Christianity in Pre-Islamic Arabia

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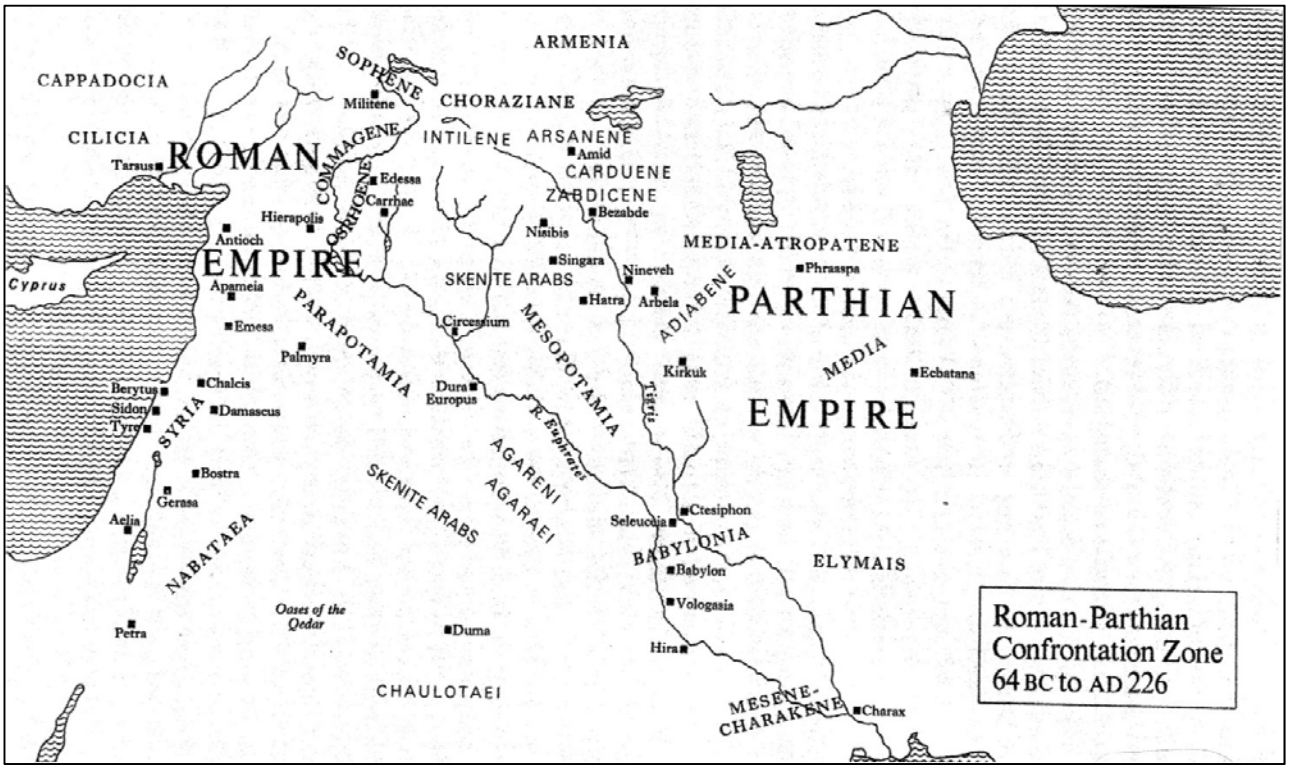
Bibliography

1. Introduction: pre-Islamic Arabia

The Quran speaks of the years before Muhammad as those of "ignorance" *(jahiliya)* – an age when Arabs lived in ignorance of Allah – the One True God. For most of their history the inhabitants of the "Arab Island" *(Jazirat Al Arab)* had been cut off from the mainstream of the great civilisations of antiquity on the Nile, the Fertile Crescent, the Indus Valley, Persia, Greece and Rome by the twofold barriers of water and sandy wastes.

The non-settled nomadic population of the Arabian Peninsula – which constituted the vast majority of the population – was oblivious to the monotheism that had prevailed to the north, the west and in Persia. The Bedouin scoffed at any formal theological creed.

On the fringes of Arabia, Sassanid Persia stretched from the Gulf in the south to Armenia in the north and the Indus in the east. Throughout the fertile regions of this huge area a network of villages supplied food to towns and cities inhabited by merchants and skilled craftsmen. Innumerable churches, monasteries and synagogues flourished in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates. Despite periods of intolerance, the Parthian/Sassanid Dynasty (224-651 AD) had accepted religious pluralism. The aristocracy, the army and many of the common people followed Zoroastrianism – the national religion. In Babylonia and upper Mesopotamia Christians and Jews made up the majority of the population. Prohibited in the Byzantine Empire and therefore encouraged in Persia, Nestorian Christianity (the Church of the East) was widespread in Babylonia, Fars, Khuzistan on the east coast of Arabia and in Oman. It had also begun work in Afghanistan and had even reached China.



