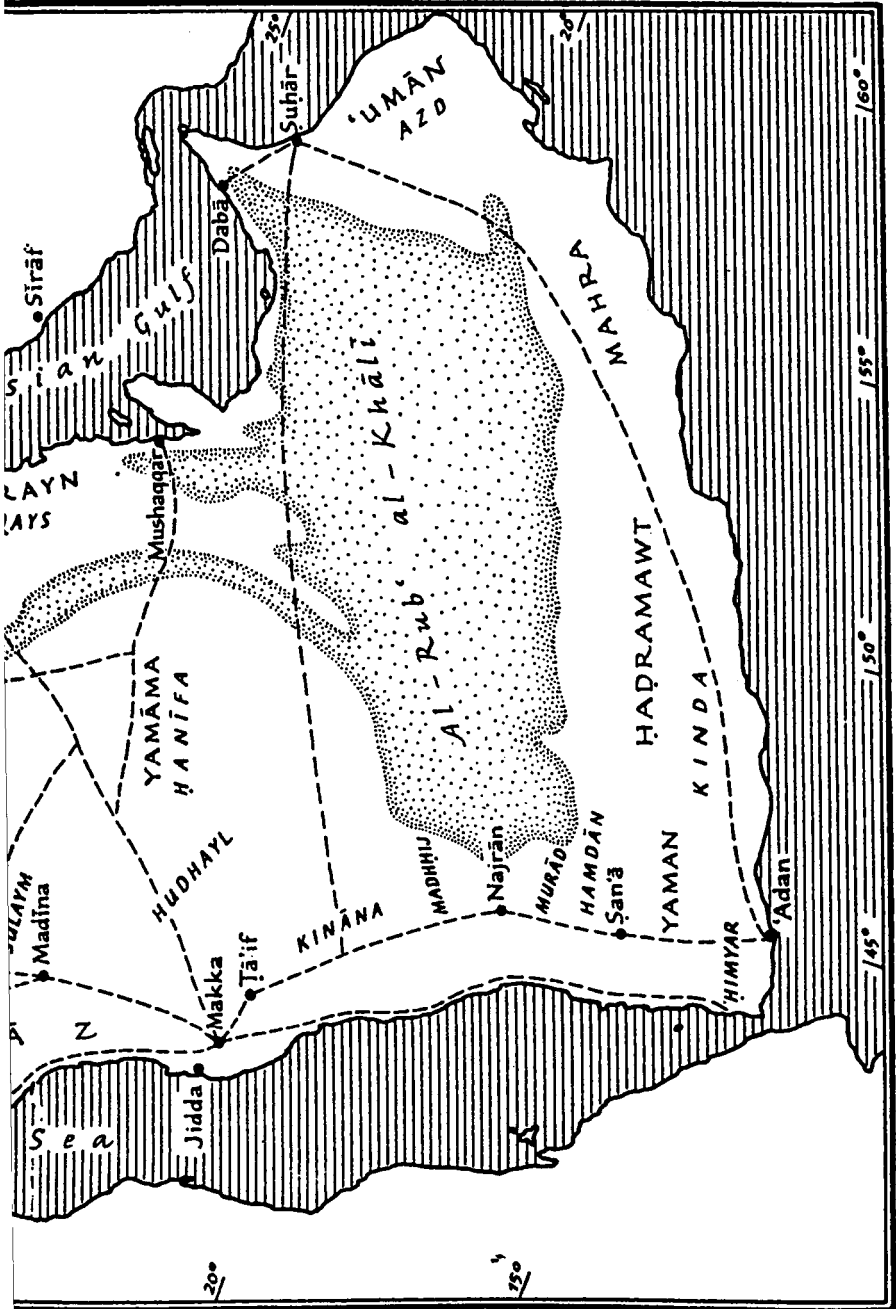
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1 The Arabian Peninsula at the rise of Islam, illustrating trade routes, desert areas and tribal distribution

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The real change in Makka's fortunes occurred with the change of its trade from local to international. This is now proved to have been the achievement of Hāshim, great-grandfather of Muḥammad, who lived around the middle of the sixth century. It is a remarkable tribute to the astuteness of the Makkan merchants that they were quick to perceive the vacuum created in the international commerce of their time, let alone to step swiftly into it. The struggle of the two great powers to dominate the trade routes and centres in Arabia was coming to a standstill. Makka, an expanding trade centre, situated on the crossroads of major trade routes, was in a most fortunate position to handle this trade. It had the expertise, the contacts and apparently a surplus of internal trade which could be channelled to foreign markets and which could very well supply the necessary capital. Above all it had an existing system which could be easily expanded to take over the greater volume of international trade, and Hāshim provided the conditions for this expansion. He secured from the Byzantine emperor a safe conduct for the merchants of Makka and their merchandise when they visited Syria. The emperor was probably glad to grant such a charter, at no cost to himself, which promised to extend his influence at least with some leading personages in Arabia. Similar charters were also secured from the Persian and Abyssinian rulers.¹

