THE RISE OF ISLAM

The Arabic conquest of the East in the seventh century is in many respects a counterpart to the Germanic invasions of the West two centuries earlier. Like the latter, it marks the end of the centuries of the predominance of the Graeco-Roman civilisation and the formation of a new mixed culture which was to characterise the following mediaeval period. The coming of Islam was the last act of the thousand years of interaction between East and West, the complete victory of the oriental spirit which had been gradually encroaching on the Hellenistic world since the downfall of the Seleucid monarchy. Mohammed was the answer of the East to the challenge of Alexander.

But the Arabic conquest differs profoundly from that of the Germans in the West, in that it owed its origin to the work of a great historic personality. It is true that, as we have seen in dealing with the Byzantine culture, the East was ripe for revolt, and a cataclysm of some kind was probably inevitable. It is true also that the tribes of Arabia, like those of Northern Europe, were on the move, perhaps owing to the pressure of climatic conditions and the progressive desiccation of Arabia. But without the work of Mohammed the Arabs could never have attained the unity and the religious impulse which rendered them irresistible. To the Byzantine government the Arabs were a frontier problem, rather than a great menace, like the power of Persia, which was always looked upon as the real eastern peril. For centuries the Empire had been in re-
lations with the Arabian states—the Nabathaens, Palmyra, and latterly the kingdom of Chassan, which was a client state of the Byzantine Empire. Any danger from the interior of the peninsula was hardly to be thought of. The wandering Bedouin tribes of the desert were in a perpetual state of fluctuation and internecine war, and the settled communities of the west and south owed their prosperity to their trade with the Byzantine world. Nevertheless a process of cultural fermentation and change was taking place in Arabia in the sixth century, and the situation was ripe for the rise of a new power.

For ages the centre of Arabian civilisation had lain in the far south—in the land of Saba, the modern Yemen. Here there had arisen in prehistoric times a settled culture of the archaic type, derived from Mesopotamia, perhaps even as far back as Sumerian times; indeed their later portrait sculpture suggests a Sumerian rather than a Semitic physical type. The Babylonian divinities—Ishtar and Sin and Shamash (with their sexes reversed, however)—were worshipped, and the Sumerian type of temple state existed. In Saba the earliest rulers bore a priestly title—Mukarrib (the blesser)—and in Ma'in the king stood in close relation to the priestly corporation. The god was conceived as the ruler of the land, he possessed rich revenues and numerous priests and dependents. Existing Sabaeans inscriptions frequently record the dedication of individuals or families as slaves of the deity, or temple servants, while rulers and priests were, so to speak, adopted into the family of the god as his children or nephews. Unlike the nomadic tribes of the north, the southern peoples were peaceful agriculturists who constructed extensive irrigation works, notably the great dam of Marib. They were no dwellers in tents; on the contrary they were great builders, and the Yemen is full of the ruins of their castles and temples. Their inscriptions are numerous and are beautifully carved in a fine symmetrical alphabetic script, which probably goes back to the ninth or tenth century B.C.1

The prosperity of the land of Saba, however, rested above all on trade. It was a land of gold and precious spices—the frankincense and myrrh that were in such request in the temples of Egypt and Asia; and it was from very early times the half-way house for trade between India and the West, and the starting point of the great caravan route which passed northwards through Mecca and Medina to Sinai and Palestine. Sabaeans influence extended along this road, and the state
of Ma'ān, in Northern Arabia and the land of Midian, seems to have been an early offshoot of the kingdom of Ma'ān in the South.

From the time of the foundation of the Roman Empire the prosperity of Saba declined, owing to the rise of new trade routes to India and the establishment of direct contact between Egypt and Abyssinia by sea. Arab tradition ascribes the fall of Saba to the breaking of the great dam of Marib, which did actually occur both in the year 450, when 20,000 men were employed in its repair, and again in 542, but this no doubt was the result, rather than the cause, of the decline of prosperity. From the third century onwards, Southern Arabia fell more and more under the influence of the kingdom of Abyssinia, and in the sixth century, after the defeat of the Jewish king, Dhu Nuwas, it was ruled for fifty years by an Abyssinian viceroy, who made Christianity the religion of the land. Finally in 570 it was conquered by a Persian expedition, and remained under Persian suzerainty until the victory of Islam.