The Jews formed the largest religious community in Babylonia after the Nestorians. They constituted the majority in the southern province between the Euphrates and Tigris – a region of technically advanced networks of irrigation canals supporting intensive agriculture. The Jews made this area renowned for its versatility, gardens and orchards.

The third-largest group were the Monophysite Christians who were mainly in what is now northern Iraq. Spiritual life prospered for those in churches and monasteries. The Persians allowed Christians to govern themselves according to their own laws. This gave clerics considerable political influence.

Facing the powerful Persian Empire was the equally powerful Byzantine Empire extending from its eastern limits along the desert borders of Syria and what is now Jordan, towards North Africa in the west. In these provinces, doctrinal conflict undermined Christianity to a considerable extent since Constantine had declared Christianity as the state religion in 337 A.D. Monophysites predominated in Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Armenia. Diophysites were the majority in the rest of the Byzantine Empire. But different Byzantine emperors frequently switched from one to the other causing political and religious chaos.

There were also substantial Jewish communities still in Palestine (Galilee, Samaria and Judea), Syria, Egypt and along the North African coast.

Most of the population were rural and farming was intensive in the Nile Valley, the Jordan River valley and the Litani River valley. Rainfall was evidently greater than now. Cities in many towns flourished as centres of a brilliant culture and civilisation. Jerusalem, Alexandria, Caesarea, Antioch and many other cities glittered throughout the Byzantine World.

On the eve of Islam, a certain degree of homogeneity had emerged. It was heir to Hellenistic culture. It had assimilated the spiritual values of Christianity. Although Greek and Pahlavi were the official languages of the two empires, in Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine people spoke Aramaic. Nestorian and Monophysite churches wrote historical and theological works in Syriac. In Egypt the people used Coptic.

Arabia, in spite of the isolation imposed by its deserts, was being penetrated by the political/spiritual influences of its powerful neighbours – Persia and Byzantium. Several Jewish tribes – immigrants or of Arab origin – cultivated the oases of the Hijaz: Taif, Yathrib (Medina), Faddak, Khaybar, Tayma, Tabuk and others. These tribes were mainly farmers and craftsmen living among the Bedouin. Outside the oases the desert rainfall (although evidently higher than now) could only feed the flocks of the Bedouin and they were dependent on seasonal movements. Linked by tribal ties or joined together in powerful warlike confederations in north and central Arabia, these tribes carried out 'razzias' (raids) on the oases and caravans.

In the absence of any central government or judicial organisation, relationships between the warlike Bedouin and the population of the oases/towns were controlled by a system of ransoms or the payment of protection money.

From time immemorial, incursions by Bedouin into the cultivated areas of Iraq, Syria, Palestine etc. had necessitated permanent surveillance. The Byzantines used a Christianised Arabian tribe – the Ghassanids. They were assigned the task of monitoring and restricting Bedouin attacks on the Near East (Sinai to northern Syria). They did this by regular subsidies – military support in terms of weapons and horses. The Persians used another Christianised Arabian tribe – the Lakmids – for the same function on the southern frontier of Persia.

Prior to Islam, various Arab tribes moved north to the borders of Syria and Mesopotamia. These nomadic shepherds settled down. They engaged in stock rearing. They attended markets in towns and they kept in contact with members of their tribe deep in the Hijaz and the Nejd. These settled Arabs appear to have remained fairly "alien" to the local indigenous populations. All the religious controversies that stirred up the indigenous population remained foreign to them.

The seventh century (600 A.D. onwards) began with an eruption of bloody fanatical fighting between Persia and the Byzantine Empire. In Persia itself, Manicheism (dualism) had been drowned in a bloodbath. In the Christian World of Byzantium, the Church of the East (Nestorian) was condemned as heretical by the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.), followed by the condemnation of all Monophysites at the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.). This kindled a great war of words and some physical action between the Eastern churches and the Greek Orthodox churches. These doctrinal dissensions fuelled very bitter quarrels among the patriarchs over the hierarchical primacy of their Sees, the control of nominations and finances in their dioceses and their respective boundaries. As well as these Christian conflicts, there were conflicts over culture and nationality fuelled by huge politico-economic interests setting the Church of the East against the Monophysite populations of the Armenians, Copts and Aramaens of Syria and Mesopotamia.