Now, Hāshim turned to the more difficult side of the deal, the Arab side. The security of the caravans of Makka depended on the attitude of various clans, some of whom were not participants in the local Makkan system. To these Hāshim submitted a proposal which gave them a market for their products and a profit for their merchandise at no cost to themselves. Makkan merchants would simply take such goods with them to Syria and, on their return, would pay back to their would-be partners their capital and all their profits. In return these tribesmen would guarantee the safety of Makkan caravans in their territories. This was probably the original form of *ilāf*, pact of security, which was the most widely applied. Other forms of *ilāf* involved a payment of tax by the tribesmen wishing to take part in trade but unable to guarantee the safety of Makkan caravans in their territories. Hāshim collected these taxes to enable him to organize the defence

¹ M. J. Kister, "Mecca and Tamīm", *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 1965, pp. 116-17.

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of the caravans.¹ As for those clans which were already participating in the local trade of Makka and thus recognized its sanctuary and its sacred months and were committed to defend them, the situation was much simpler. The expansion of Makkan trade would give them more reason to abide by these agreements. They emerged as the *ḥums*, a word which denotes ideas of courage, strictness in religion and also dedication to a sanctuary. Thus Makka itself was proclaimed *dār* (abode) *al-ḥums*, and the Ka'ba was *al-ḥamsā'*. This alliance, the *ḥums*, included Quraysh, the inhabitants of Makka, and many other clans which lived in different areas of Arabia and had no common tribal origins. More significant is that these clans were in control of many trade routes across the peninsula.² They also referred to themselves as *ahl* (the people of) Allah.³ Adherence to the *ḥums* was thus equivalent to and embodied the recognition of this one deity, who was possibly the personal god of Hāshim and his immediate family.⁴

To cement the alliances of the *ḥums* Quraysh granted the other clans a share in its dominance in accordance with their strength and services to the "Commonwealth of Makka". Kister has proved beyond any doubt the close relationship between Quraysh and clans of Tamīm who were "even included in the body politic of Makka".⁵ Quraysh granted leaders of these clans some control of the markets in its own territory and even authority in performing the rites of the pilgrimage. Another plausible suggestion by Kister is that some of Tamīm participated in an inter-tribal militia to guard Makka itself and its markets.⁶ Of course such sharing in responsibility would entail sharing in the profits of the whole enterprise. It is also reasonable to assume that Quraysh would require the participant clans to pay their share in the expense of maintaining the system. This almost egalitarian association was the basis of the rise of Makka to new wealth and power, shared by their allies.

In Makka itself it was again Hāshim who introduced another revolutionary measure. This was to give the poor some share in the profits as payment for their work or, probably, against investment of small sums for poor relatives.⁷ Therefore it was a joint

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-20.² *Ibid.*, pp. 132-8.³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.⁴ The occurrence of the name 'Abdullah among his descendants before Islam is significant, and also that the name did not occur among his ancestors.⁵ Kister, "Mecca and Tamīm", p. 131, for more details.⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

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enterprise with co-operation between all concerned. This co-operation, added to the elaborate network of highly organized alliances and agreements, succeeded well and certainly increased the prosperity of all participants. In fact it was too successful to last and endure the pressures of competition for a larger share in the expanding trade. By the time Muḥammad appeared on the scene, there was a tendency in Makka for wealth to be concentrated in fewer hands to the exclusion of poorer clans. It has been suggested that the formation of limited alliances, *ḥilf*, within the clans of Quraysh was in fact an attempt to monopolize trade in one direction or the other.¹

Outside Makka, the member clans of the commonwealth also scrambled for an increase of their rewards or a decrease of their dues to Quraysh. The causes of many wars like the Wicked War can be traced to the attempts of some of the clans along the trade routes to increase their own control over territories belonging to other clans.² Moreover, the expansion of trade encouraged the growth of several market towns, increasing the wealth and strength of their settled communities to the disadvantage of the nomadic clans around them. In consequence, a state of tension existed between the settled and nomadic clans though they may have belonged to the same tribal groups.³ Undoubtedly these increasing tensions within the system represented a threat to the trade network and the far-sighted Qurayshites must have realized the dangers inherent in such an explosive situation. Nevertheless, nobody came forward with any suggestion as to how the balance of the alliance might be restored or to warn against the inevitable disaster to Makka and its trade; nobody, that is, but Muḥammad.