Nothing could be in more complete contrast to this settled civilization of the South than the life of the wild nomad tribes of the North, which we are accustomed to think of as characteristically Arab. Their whole existence was devoted to warfare, to raiding the flocks and herds of their neighbours and levying tribute on the caravans of the traders.

While the social organisation of the sedentary peoples possessed a strong matriarchal element, as we see from the legendary Queen Bilquis of Saba, and the historic Zenobia of Palmyra, that of the nomads was purely patriarchal—indeed it is the purest example of the patriarchal type that exists, and it has endured with little change from the days of Abraham to our own. Religion played a far smaller part in their lives than in that of the settled peoples, but it was of the same type, and in this and other respects the ancient Sabaean culture exercised a considerable influence on the nomad peoples.

Moreover from the north they were exposed to the influence of the higher cultures of Syria and Mesopotamia. Here there had arisen first the trading state of the Nabataeans with its centre at Petra, then that of Palmyra, which during the third century controlled the great trade route between the Roman Empire and the Persian Gulf, and finally the border states of Ghassan and Hira, which stood in immediate relations, the one with the Byzantine Empire, the other with Persia. In the
age that immediately preceded the rise of Islam, the latter were
the chief centres of Arab culture, and it was at their courts
that the early Arabic poets flourished and that the classical
form of the language was developed.

Thus Mohammed was born at a critical moment in Arabian
history. The ancient civilisation of the South was in full de-
cline, and alike from the North and the South the land was
being invaded by foreign civilisation and foreign religions.
Mecca, the city of his birth, was one of the last strongholds
of Arabian heathenism. It lay upon the great prehistoric trade
route from the Yemen to the north, and it probably owed its
foundation, like Al Aila and Taima further north, to the Sa-
baean colonising movement, but we have no knowledge of its
early history before its conquest by the Quraysh, a tribe of
North Arabian origin about the fourth century A.D.

It was a Temple City of a rudimentary type and owed its
importance to the great sanctuary of the Kaaba, the shrine of
the god Hebal and his oracle, and to the famous annual pil-
grimage which took place at Mount Arafat some miles away. As
in the case of the Sabaean temples, the god of the Kaaba
was the lord of the city territory, and the Meccans were his
clients and subjects, paying to him the tithe of their crops
and the first-born of their herd, and the power of the
Quraysh rested on their position as priests and guardians of
the shrine. On the other hand, the pilgrimage was a cere-
mony of independent origin, perhaps characteristic of the no-
mad peoples, and it was accompanied by an inter-tribal truce,
a kind of sacred fair, such as is common among peoples of
tribal culture.