Determined to subject the Eastern Church to its obedience (both the Church of the East and the Monophysites), the Greek episcopate, with the Emperor's help, tried to wipe out these churches through persecution and the confiscation of churches, monasteries and dioceses. These conflicts worsened when in 632 A.D. – the year Muhammad died – the Emperor Heraclius (610-641 A.D.), at the instigation of the Bishop of Jerusalem, decreed the conversion of all Jews. This unleashed a wave of cruelty and killing throughout the Empire increasing hostility to Byzantine rule. A power struggle in Constantinople between the Emperor Phocas (602-610 A.D.) and his general Heraclius had provoked a large mutiny in the Greek troops in Egypt. The Arab frontiers were not guarded. The Ghassanids were not paid and the Persians didn't pay the Lakmids either. So when the Arab Muslim armies emerged out of Arabia in what was originally planned as raids on the towns of Babylonia and Syria, they recruited allies from the Arabs who had settled in these regions and also from Nestorians, Monophysites and even some Greek Orthodox, in order to participate in the sacking of the towns and populations among whom they lived, in revenge against the Byzantines!

Although Arabic was one of the languages given to the disciples on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:11), there is not much evidence of the early penetration of the Gospel into the "Island of Arabs". Thomas

touched the land briefly on the road to India. Bartholomew may have gone to Yemen. But by and large the Early Church confined its missionary zeal to the "civilised parts" of the Roman Empire.

By the time Christianity was recognised as the state religion it began to send workers to the Arabs, but evangelism began to coincide more and more with imperial political aims. So the evangelisation of Yemen was directed primarily towards having a strong Byzantine presence at the southern end of the Red Sea so the Roman navy and trading ships could control trade between the Byzantine Empire and India and so circumvent Persian control of the land route to India.

In the eyes of the emperors, any Christian presence was preferable to Persian control of the strategic Straits of Mandab and so the control of all trade with India. The Persians had the same idea and used the Church of the East (Nestorian) workers to increase their influence. So attempts to evangelise Arabia were greatly hindered by political intervention.

What so dramatically weakened the evangelisation of the Arabs and, in the end, paved the way for rapid Islamic expansion, was the overall lack of unity among Christians. This sad state was not new in the history of the church prior to 325 A.D., but it certainly got a great deal worse when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Even the apparent unity of the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. was primarily an attempt to crush the Aryan heresy that was fairly widespread in the Empire. But as soon as Nicea was finished, new Christological controversies plunged Christendom into theological confusion.

The Nestorians were followers of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, who stressed the humanity of the Lord Jesus and refused to recognise Mary as the "Mother of God". At the insistence of Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, they were condemned by the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.). The Church of the East was not represented either at Nicea or at Ephesus. It was declared Nestorian and therefore heretical. This had the advantage that the Persians reduced the persecution of Christians in the Persian Empire.

Within a generation the reaction to the Nestorian heresy produced an equally extreme view that virtually denied the humanity of the Lord Jesus. The adherents to this view are called Monophysites. They prevailed on the Emperor Theodosius (408-450 A.D.) to summon another counsel at Ephesus in 449 A.D. called "The Robber Council". There the bishops were bribed and physically forced to support the Monophysite cause. But in 450 A.D. the old emperor died and the new emperor, Marcian, summoned another counsel (Chalcedon) in 451 A.D. Here Monophysites were all condemned as heretics and the Diophysites emerged triumphant. But until the coming of Islam, battle lines were drawn between these two groups and different emperors sided with one or the other. In the end the Diophysites (the Greek Orthodox) prevailed in the north, to the west of the Cicilian gates (Turkey near Tarsus) and in the Byzantine Empire. The Monophysites prevailed in Egypt and Axum (Ethiopia) as well as in the western part of the Fertile Crescent.

Probably a minority of believers at this time took the issue of the nature of the Lord Jesus very seriously. The theological hair-splitting that characterised the so-called Christological controversies of the 5th century seems tedious, if not ridiculous, to believers today. Behind it there were strong undercurrents of the secular cultural values and political values that lay behind the debates [Greek vs. Semitic and non-Greek cultures]. The patriarchs of Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople had enormous political influence. The Bishop of Rome (the Pope) lost much influence when the Western Roman Empire collapsed in 475 A.D. and Western Europe was abandoned to the barbarians.

The people of Syria, Palestine, Egypt and some of North Africa were largely Monophysite. But the troops of Byzantine soldiers guarding them were Orthodox – often called Melkites (the Emperor's men from the Syriac 'melk'= king). Also the tax authorities were appointed by the Emperor and they taxed Monophysites heavily. The eastern half of the Empire had always been wealthier and more "civilised" than Spain, Gaul and Britain.

Persia overran and occupied both Syria and Egypt in 610-620 A.D. and the Persians were welcomed by much of the population. They captured Damascus in 613 A.D., Jerusalem in 614 A.D. and their armies occupied both Egypt and Asia Minor (Turkey). The Persian ruler was assassinated in 628 A.D. and the Persian Empire collapsed.

