Arabia in the Plans and Purposes of God

1. Ancient Arabia – The Beginning

Around 12,000 BC the ice age ended. During the ice age the sea was about 300 metres below the present levels since much of the earth's water was frozen in the great ice caps. The Gulf was then dry land. During the ice age Arabia was covered by forests and rainfall was plentiful.

Where was Eden? Eden means a plain or a flat place. Genesis 2:8, ***"And the Lord planted a garden towards the east in Eden. Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden and from there it divided and became four rivers …."***

- Pishon
- Gihon
- Tigris
- Euphrates

Speculation: Eden was in the Gulf – now covered with water. Underwater exploration has located the remains of ruins deep under the Gulf. The Tigris and Euphrates are known to us today. Where are the other two rivers mentioned – Pishon and Gihon? There are no other rivers visible today.

Two river valley systems in Saudi Arabia can be clearly identified from aerial photographs and Landsat photographs. One river system is in Medain Saleh (northern Arabia) and flows east into the Gulf north of Qatar. In northern Arabia there are presently worked gold mines. Havilah is probably northern Saudi Arabia. The other river valley system arises in the Asir Mountains and Yemen and flows into the Gulf south of Qatar. These drainage systems still operate underground. Fresh water from the Pishon still flows into the Gulf underground near Bahrain. Bahrain means 'two seas' – the salty Gulf water and the fresh water coming from underground.

So Eden is probably in the lower part of the Gulf off the coast of the UAE.

2. Abraham and Ishmael

a) The Arabs of northern Arabia are descendants of Abraham through Ishmael.
Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, was the first person in Scripture to have an encounter with ***"an angel of the Lord"*** (Gen. 16:7-15). It is widely believed ***"the angel of the Lord"*** is a theophany of the Lord Jesus in the Old Testament.

God made specific promises relating to Ishmael:

- He would have many descendants.
- There is a spiritual blessing for those descendants. This spiritual promise is encapsulated in the name 'Ishmael' (God will hear).

Over the last 2000 years Arabia has been a fountain of people. People of Arab descent are found in every city of the world! So God has fulfilled part of His promise. God has yet to fulfil the second part of the promise – giving a spiritual blessing to this people.

b) Ishmael and all Arabs since are involved in the covenant of circumcision. (Gen. 17:15-21)
this refers back the Old Covenant. Abraham's prayer, ***"O that Ishmael might live before you"*** is not asking God for temporal prosperity and length of life for Ishmael. Abraham prays that Ishmael might live **before** God – i.e. be a part of the blessings of the Covenant. God's reply to Abraham was, ***"As for Ishmael, I have heard you …."*** Believing that Ishmael has a part in the blessing of God, Abraham circumcises Ishmael as a sign of the Covenant.

c) Ishmael's acceptance (Gen. 21:9-21)
In this story you clearly see God's love and concern for Ishmael the son of Hagar – a slave. Ishmael's mocking of Isaac was the cause of their being expelled from the camp. In desperation Ishmael prayed. God forgave his sinful mocking. God confirmed His promise and saved his life!

d) **Isaac and Ishmael – only and together – bury their father Abraham.**
The descendants of Ishmael are recorded twice in Scripture (Gen. 25 and 1 Chron. 1) along with the descendants of Isaac. This indicates their involvement with the Covenant Blessing of God. It is interesting that one of the sons of Ishmael – Mishima is the ancestor of the Saudi Arabian tribe the Beni Misma. Another son of Ishmael, Mibsam, is probably the founder of the Nejdi tribe of Bessam. Kedar, another son of Ishmael, is the generic name in the Old Testament for the Bedouin.

There are very great promises about the sons of Ishmael being blessed e.g. **Isaiah 42:11**. Kedar has only lived in cities since the oil price hike of 1973. It must be soon that they will begin to ***"shout for joy"*** and give glory to Jehovah God!

Isaiah 42:16 is very encouraging. Isaiah **60:6-7** implies that the wealth of Arabia will be poured into the church. This is confirmed in Psalm 72: 10,15, ***"The Kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts… … may the gold of Sheba be given to Him!"***

3. The Early Evangelisation of Arabia

Arabs heard the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:11) – the birthday of the Christian Church. Most of these were probably Jewish proselytes who had been born in an atmosphere of expectation waiting for what Anna and Simeon call ***'the consolation of Israel'***.