Thus the Meccan culture had a double character. It oc-
cupied an intermediate position between two different types
of society—the ancient sacred city of Southern Arabia and the
warlike nomad tribes of the desert. And in the same way the
age was a transitional one between the old world of Arabian
paganism and the advance of the new world religious. These
influences played a great part in the development of Moham-
med's character and teaching. It is important to remember
that he was a townsman, dominated by the tradition of the
temple-city-state and the trading community, and with a con-
siderable contempt for the Arabs of the desert, though no
doubt he derived from his desert ancestry the warlike and
daring spirit which comes out increasingly in the second part
of his career. His mind was deeply impressed by the anarchy
and barbarism of the warring pagan tribes, and by the vestiges of the vanished greatness of an earlier civilization. He felt the need for a moral reform of Arabian society—"for some new principle of order to replace the primitive tribal law of kinship and of the blood feud—and at the same time he was conscious of the absolute helplessness of man to accomplish anything of his own strength; for like all Semites he possessed that conception of human unimportance before the absolute and irresponsible divine power, which is perhaps the natural psychological result of the harsh conditions of a desert environment. But the all-powerful divinity of Mohammed was not like the deified powers of nature of the old Arabian religion, it was the God of the new religious—Jewish and Christian—which were making their power felt in Arabia. No doubt Mohammed came into contact with these new influences during the trading journeys that he undertook on behalf of his wife—the rich and elderly widow Kadijah. The Jewish communities in Southern Arabia, and even as near as Medina, were numerous and active in proselytising—so likewise were the Christians—and though we know little of the flourishing church of Southern Arabia, there is much in the code of laws ascribed to the apostle of the Himyantes—St. Gregentius—which recalls the severe puritan spirit of early Islam. Moreover there was also a class of native ascetics—the so-called Hanifa—who, like Mohammed, were preachers of monotheism and a strict moral law, and one of the most celebrated of them, Zaid ibn ‘Amr, was a citizen of Mecca, and died when Mohammed was a youth. Nevertheless it would be a great mistake to look on Mohammed as one who was an apostle of the ideas of others rather than an original force. He was profoundly convinced of his own direct inspiration. Like so many religious mystics, he used to fall into a kind of trance in which he heard a voice—always the same voice—whose utterances he was powerless to control or resist. These utterances took the form of a kind of rhythmic and rhyming prose, similar to the oracular verses of the heathen poetry, for Mohammed constantly has to defend himself against the accusation of being "a poet" or one possessed by a spirit.

These brief ecstatic utterances gave place, as Mohammed became the leader of a party and the founder of a sect, to a more prosaic and didactic tone, to regulations for the guidance of the young community, to controversies with opponents and
legendary histories drawn from the most diverse sources—the Talmud, the apocryphal gospels, the stories of pagan Arabia, even the tale of the two-horned Alexander and his expedition to the bounds of the earth. Yet, in spite of its crudities and its motley character, the Koran has exercised a greater influence on the history of the world than any other single book. Even to-day it is the supreme authority for the social life and thought of 200 millions of the human race and is regarded as divinely inspired in every line and syllable.

The power of the religion of Mohammed rests above all on its absolute simplicity. It is the new type of world-religion reduced to its simplest elements. It rests on the principle of the absolute unity and omnipotence of God and of the all-importance of the life to come. But in spite of its simplicity it is far from being a rational Deism, as some of its modern apologists have conceived it. It is based not on Reason, but on prophetic Revelation in the strict sense of the word, and on the belief in the miraculous interposition of the supernatural powers. The life to come is portrayed in vivid material imagery: the fire of hell in which the unbelievers shall burn eternally, feeding upon the hellish fruit of the tree Zakkoum, and the shady gardens of Paradise, in which the faithful shall recline for ever on high couches, with linings of brocade, drinking of the waters of the fount Es Selebi, and accompanied by their brides, the maidens of Paradise, “the large-eyed ones, with modest refraining glances, fair like the sheltered egg.”

The moral and social teaching of Mohammed is as simple and straightforward as his theology. To the Unity of God corresponds the fellowship of believers, which abolishes all distinctions of race and tribe and social rank. The primary duty is almsgiving: “To ransom the captive, to feed the orphan and the poor that lieth in the dust.” Polygamy and slavery are permitted, but otherwise the moral code is puritanical in its strictness and was enforced by corporal punishment.

On the other hand, the moral and doctrinal simplicity of Islam is balanced by an elaborate ceremonial code; the five daily times of prayer with the due number of prostrations, the recitations of the Koran, the severe annual fast of Ramadan, the strict rules concerning ceremonial purity and ablutions; above all the ceremonies of the pilgrimage to Mecca make the Moslem a race apart from other men, like the Jews, with its centre at Mecca instead of Jerusalem. For Mohammed, in spite of his abandonment of the old Arabian pagan-
ism, remained faithful to his sacred city. The Kaaba remained the House of God, and even the traditional ceremonies of kissing the sacred black stone and performing the sevenfold circumambulation of the Kaaba were preserved, as well as the primitive rites of the pilgrimage to Mount Arafat with the sacrifice of sheep and the cutting of the hair and the nails at Mina. All these practices were justified as part of the "Religion of Abraham," who was the founder of the Kaaba and the ancestor of the Arab race.