The Emperor Heraclius (610-641 A.D.), in defeating the Persians again, tried to subjugate the Monophysites. So when the armies of the Caliph Umar ibn-al-Khattab stormed into Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt they encountered two empires – neither Semitic – populated by non-Orthodox Christians who were angry at being ruled by what were now two exhausted empires that had both mistreated them. For most of these Christians, the Muslim invaders from the south (racial and linguistic cousins) were far preferable as rulers to the Greco-Roman Byzantines and the Aryan Persians. So the Christians of Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia often helped the invaders in defeating the imperial armies of Constantinople and Persia.

For example, in 581 A.D. the head of the Beni Ghassan tribe protecting Syria/Jordan from the Bedouin Arabs was arrested and taken to Constantinople because he was a Monophysite as were all the Beni Ghassan. Not surprisingly the Beni Ghassan did nothing except encourage anarchy and rebellion against Byzantine rule.

Sadly, it has been in the interest firstly of Arab Muslims and then of Turks (Ottoman Empire) to perpetuate these divisions within Christianity and so prevent the majority of their non-Muslim subjects from feeling any sense of loyalty to their country. This is one of the reasons for the high immigration rate of Christians out of the Arab World. The two councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon permanently crystallised the situation that still dramatically weakens believers today.

Behind the political rivalry between Persia and Byzantine Empire lay **trade**. The climates of East Africa, India, Indonesia and China are very different from those of the Mediterranean and Europe. The products of "the East" were considered rare and exotic and commanded high prices. The early Greeks thought all these goods and products were produced in Arabia which was the land of fables. They were actually sent by ship up the Gulf or the Red Sea. Navigation in the Red Sea was dangerous because of coral reefs and pirates. So until Roman fleets got involved in the Red Sea, much of the trade from China, India and East Africa was landed in Yemen (Aden) and sent by camel up the eastern shore of the Red Sea to Egypt and Syria. From before 1000 BC this had always been a very lucrative trade. South Arabia (the Hadramaut) also earned considerable revenue from its own production of spices that sold for high prices in the Roman Empire. Lanteen sails and Roman ships in the 5th and 6th centuries began to eat into the profits of the camel traders. It was this that led to the rivalry between Byzantium and the Persians who had independent trading routes (the Silk Road) and ships sailing into the Gulf from India and East Africa. [This trade was developed in Sumerian time in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC.]

At its roots the competition of empires was a competition for trade. Some historians say that in the B.C. period most trade through Arabia was in the hands of the Arabs. In the first six centuries this monopoly was increasingly broken by the Persians and the Romans/Byzantines through shipping in the Red Sea. Aden developed as a sea port garrisoned by Roman troops. This resulted in a drop in trade on the overland caravan routes and slowly growing poverty for all who were involved in that trade. This was completely reversed by the Islamic conquests.

2. The Religion of the Arabs in pre-Islamic Arabia

The **heart** of their belief system was '**Muruwwa'** *(muru'ah)* – the spirit/virtue of a man (manliness). 'Muruwwa' is the driving force in Arab Bedouin culture. The component elements of manliness were courage, loyalty and generosity. Courage was measured by the number of raids undertaken. Generosity was demonstrated by a man's readiness to sacrifice his camel at the coming of a guest or on behalf of the poor and the helpless.

'Muruwwa' is more significant than the superficially observable apparatus of deities and spirits and local holy places and objects such as stones. Such spirit-beings (gods, goddesses, jinn, demons, stones etc.) were significant as they contributed to maintaining the equilibrium in the tribal society – a sort of propitiation to the spirit world. The god/goddesses were themselves functionless. They only gained meaning when associated with the concept of ***'ird'*** (roughly = 'honour') and at fairs and contests – such as the 'mukakhara' – that gave meaning to the Arabs coming together and developing cohesion.

So nomadic Arabs worshipped "Man" – the collective spirit of man – because they put their trust in Man and relied on Man. The nomadic Arabs **acted** as though this life was all that there is. Man was on his own. He owed no responsibility to god or demon. His personal responsibility was to himself within his own closed society. His life, based on tribal organisation, was regulated by "the way of the ancestors" – the din al-Arab. Since the ethics of the tribal community ruled, the moral outlook of ordinary Bedouin was really quite secular. This was true of the genuine Bedouin, the urbanised merchants of Mecca and also the Christianised Arabs of the Fertile Crescent and northern Arabia.

So they were lukewarm concerning spiritual issues. Any conformity to religious practice followed tribal inertia. Hardly anywhere do we find genuine devotion to a heathen deity. The pagan Arabs developed no mythology, no involved theology and no cosmology comparable to the Babylonians or Egyptians.

