

Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture

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Part Ten: The Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century

The two great powers in the Middle East at the start of the seventh century were the Byzantine and the Sasanian Empires. The Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire was centred on Constantinople or Byzantium (modern Istanbul). It was what remained of the Roman Empire, which had begun to decline from the fourth century and in the fifth moved its capital eastwards from Rome to Constantinople. By the seventh century, its territory was confined to the Mediterranean seaboard to the west, the coastal regions of North Africa, Egypt, Syria, and modern Turkey, Greece and most of Italy. When the Qur'an speaks of "the Romans" [Q. 30 is called *al-Rum*, the Romans], the reference is to this Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantines were Greek-speaking and looked down on their non-Greek subjects (Barbarian means those who do not speak Greek). Damascus was their administrative centre in the Arab lands. They were a formidable force and controlled much of the Mediterranean Sea through their navy. Religiously, they were Byzantine (modern Greek Orthodox) Christians with the Emperor having both a religious and a political role.

The Sasanian Empire controlled Persia and Mesopotamia as far north as the Caucasus Mountains (including modern Iraq). They also held the south-west corner of the Arabian peninsula at this time (including part of modern Yemen). Religiously they were Zoroastrians, followers of the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra), a monotheistic religion worshipping God under the name of Ahura Mazda. The Sasanians had been in conflict with the Byzantines for decades and from 607 to 628, they controlled the coastal region from Egypt through Palestine to Syria. The Byzantines took back these lands in 628, which is the context for the revelation of Chapter 9 of the Qur'an, when Muhammad was preparing to send an army towards their territory for the Battle of Tabuk. This is the only chapter of the Qur'an that does not begin with: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." Some scholars have linked this with the fact that this chapter speaks in harsh terms of subjugating these enemies and strongly urges the backsliders within the Muslim community.

Both of these great empires had Arab tribes on their borders who affiliated with them to create buffer kingdoms between the rest of the peninsula and their directly controlled lands. A good proportion of these tribes had become Christians through their contact with Christians from the empires, both in Syria and in Iraq.

Jews and Christians in the area

After the dispersal of Jewish tribes from Palestine, especially after the expulsions by the Romans in the first and second centuries, some of them had settled in the Arabian

peninsula. There were Jewish settlements in the northern part, notably in Khaybar and Madina itself, and also in the far south-west, in modern Yemen. They were engaged in trade and probably had their own trading networks between their various settlements. We do not know too much about the Judaism that they practised but they knew themselves to be different from their neighbours. At times, they became the agents of the Sasanian Empire especially, exercising a degree of control in the region on their behalf.

The early centuries of Christianity saw the formation of various different groups. Often the differences centred on what they understood about the person of Jesus. The Byzantines followed the classical orthodox position of eastern and western Christianity on this question as defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 in which they held that Jesus Christ and God the Father were of one single substance, in other words, both were fully divine, being with the Holy Spirit, one divine Being. The earthly Jesus, they said, had two natures that were united in him, one human and one divine.

To the east of the peninsula, centred on Iraq, there was the great “Church of the East,” which followed a Nestorian understanding of Jesus. This position said that the *logos* or Word of God dwelt in Jesus but that this did not make him divine. His human nature was perfected through the presence of the *logos*. He was a prophet “filled with the Holy Spirit,” a human being adopted to the position of Son of God (following and developing upon the theological school of Antioch). After the disputes surrounding the Council of Ephesus in 431, they insisted on speaking of Mary as the “Christ-bearer” and not the “God-bearer” (*theotokos*). The Nestorians were energetic missionaries, carrying their form of Christianity along the trade routes up the Tigris River into Central Asia and along the Silk Road into China, in one direction, and south into India, in the other. They would later play an important part in conveying Greek wisdom to the Arabs and Muslim missionaries would follow their path in taking Islam to the east. They also had no doctrine of Original Sin and this, combined with their understanding of Jesus, made it an easier step for the eventual conversion of a good number of them to Islam.

To the west of the peninsula, in Egypt and Ethiopia, another form of Christianity was dominant. These are normally called Monophysites, that is those who followed and developed the other early theological school, that of Alexandria, to stress the single divine nature of Jesus. In him, the Word of God or *logos* was incarnate, so that he was fully divine. They upheld the doctrine of the Council of Ephesus 431 to use of Mary the name “God-bearer.” The Coptic Church in Egypt and Ethiopia would belong to this Monophysite school today. At the extreme end of this spectrum would be found the Docetists, who held that the humanity of Jesus was illusory, some of whom went to the extent of saying that Jesus escaped crucifixion and a substitute was crucified in his place. Further still to the west, along the coast of North Africa, another group was dominant, the Arians, who held the *logos* to be a creature of God and Jesus a human super-prophet. It was throughout this region that conversion to Islam would later make rapid strides, facilitated in part by this Arian doctrine of Jesus.

There were some Christian settlements in the Arabian peninsula itself, notably in the Yemen in Sana'a and Najran. We are not sure to which form of Christianity they belonged, except that we know that they were not Byzantine. It may well have been that they followed the Ethiopian Monophysite school as that was their nearest neighbour. Both Sana'a and Najran were on the trade routes running up the western side of the peninsula to Damascus, so there could have been some cross-fertilisation.