The full development of Mohammed's teaching and the organisation of the Moslem community was of course a gradual process. The crisis of Mohammed's career came when he was driven out by the heathen Quraysh of Mecca and took refuge with his followers in the neighbouring city of Yathrib—the modern Medina. This was the Hegira of the year 622 A.D., which became the starting-point of all Moslem chronology. It was at Medina that the new community took form as a political society which was to supersede the old tribal unity, and it was thence that Mohammed sent out the raiding parties against the caravans of the Meccans, which were the beginnings of the secular power of Islam and of the institution of the Holy War. In the desert skirmishes of the next few years, from the Battle of Badr in the year 2 to the taking of Mecca and the Battle of Hunain in the year 8, the whole future of Western Asia and North Africa was decided.

From this point Islam becomes a conquering power that absorbs and unites all the tribal communities of Arabia. It was one of the fundamental principles of Mohammed's teaching that the true believers should live in peace with one another, and the cessation of tribal warfare liberated a great wave of warlike energy, which flooded the surrounding countries. Within two years of the death of the Prophet, the attack on Syria and Persia had begun. But the extraordinary success and rapidity of the Moslem expansion was not merely due to the warlike spirit of the Arab; it was far more a result of the intense religious enthusiasm which makes the Holy War a supreme act of consecration and self-sacrifice, so that to die in "the Path of God" is the Moslem's highest ideal.

This fighting puritanism, which is of the essence of Islam, found its highest expression in the Moslem state under the first Khalifs, and it is this period, and not the great age of culture and philosophy under the Abbasids, which has always been regarded as the Golden Age of Islam by the Moslem
themselves. It is described by the writer of Al Fakhri in a celebrated passage as follows: "Know that this was not a state after the fashion of the states of this world, but rather resembling the conditions of the world to come. And the truth concerning it is that its fashion was after the fashion of the Prophets, and its conduct after the model of the Saints, while its victims were as those of mighty kings. Now in its fashion, this was hardiness in life and simplicity in food and raiment; one of them (the Khalif Omar) would walk through the streets on foot, wearing but a tattered shirt reaching halfway down his leg, and sandals on his feet, and carrying in his hand a whip therewith he inflicted punishment on such as deserved it. And their food was of the humblest of the poor. The commander of the Faithful, 'Ali (on whom be peace), had from his properties an abundant revenue all of which he spent on the poor and needy, while he and his family contented themselves with coarse cotton garments and a loaf of barley bread. "As for their victories and their battles, verily their cavalry reached Africa and the uttermost parts of Khurasan and crossed the Oxus." 

It is easy to understand how the professional army of the Byzantine Empire or the feudal levies of Persia were no match for men animated by such a spirit as this, especially as the military strength of the two empires was exhausted by the great struggle with one another that was just concluded. Alike in Syria and Iraq the native population was alienated from its Greek and Persian nobles by fiscal oppression and religious persecution. The Aramean peasantry had more in common with the democratic simplicity of primitive Islam than with the orthodoxy of the imperial Church or the Zoroastrian state religion, and if they were still in a subject position, the Monophysite and Nestorian Christians were at least on a level with their hated oppressors. But the conquest was an unmitigated disaster to the national Persian culture, and to the flourishing Greek cities of North Syria and the coast region, which latter never recovered from the blow.