In Yemen there was a sedentary population and so the Yemeni cults had astral features, ornate temples, elaborate rituals and sacrifices. But this was not so among the Bedouin. Again in Petra and Palmyra the emphasis was on sun worship but this assumes an agricultural society where there was a known association between the sun's rays and the growth of crops.

Such animistic cultic forms as there were connecting the world of man to the service of the gods, were so that the gods would be of service to man! All the shrines all over the Arabian Peninsula in fact served for the commercial and social exploitation of man's needs and weaknesses. It was believed that it was somewhat better to have a harmonious relationship with the spirit world in man's ability to maintain collective order.

The natural objects – trees, wells, caves, stones – became sacred objects as they formed the media through which a worshipper could contact the spirits. Zamzam's holiness, according to Arab Muslim authors, was pre-Islamic. Caves became holy through association with underground spiritual forces.

Moon worship implies a pastoral society. Even today Bedouin in Arabia believe their life is regulated by the moon that condenses the water vapour at night as dew and makes possible the growth of trees and grass in the desert. They also believe the sun tends to destroy life. So Ibn-Hisham speaks of a sacred palm tree in Najran. Gifts were offered to the tree in the form of garments and weapons.

Al-hat in Taif was represented by a square stone. There was a large, unhewn, rectangular black stone four feet high and two feet wide in Petra that was worshipped as the Lord al-Shara.

The Bedouin also believed the desert was peopled with jinn. Jinn are different from gods – gods are friendly and jinn are hostile. The gods (i.e. good spirits) belong to regions frequented by people. Jinn belong to the unknown and untrodden parts of the desert. Someone who is mad (majnun) is possessed by jinn.

The Quran illustrates many of these aspects of the basic religion of Bedouin Arabs. Muhammad challenged this basic worldview in a way that the Aramean (Fertile Crescent) Christianity never did.

Note the Quran:

9:98: *"The Bedouins* [a'rab] *are especially stubborn in disbelief and dissimulation."*

49:14: *"The Bedouins say, 'we have accepted the faith* [amanna]*'. Say, 'you have not really accepted the faith.' Rather say, 'We have (merely) submitted* [aslamma]*, for faith has not yet entered your hearts."*

The Quran rebukes them for claiming that, *"There is nothing in this life of ours. We die and we live and it is the time* [dahr - fate] *that devours us"*. (45:23-24). *"These say, 'There is nothing but our first death, we shall not be revived' "* (44:33-34).

A great pre-Islamic poet, Tarafa, who was killed in 560 A.D., wrote: "The man of generous spirit satisfies himself during his lifetime. Should both of us die tomorrow, you will know which of us will thirst. The grave of the prudent man, the wealth hoarder, I see not to differ from the grave of the profligate of self, the spendthrift. On each stands a mound of earth topped by flat slabs."

Arab humanism provides the reason why the Arabs were relatively easily Christianised when they met Christians, since religion existed to be exploited by man, **not to challenge and change man**. Though an Arab may turn to God when in trouble, the Quran points out that once relief has been given, he turns again to the more familiar "folk religion".

The Quran says in 39:11: *"When harm befalls a man he calls upon his Lord, turning to him, but after God has given him favour from himself, he forgets that being he invoked before and sets up peers with God to lead men astray from his way."*

Religious humanism lacks an absolute eternal reference point, but is fully compatible with super-natural experience. Spiritual beings (angels, demons, jinn etc.) are created like humans and are as fully conditioned by 'creatureliness' as are humans. So the goal of the "worship" of stones, shrines and the many "spirit-focused" cults of the Arabs – including the Meccan Ka'aba – were part of man's supernatural world (supernatural but not spiritual – i.e. belonging wholly to the spirit world) and this supernatural world was to be regulated by humans. Supernatural beings were not good or bad by nature any more than people are (in their view), but man's relationship with supernatural beings could be regulated, appeased, propitiated and even neutralised.

R.A. Nicholson wrote a book entitled, **The Literary History of the Arabs**. He gives a translation of one Arab poet – Adi-ibn Zaid (~ 4th century): Adi is walking past a graveyard and hears the dead calling him:

Thou who seest us unto thyself shalt say,
"Soon upon me comes the season of decay."
Can the solid mountains evermore sustain
Time's vicissitudes and all they bring in train?
Many a traveller lighted near us and abode,
Quaffing wine wherein the purest water flowed.
For a while they lived in a lap of luxury,
Fearing no misfortune, dallying lazily.
Then, behold! Time swept all, like chaff, away
Thus it is men fall, to whirling time a prey."