Paul spent some years with the Arabs. (Gal. 1:17). Tradition says that the first person to preach the Gospel in Yemen was the apostle Bartholomew. There is much evidence that a major wave of immigrants fled into Arabia from Iraq and western Iran from about 226 A.D. onwards. This was when the Sassanid Persian dynasty came to power in Iran. The state religion was Zoroastrianism and Christians were severely persecuted.

Al Hasa became a major Christian centre in the 3rd century and from there Christianity spread into the rest of Arabia. Al Hasa is on the river Euphrates in southern Iraq.

There was a Bishop of Qatar in 225 A.D. There were martyrs in Najran about the same time. At the time of Constantine a man from Socotra (some say it was from the Maldives islands) called Theophilus, who was educated in the Roman Empire, was sent by Constantine to Yemen to convert the people. The King became a Christian along with some others of his subjects. He built churches in Aden, Sana'a, Hormuz (at the entrance to the Gulf) and Dhafur – all around 325 A.D.

By the 4th century many Yemenis – those from the Arabian tribes of Ghassan (the Beni Ghassan lived in the area of the East Bank of Jordan down as far as the northern part of Saudi Arabia around Tobuk) Rabia, the Beni-Taghlib (an Iraqi Bedouin tribe), the Bahra, Tonuch and part of the tribes of Tay and Kodua had become Christian. An Arabian Queen of Kufa, called Mavia, invited a Bishop called Moses to live among her people in 380 A.D. One of the early converts, Noman Abou Kamas, is said to have melted down a golden statue of the goddess worshipped by his tribe and to have distributed the proceeds to the poor.

Christianity took root in Najran (just north of the Saudi/Yemeni border) as the result of a businessman's ministry. His name was Hayyan. He was evidently converted in Al-Hasa and then returned to Najran. His family and a number of other people were baptised. This apparently took place about 400 A.D. In 512 A.D. the King of Al-Hasa, Al-Mundhar, became a Christian. By this time there were bishops in Kufa, Basra and several other places in northern Arabia.

For the most part, Christianity spread in Arabia in the 5th century without much persecution. One named Azquir was martyred in Najran in 467 A.D. In Yemen, Najran and in much of Arabia, violent persecution of Christians began in 523 A.D. The prime mover was the Jewish king of Yemen – Masruq Dhu Nawas. There was less persecution in Najran since it had a Christian king. The Christians in Yemen asked the Christian king of Ethiopia, Elesbaan, to help them. He sent an army over to Yemen and defeated Masruq in battle, but then the army withdrew. Christians were severely persecuted in Dhafur. Over 280 Christians were burned to death in their church. Masruq captured Najran and about 427 Christian men – including all the Christian leaders – were burnt to death on that day. One leader said, "**I will not deny Christ but confess Him that He is God and the Son of God indeed**".

This was followed by other murders – hundreds of men and women each day for several days. All this happened between November 20-28 in 523 A.D. Some have estimated that all together around 20,000 were killed in Najran.

There are reports that a church in Shabwa, in the Hadramaut, was torched at the same time with all the Christians in it. Other churches in Yemen – in Marib and Hajaren – were also destroyed. Here is just one example of the suffering of these Arabian Christians:

"He met some persecutors on the road. '**Are you a Christian?**' they asked. '**Yes, I am a Christian**' was his reply. '**Then hold up your right hand**'. He held it up and it was cut off. '**Are you a Christian?**' they asked again. Again he answered, '**Yes!**'. '**Then hold up your left hand.**' He did so and it was immediately cut off. '**Are you still a Christian?**' they asked. '**Yes!**' Was his reply, '**In life and death I am a Christian**'. Enraged by his obstinacy they cut off both his feet he bled to death."

The women of Najran whose husbands had been killed the day before, were brought before Masruq's general – Dhu Yuzan. They were commanded to deny Christ or else they would be put to death as their husbands had been. They answered, **"God forbid that we should deny Our Lord and God Jesus Christ for He is the Lord and Maker of all things and He has saved us from eternal death. God forbid that we should revile (spit upon) His Cross or that we should treat it with contempt for by it He has prepared for us redemption from all errors and we reject your being and yourself and all who agree with you … and we pray that, as our husbands died, we may be deemed worthy to die, we also, for the sake of Christ."**

A woman of Najran, called Habsa, prayed, **"O Lord Jesus Christ regard not my sins and exclude me not from the rank of martyrdom for your sake. But deem me worthy, my Lord, me also, to be added to the number of those who have loved You and been put to death for the sake of Your worshipped name."**
Her turn came. She was beaten nearly to death and then tied to two wild camels and sent out into the desert.

