

A Man Called Muhammad

THE TRIBE IN 7TH CENTURY ARABIA

Life in the Arabian desert was precarious. The Arab nomads were nearly always hungry and suffering from malnutrition; and were in fierce competition with each other for the necessities of life. The only way to survive was in a closely-knit group; an individual stood absolutely no chance at all. The groups were formed of blood and kinship bonds, and could make alliances with other tribes. Group members felt a fierce and absolute loyalty to the tribe and its allies.

The tribe had sacred value to the Arabs. The only duty and immortality was in serving the tribe. Generosity and hospitality within the tribe and among allies was a sacred duty; the strong had a duty to protect the weak and to distribute food and goods equally. A time-honoured method of providing for the tribe was the raid, which was a constant occupation and almost a national sport. In times of hardship one tribe would raid the territory of another and carry off camels, cattle or other goods. However, bloodshed was avoided during a raid, in order not to provoke a blood-feud.

To protect the tribe and its members a chief had to be prepared to avenge each and every injury. There was no common law to be enforced by a central authority- no government or police force- so the only way of preserving security for one's tribe was by means of the blood-feud. If a member of your tribe was killed, a member of the murderer's tribe *had* to be killed in return. This was the only way a chief could protect his tribesmen. If he failed to retaliate, nobody would respect his group and would feel free to attack with impunity. As it was extremely easy for a killer to disappear without trace in Arabia, there was no duty to punish the killer. The offending tribe would be weakened by the death of any member. One member of a tribe was considered to be much the same as any other. Blood feuds meant that it was impossible for Arab clans to unite and pool their meagre resources. One blood feud bred another, sometimes until every member of a tribe had been wiped out.

THE CITY OF MECCA

One tribe, the Quraysh, had become rich by trading with surrounding countries. The desert oasis of Mecca had become a thriving city of merchants who bought and sold goods and gave up their old nomadic ways. However, in the aggressive stampede for wealth, some of the old tribal values had been lost. Instead of looking after weaker members, some of the Quraysh were intent on making money, to the exclusion of all social duties. Widows and orphans were mistreated or left to starve. In the old nomadic days this would have been unthinkable. Money and goods were not shared and there was drunkenness, gambling and violence.

There was also a spiritual restlessness in Mecca and throughout Arabia. The Arab tribes were aware of the new religions of Judaism and Christianity, and felt that they were more sophisticated than their old desert traditions. The Arabs had many gods, but some had come to believe that the Arab high God, al-Lah (the God), was the one God worshipped by Jews and Christians. However, al-Lah had sent the Arabs no prophets or revelations, or a scripture in their own language. Indeed, the Jews and Christians often taunted the Arabs for being excluded from the divine plan. Some Arabs had come to believe that they were a lost people, ignored by God and doomed to implode through violence and greed.

A MAN CALLED MUHAMMAD

Family life: orphan, taken in by grandfather, raised by uncle, married with 4 daughters (2 sons died in infancy). A member of the Quraysh tribe.

Employment: a successful trader, known to be honest and intelligent, based in Mecca.

Marital status: married to Khadijah, a rich widow. They are devoted to each other.

Religion: very spiritual, often goes to a cave called Hira, outside the city of Mecca, to pray and meditate.

Characteristics: wise and generous; he solves problems in the city and takes orphans into his family. He is very respectful towards women. Peaceful; he hates the way the Meccans treat the poor, needy and vulnerable. Clean-living: he thinks the Meccans that gamble, drink and fight are not living a good life.

THE REVELATION

One night, during the month of Ramadan in 610 CE, Muhammad was praying in the cave Hira. He suddenly felt himself being squeezed, as if by an enormous hand, until he thought he would faint. This devastating presence caused the first words of a new Arabic scripture to pour out of his mouth. After this terrifying experience, weak and trembling, Muhammad staggered down the mountainside to his home. He collapsed into Khadijah's arms and told her what had happened, terrified that he had become possessed by a malevolent spirit. Khadijah listened to her husband, soothing him, and declared that it did not sound like he had become possessed. Muhammad had received the first words of the Qur'an; the revelation of the One God to the Arab people, he had become the prophet of Islam.

Over the next 21 years Muhammad received many more revelations. In the early days the impact was so frightening that his whole body was convulsed; he would sweat profusely, experience a great heaviness or hear strange sounds and voices. The revelations were painful to Muhammad, who said, 'never once did I receive a revelation, without thinking that my soul had been torn away from me.' (K. Armstrong, a history of God, 1999, p. 163, citing Jalal ad-Din Suyuti, 1971)

ISLAM

Muhammad received more revelations after that night. By 612 he had begun to speak publically about his revelations, and gradually a small following formed around him. Many of the converts to the new ideas were poor or weak members of the tribe who felt that the new inequality in Mecca was alien to the Arab spirit. The message of Muhammad was simple:

- ☛ Do not build a private fortune, but share your wealth with the poor and vulnerable
- ☛ Treat the weakest members of a community with respect
- ☛ Justice and equality are fundamental laws of existence, without them a society will collapse
- ☛ Behave towards one another with justice and compassion

The new sect became known as *Islam*, and its followers *Muslims*. 'Islam' means at once 'peace' and 'surrender' or 'submission' in Arabic; it is the way of submitting oneself to the justice and compassion of God's laws. A Muslim is one who surrenders their will, and undertakes to treat their fellow human beings with this justice and compassion.