So there is no theme of **hope** either for mankind or for the individual. There is no note of joy other than: "Enjoy the present while you can".

The supreme virtue of the Christian monks, hermits etc. that the Arabs (Bedouin) met, appeared to be almsgiving – helping the poor **for its own sake**. But this too is part of Arab humanism which is in contrast to western aid with its concern with who gets the aid and the use to which aid is put. The Christian monasteries in Arabia maintained open hospitality to all. This was what Arab Bedouin thought should be so. God gives this way – the rain falls equally on the good and bad. This was modelled so very well in the life of the Lord Jesus.

Arab humanism found its chief expression in poetry. The hedonistic Arab Bedouin was so much absorbed with the immediate issues of life, that he didn't devote much thought to eternal, spiritual issues. For example:

"We spin about and whirl our way through life.
Then rich and poor alike at last seek rest.
Below the ground in hollow pits, slate-covered
And there we do abide."

Poetry is the only form of record we have of pre-Islamic Arabia that conveys the people's life and culture. Most of the poetry has been lost, for it was not preserved in writing but only in oral form.

It is only preserved by collections made during the early Abbasid period by Muslim scholars, mainly non-Arab, trying to draw a veil over the pre-Islamic past which they said was the Jahiliyya. So the preserved poems are moulded to a suitable purpose – the ignorance of the Arab Bedouin.

In any of the preserved poetry it appears that religion was alien and couldn't be fitted into the scheme of things except the concept of 'Fate' which, of course, belongs to a humanistic outlook. The testimony of the poets to the influence of Christianity in Arabia in a spiritual or sociological sense is negative. Much of Arabia was Christianised, but Christianity doesn't appear to have affected their mode of life except on the surface.

Perhaps only hermits struck the fancy of the pre-Islamic poets, for there are many references to their twinkling lights in caves or small buildings along the trade routes breaking the monotony of the desert trading journeys and assuring a welcome and hospitality if needed. This is in contrast to raiding groups that extinguished their fires to avoid attracting attention!

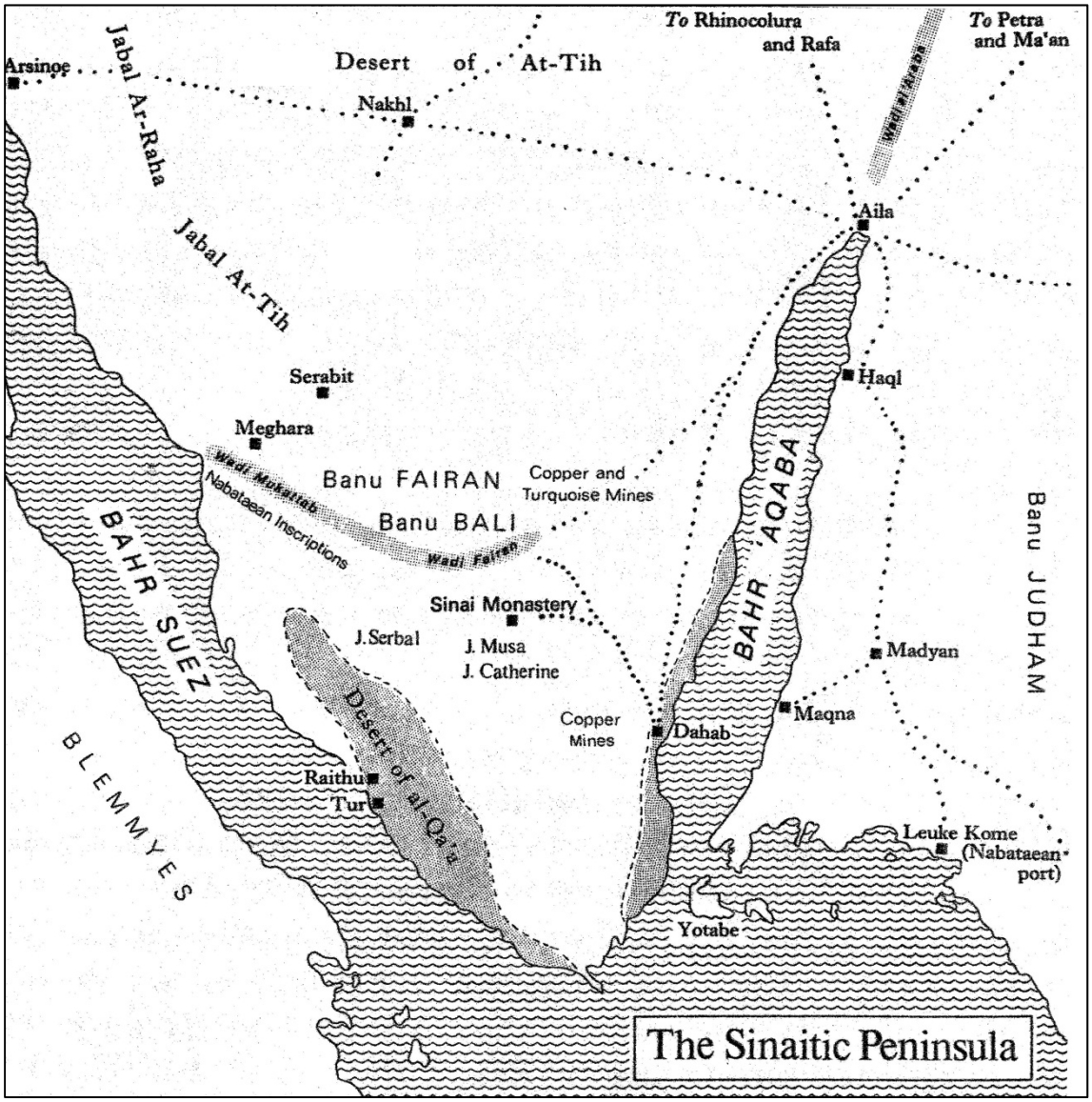
3. Monotheism in pre-Islamic Western Arabia