He was an active participant in this trade and he cannot have been blind to the fact that not only Quraysh's livelihood but that of many others depended on its prosperity. He cannot have advocated the destruction of Makkan trade, he can only have suggested means to maintain and strengthen it. As a party to the *ḥums* alliance he must have realized the imminent breakdown and he

¹ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford, 1953, p. 15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 14; M. J. Kister, "Al-Ḥira", *Arabica*, vol. 15, 1968, p. 154.

³ The tendency of the settled communities to control the nomads around them was not only clear in Makka, Madīna and Ṭā'if, but also in Dūmat al-Jandal and al-Ḥajr, and was clearly a major objective of Musaylima, the prophet of Ḥanifa.

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suggested a more equitable basis for its maintenance.¹ Makka enjoyed a privileged religious sanctity which was closely connected with its commercial activities. Any attempt to reform or revolt against the existing system would have to be directed against both trade and religion. Muḥammad's religious convictions and his sincere belief in his divinely inspired mission are self-evident and this is not the place to pass a theological judgement on his prophethood or the religion he founded. From a historian's point of view his revolution and his statesmanship should be explained and understood in the light of their environment. In Makka this meant trade. To attempt a study of Muḥammad's activities in Makka and Arabia without taking trade into consideration is equivalent to studying contemporary Kuwait or Arabia without paying attention to oil. In all his preachings Muḥammad never encouraged his followers to neglect their worldly affairs. He only preached moderation reminding them that they should work for success in this world as much as for salvation in the other. That Islam itself encourages trade and considers it a highly honourable occupation needs no proof. What needs explaining is Muḥammad's plans for the continuation and prosperity of trade in his time.

At first Muḥammad decided to lead a revolt from within the system itself. He consistently preached that Quraysh should put its own house in order. The pursuit of excessive wealth, the deprivation of the weak and the neglect of the poor in Makka were all evil. The salvation of his fellow Qurayshites was to consist in taking care of their poor relatives, in watching over the well-being of their orphans and in being generous to the poor amongst them. This Co-operation between rich and poor is the basic tenet of all Muḥammad's preaching just as Love is for that of Jesus Christ. Having established this Co-operation within Makka itself, it would be easy to apply it to all members of the commonwealth. However, this demanded from the richer Qurayshites a certain sacrifice which they could not accept. Although his early followers included some rich men like 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, few Makkans were ready to heed his warnings, and his attempt at a revolution from within was doomed to failure. For thirteen years he persisted in preaching to his fellow Qurayshites, in spite of great difficulties. Economic warfare ensued between his followers and the rest of Quraysh. His rich enemies instituted an economic

¹ Kister, "Mecca and Tamim", p. 139, especially nn. 9 and 10.

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boycott of his clan. He tried, by sending some of his followers to Abyssinia, to establish independent trade relations there, but Quraysh was quick to foil his attempt.¹

Finally, Muḥammad began to look for outside support with which to challenge Makka. Significantly he turned first to Thaḳīf of Ṭā'if, the junior partners in the Makkan trade. He must have realized that his teachings were likely to be more acceptable to settled communities. Still, his choice of Ṭā'if was surprising unless it is to be seen as a desperate move. He could not have seriously expected the Thaḳīfites to challenge Quraysh on his behalf. In the event his journey to Ṭā'if ended in his being chased by the town rabble who flung stones at him. Again in desperation he tried to find support among the clans which had come to Makka for trade in the pilgrimage season, but to no avail. Nobody felt strong enough to challenge the powerful Quraysh and its allies.

Meanwhile Muḥammad's situation in Makka was deteriorating very fast and even his life was not safe. He had no alternative but to leave. Rescue came from the most unexpected direction, Madīna. It must be noted that the Madīnans were not active participants in the Makkan trade or alliances. Moreover, Madīna had its own peculiar problems. Its population was not homogeneous and tension existed between its Jewish and non-Jewish communities. The latter, the Aws and the Khazraj, were competing for the domination of the town and its resources, most of which were in Jewish hands. In the light of the close connections between the Madīnan Jews and other Jewish communities in Arabia it is not unreasonable to suggest that a Jewish trade network existed there at the time.² This would explain the absence of any large-scale operations between Makka and Madīna. The Madīnans were certainly aware of the situation in Makka and the opposition to Muḥammad there, yet they chose to assume the potentially dangerous attitude of hostility towards Makka. Furthermore, it was to give protection to a Qurayshite against Quraysh itself that they invited Muḥammad to Madīna. To add to the complexity of the situation they gave him a privileged position as arbitrator amongst themselves.

It was in fact only a very small minority of Madīnans who were

¹ Watt, *Muḥammad at Mecca*, pp. 114–15.

² These connections extended as far north as with Adhra'āt in Syria, and at least as far as Najrān in the south.