Thus the brief years of Omar’s Khalifate, 634-643, had converted Islam into a vast empire which embraced Syria, Iraq and Egypt, as well as the Arabian peninsula, but this expansion was fatal to the primitive theocracy. The Arabs had become the rulers of a vast subject population, who retained their old religion, but were bound to pay a poll-tax and were
not allowed to carry arms. Society was thus divided into two classes, the Moslem warriors and the tax-paying Christian or Zoroastrian peasants and townsfolk, and to these there was soon added a third class of non-Arab Moslem converts—the Mawwali or Clients. Omar attempted to preserve the simplicity and equality of Mohammed's ideal, by forbidding the warriors to acquire conquered lands, and by giving them a regular salary from the state treasury. The main garrisons were established in the camp cities of Kufa near Ctesiphon and Fustat near Cairo, to guard the newly conquered territories, but it was difficult to control these turbulent armies of fanatics from distant Medina, and the old tribal jealousies began to reappear. On the one hand there was the party of the old tribal aristocracy headed by the House of Umayya; on the other the party that was faithful to the original ideals of Islam, the Helpers of the Prophet and the Companions of his Exile—and these, again, were divided between those who supported the claims of his next-of-kin, his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali ibn Talib, and the strict puritans whose principles were as democratic as they were theocratic, and who recognized no man as having any personal claim to the Khalifate. These were the Kharijites or the Sceaders, but they named themselves the Sellars, Shurat—the sellers of their own lives in the cause of God, in allusion to the passage of the Koran, "Verily of the faithful has God bought their powers and their substance, on condition of Paradise for them in return. On the Path of God shall they fight, and slay and be slain—a promise, for this is pledged in the Law and in the Gospel and in the Koran, and who more faithful to his engagement than God? Rejoice therefore in the contract that ye have contracted for this shall be the great bliss." Their position is represented to-day, not only by their lineal descendants, the Ibadites of Southern Arabia, but even better by the modern Wahabite movement, which attempts to restore the primitive simplicity of Islam and has once more almost united Arabia and has driven the King of the Hejaz from the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina.

From these three parties sprang all the civil wars and discussions which rent asunder the primitive unity of Islam and left a deep mark on future history. The Khalif Othman, the successor of Omar, and the leader of the Umayyads and the Meccan aristocracy, was slain by the partisans of the strict Moslem tradition. Of his successors, 'Ali abandoned Medina
for Kufa, while Moawwiya, the representative of the House of Umayya, held Damascus and Syria. In 681 'Ali was murdered by a puritan fanatic, and the Khalifate fell to the Umayyads, by whom 'Ali's son, Husain, the grandson of Mohammed himself, was defeated and slain at Kerbela in 681—an event which is still commemorated throughout the Shi'ah world on the feast of Ashura with the most passionate grief and extravagant acts of mortification. Thus the secular principle in Islam was victorious, and Damascus became the capital of a great oriental state under the hereditary rule of the Umayyad Dynasty. Its frontiers were extended eastwards to meet those of the Chinese Empire, and westwards to the shores of the Atlantic; in one year (711) Sind and Spain were added to the Khalif's domains.

This expansion was accompanied by the rapid transformation of Moslem culture. The Khalifs took over the old Byzantine and Persian methods of government. The lower officials were almost entirely natives, and Greek and Persian were at first the languages of the administration. The court of Damascus was the centre of a brilliant culture, and great buildings like the Mosque of Omar at Jerusalem and the Great Mosque of Damascus mark the rise of Islamic architecture and art on the foundation of the Syro-Byzantine tradition.

Thus the Umayyad period (661-750) marks the final triumph of the oriental reaction, the progress of which we have been tracing. Syria, Egypt and Mesopotamia had been wrested from their Greek and Iranian rulers and had become the centre of a homogeneous Semitic Empire possessing its own religion and culture, whose power extended from the Atlantic to the Oxus. The Roman Empire was brought to the verge of destruction and the whole civilised world seemed about to become Moslem. Even in the Christian world, oriental influences were everywhere in the ascendant. The age of the Syrian Khalifs also saw the Eastern Empire governed by a Syrian dynasty and the Western Church led by a Syrian Pope, while the leader of Christian thought and the last of the Greek Fathers was the Syrian, John Mansur, who had been head of the revenue department under Walid I and his successors. It is in the seventh century, and not in the fifth, that we must place the end of the last phase of ancient Mediterranean civilisation—the age of the Christian Empire—and the beginnings of the Middle Ages.