➢ Currents of influence

The recognition of a supreme God in the form of Al/El among the Arabs forms part of the religious history of the Semitic-speaking world. The story of Abraham belongs to the Aramean peoples – i.e. the settled Semitic people of the Fertile Crescent. Abraham's homeland was Harran (Gen. 24:7) – at the top of the Fertile Crescent. Jacob is called ***"A wandering Aramean"*** (Deut. 26:5). In Genesis 15:18 it says, ***"To your descendants, El said, 'I am giving this land from the great river of Egypt to the great Euphrates River' "***. For 'El', the Massorite text has YHWH, but the LXX implies that an alternative text was El. In very early Semitic texts El was not related to a supreme God, but to some sort of spirit power that linked together family and tribe – i.e. there were lots of 'Els'. It was Judaism that proclaimed the exclusive, unique 'El' over all peoples.

The story of Job – written around the 8^{th}- 6^{th} century B.C. in the Madyan region of 'Aws (south east of the Dead Sea) – shows that in this part of the Arabian Peninsula, monotheism was known to the Arabs (non-settled Arameans) 1000 years before Muhammad. The Quran reveals that the Meccans of Muhammad's day knew of Allah and recognised him as Creator (sura 31:34). They saw the other deities as subordinate to him. This was probably not just due to the influence of Christians and Jews in Arabia, but a long understood concept of a monotheistic God. The opposition of the Meccans to Muhammad only arose when he proclaimed that Allah was exclusively God.

There is evidence that around 250 A.D. there was a bishop from western Arabia whose views on the deity/humanity of the Lord Jesus created a sensation. Other doctrines put forth by the church of western Arabia differed very greatly from the rest of the church in the Roman Empire. This was probably as a result of Arab believers never being influenced by a Hellenistic worldview. Particularly during the wars between the Byzantines and Persia, non-Orthodox Christians and Jews were heavily taxed by the Byzantines in order to pay for the war. The result was that non-Orthodox and especially sub-Christian sects tended to move out of Byzantine jurisdiction into western Arabia. There was one sub-Christian sect called Collidrians who were tri-theists worshipping equally God the Father, God the mother (Mary) and God the Son (Jesus). This may be why Muhammad met garbled versions of Christianity.



The Arabs of Sinai and north western Arabia found themselves politically under the Byzantines, but religiously much more influenced by the Monophysites of the Euphrates/Tigris Valley. There are ruins of hermitages with monastic cells around Kilwa that can be visited today. The tribes – the Banu Judham, the Banu Udhara, the Banu Bahra and most of the Banu Kalb became Christians. The tribes of Sulaim, Muzaima, Juhaina and Bali remained pagan. The Banu Judham was the largest and most powerful tribe. In the east they formed an alliance with the powerful Banu Kalb. Wadi Z-Qura (the Valley of Villages) was a sort of border between Christian Bedouin tribes and pagan ones. Please note that 'Christian Bedouin' means they call themselves Christian – what we would call nominal Christians – i.e. there was a surface nature, a sort of political nature, to their Christianity. The Christian tribes were all committed to the Byzantines for reasons of self-interest - cities, access to power and wealth from the caravan traffic.

The Banu Udhara perhaps had a more distinctive attachment to Christianity than the Banu Judham. But Aila (Eilat/Aqaba) fell in their territory and there was a Byzantine legion based there. A number of these Christian tribes fought against Muhammad's army at the Battle of Mu'a (AH 8) where the Muslims were defeated. But after the battle of Yarmuk (AH 15 / 636 A.D.) where these Christian Arab tribes fought with the Byzantines against the Muslims, they changed sides and joined the Muslim armies of conquest realising the Muslims were a formidable military force made up of Semitic people as they were themselves.