The Arabs of the peninsula

The Arabs at this time comprised various tribes with their sub-groups, often referred to as clans. Each tribe had its own identity, which was reinforced by memorised genealogies and a strong emphasis on oral history. Sometimes tribes banded together into federations but always the loyalty and identity was essentially tribal. There was a general unwritten legal code that emphasised mutual protection within the clan or tribe, in which any attack on a member was likely to result in concerted action to revenge any deaths, injuries or losses on the perpetrators. There was a high code of honour, by which someone who did not defend himself or exact revenge was unworthy of respect. It was common for one tribe to raid the encampments or flocks of another with a view to carrying off their livestock, slaves and women rather than shedding blood. This raiding mentality was so strong that there was a general agreement that four months of the year were declared to be a period of truce, in which no raiding was permitted and trade and religious rites and pilgrimages were conducted. The position of women within this society was akin to being another possession of the men of the tribe. Many dialects were spoken amongst the tribes but there was a great emphasis on poetry, which was recited in such a way that it could be understood commonly on an inter-tribal basis. One of the places in which such common recital took place was in Makka; as a centre of pilgrimage it was a great supra-tribal meeting place.

We can see three styles of life amongst these tribes: they were nomads, semi-nomads and settled peoples. The nomads tended to breed camels, which could travel with them. Those who lived on the more fertile margins had flocks of goats and sheep and a more restricted range of travel. In the settled communities, agriculture was likely to take the form of wheat, date plantations or fruit orchards. People from different tribes would live together in mixed settlements but still tribal identity and living in clan clusters was the norm. Settled communities would employ different battle tactics to the nomads. Leadership was tribal and thus based on a mixture of age, proven ability and lineage. In settlements and federations, a council of elders or *shura* was the supra-tribal norm. These leaders would give their patronage and protection to their clan members and, if they so chose, to people outside. This can be seen in the way that Abu Talib, the uncle of Muhammad (whether he was a Muslim or not is unclear), gave his protection to Muhammad when he was head of the clan. When he died, the next clan leader withdrew that protection, thus leaving Muhammad exposed to threats and even assassination attempts. In these circumstances, he sought the protection of the head of another clan to ensure his safety.

The religious culture of the Arabs was structured around the worship of many gods in a broadly hierarchical system or *henotheism*. Families would have family gods, generally carved of wood or stone, which would have a place of honour where they could be greeted and a blessing received as members came and went from the dwelling. Then there would be clan gods, who were usually known by a name and placed in a sanctuary where sacrifices could be offered. There were three great sanctuaries for the supra-tribal goddesses: Lat in Ta'if, Uzzah east of Makka, and Manah between Makka and Yathrib [Q. 53:20]. These three feminine deities were known as the “daughters of god.” There is some evidence of a concept of a supreme god called Allah. Within this context, the *Ka'ba* in Makka had a pre-eminence. It was primarily the shrine of the god Hubal but additionally, many clans and tribes had brought one of their gods to reside there and at the time of Muhammad's youth, it is reported that there were some 360 gods in, on and around the *Ka'ba*. People would make pilgrimage there during the months of truce and engage in their ritual practices as well as trade with the merchants.

The trade routes

The Arabian peninsula was strategically placed for trade from East Africa, India and other eastern countries seeking to send their goods to the lucrative markets around the Mediterranean. Ivory, rhino-horns and coconut oil would be sent from East Africa. Spices, pepper, precious stones, cotton, gum resin and tortoise shells would come from India and modern Indonesia. These were unloaded on the coast of Yemen, at modern Aden, and then taken by camel train merchants along a well-defined “spice road” that ran through such cities as Sana'a, Najran, Ta'if and Makka until eventually reaching the Mediterranean coast mainly at Damascus. The journeys were long, arduous and dangerous, therefore the caravans kept to the frequented routes and used to travel in numbers for the sake of security. The Makkan caravans would journey south to Aden in winter and then collect to travel north to Damascus in summer. The caravan merchants often played a role in making pacts with various peoples along the routes so that they could be sure of safe passage. At times of the involvement of the great empires, these could be political pacts too.

The customary practice was that camel train merchants took goods on trust to sell in the markets of Damascus and then returned with the proceeds. They earned their living by a system of profit-sharing with the original owners. The nomads would bring tanned hides and carvings to trading centres like Makka and entrust them to a merchant for onward shipment and sale. The potential for corruption is obvious. This is the context to understand the nick-name given to Muhammad in his early manhood as a trader, *al-Amin*, the Trustworthy. When Muhammad began to preach his egalitarian proclamation of mutual welfare with the rich taking care of the poor, this was an unwelcome message in such circles.

The cities

The key significance of Makka has already been noted. Its prosperity was built on the combination of trade and pilgrimage. Ta'if was a short journey to the south-east but it stood in a much more fertile area where it was possible to grow wheat, grapes, vegetables, roses and all manner of fruits. Sometimes in the literature it is called “the garden of Makka” because its larger neighbour provided a ready outlet for its produce, which could not be grown in the much more arid climate around Makka. To the north, the city of Yathrib, which was to become Madina, was really a cluster of tribal villages with some agriculture, especially date palms. There were significant Jewish clans that had settled there and over the years there had been Arab converts to Judaism. There were also lesser trade routes that crossed the peninsula towards the Gulf and the Sasanian lands, which passed through important trading cities such as Yamama and Hira.