Many other cases could be mentioned. As a result of all this, the Ethiopian Christian Kingdom invaded Yemen again and overthrew the Jewish Kingdom of Yemen. Christian Yemenis began the habit of tattooing their hands with the Cross to indicate to the Ethiopians that they were Christians because they could not understand each other's languages.

For the next 50 years Yemen was a Christian Kingdom under the protection of Ethiopia. Sana'a was the capital of this kingdom and it stretched right from Oman round to the Asir Mountains south of Mecca. A major cathedral was built in Sana'a and for a time it rivalled Mecca as a place of Arab pilgrimage. This cathedral was completed in 567 A.D. Members of the Quraish tribe of Mecca tried to destroy the cathedral just before its dedication. A year later, in 568 A.D., an Ethiopian army unsuccessfully attacked Mecca. This victory is celebrated in the Quran (sura 105). Two years later, around 570 A.D. Muhammad was born in Mecca.

Jews from Yemen encouraged the Persians to attack and invade the Kingdom of Yemen. They captured the various Gulf ports and in the end they destroyed the Christian Kingdom of Yemen in 574 A.D. Again Christians were severely persecuted in Yemen and throughout Arabia. The Persians had also been at war. They had captured Egypt, Syria and Palestine. From about 540 A.D. onwards the Byzantine Empire severely persecuted all non-Greek Orthodox Christians. The vast majority of Christians in Arabia were non-Greek Orthodox and rejected the Byzantine influence on Arabia. The Beni Ghassan went into revolt.

Arabian Christians made treaties with Muhammad very easily because he was Arab and they were tired of persecution from both Byzantium and from the Persians. The flourishing Christian community in Najran concluded a treaty of protection with Muhammad before his death. This was renewed by Abu Bakr.

In northern Arabia Muhammad secured the submission of the non-Christian tribes with the help of Christian tribes. A Christian tribe – the Beni Namir – came to the help of one of Abu Bakr's generals

in the crucial battle of Buwaib against the Persians 635 A.D. The Christian tribe of Beni Taghlib also took part in the battle. The heroism of one of their men turned the battle.

Apparently one of Muhammad's dying wishes was that, **"Throughout the Peninsula there shall be no second creed."** So even though succeeding caliphs accepted help from Arab Christians, they kept this objective before them. In some places Christian Arab males were killed and the women and children taken into slavery. In other cases, such as Najran, all the Christians were deported by order of the Caliph Omar to northern Iraq. In many cases, such as Bahrain, Sohar in Oman, Yemen and Central Arabia the choice was to become Muslim or to leave. Many became Muslims to save their property. By the time of the fourth Caliph, Ali (656-661 A.D.), Islam was considered obligatory for all Arabs in Arabia and the last sparks of Christianity were extinguished in Arabia. There was one last great synod of Arabian bishops in what is now UAE in 676 A.D. After this nothing is heard of indigenous Christianity in Arabia.

Why? John Glubb's explanation is as follows:

"A great gulf separates the mentalities of Greeks and Arabs. The Greeks had always been philosophers, speculators and intellectual theorists. The Arabs, on the contrary, were a practical people to whom purely intellectual thinking made no appeal whatever. Their genus inclined them to action rather than thought. While the Greeks were engrossed in their attempts to define the nature of God, the Arabs were more interested in what God wanted them to do. In actual fact, Christianity is a practical religion concerned with how man could obey God will, for it also originated in semetic thinking. But Christianity didn't reach the Arabs from Jewish Christians with their semetic thinking. It reached them two or three centuries later filtered through the intellectual subtlety of the Greeks. The Christianity of the Gospels would doubtless have appealed to the Arabs as it did to the poor fishermen of Galilee. But the Christianity that reached them in the fifth and sixth centuries was not the simple doctrine of the Sermon on the Mount. Islam, on the other hand, was a straightforward religion of action entirely free of philosophical subtleties. As a result, it presented to the simple Arab mind a more satisfying basis for life than the incomprehensible hair-splitting dogmas of the Greeks. Islam has sometimes been called a Christian heresy and heresies are often violent reactions to genuine abuses. In this sense, Islam may indeed have been an unduly vehement protest against the fact that the real message of Christianity had been submerged by the subtleties of Greek dogma." [Great Arab Conquests page 30]

As a follow-up to this paper read <u>The Promises of God for Arabia</u> under Miscellaneous Papers.