In the pagan Arab tribes in north west Arabia, Christianity was no more than a surface influence. Mecca had become a centre for pagan cultic worship with the Ka'aba as its chief sanctuary. The Quran provides evidence of a strong attachment to female deities – Allat, al-Uzza and Manat (53:19-23; 4:117; 37:149-53). But other deities are also mentioned. According to the Quran (71:22-23) when Noah proclaimed the One True God, the rebellious cried out, *"Do not abandon your gods; do not leave Wadd or Suwa or Yaghuth, Ya'uq or Narr"*. So Allah was known by the Jewish and Christian influence, but to the pagan tribes he was marginal in their cultic worship.

Sura 6:137 is very interesting in this respect: *"Out of what God has produced of tillage and cattle they set aside a portion (as a first fruits offering) saying, 'This is for God' (as they deem fitting) 'and this is for our associated spirits' (shuraka'ina). But what is for their associated spirits never reaches God, yet what is for God ends up with the associated spirits."*

This is similar to Paul's statement in Romans 1:21-23, ***"Although they knew God, they didn't honour Him as God."*** In the Quran, Allah is recognised as the *'Lord of the Ka'aba'* (sura 104) and calls on Muhammad to *"purify my house"* (22:28). The word 'Allah' need not be thought of as an Arabic contraction of *al-ilah*, but as the proper name for God coming from Aramaic/Syriac – *'Alāhā'*. This was the name of God used by the Nabateans and other pre-Islamic north Arabian inscription writers.

The religion of south Arabia – especially Yemen – was in its essence a planetary astral system in which the cult of the moon-god prevailed. The moon – known as *'Sin'* in the Hadramaut and as *'Wadd*' (love?) in Yemen – stood at the head of a pantheon. The moon-god was a masculine deity and took precedence over the sun. From this celestial pair sprang many other heavenly bodies considered divine including the Quranic *'al-hut'*. It is thought the origin of this astral system was imported in the second or third millennium B.C. from Sumer.

- **The Hermits/Monks of Sinai and Madyan (Midian)**

By the 4th century monks and hermits had become fairly common in the Sinai Peninsula as well as east of the Gulf of Aqaba in and around the district of Madyan. Many of these monks fled outside the Byzantine Empire seeking refuge from the constant switching between emperors who were sometimes pro-Monophysite and sometimes pro-Diophysite. Monasteries and hermits were clustered around Jabal Serbal that was traditionally associated with Moses. Jabal Musa was only identified by Justinian (died 565 A.D.) who built a church on it in honour of the Virgin Mary.

Most hermits/monks lived in the two fertile valleys in Sinai – Wadi Fairan and the other near Raithu/Tur on the Gulf of Suez – a bit inland going north-west. They occupied caves or built themselves stone huts. Many of these still exist and show that the peninsula had a considerable hermit population.

The Byzantines claimed control of Sinai and Madyan and the whole area controlled by the Banu Judham. But in practice this control was weak except in the port towns and on the island of Yolabi where there was a major customs post. The nomadic Arab population was in a perpetual state of hostility against the nomadic Kushite tribes of the Beja – called by the Byzantines the Blemmyes. So insecurity was the price these monks and hermits had to pay. The Beja spared no one and there were several massacres of the monks over two centuries.

By 373 A.D. Fairan town had a big central church. There was a Bishop of Fairan by 400 A.D. The last known bishop was Theodore and he died soon after 638 A.D. Most of the monks were Monophysite so there was very little protection from Byzantine troops. Between 548 and 562 A.D. Justinian changed this policy by building a large fort on the north side of Jabal Musa. Today it is St Catherine's Monastery. Monks and hermits slowly moved from Wadi Fairan and Jabal Serbal to this fort. The price for security was accepting Chalcedon theology. Monophysite Christianity survived in Fairan for some time after the Muslim conquest.

In general, in the 5th century a number of Arab tribes accepted Christianity as they moved into territory controlled by Byzantine troops. A council that met in Antioch in 363/4 A.D. was attended by a 'Bishop of the Arabs' – probably from Sinai.

The oasis centre of Madyan (now called Hawra) had an abundant water supply, gardens and date palm groves. Many Nabatean tombs have been found here. Monks and hermits lived here. As late as 723 A.D. (AH 105) a Muslim Arab poet writes of the monks of Madyan.

What comes through from pre-Islamic Arab poets of these monks and hermits was **a joyless Christianity**. The chief virtue of Christians was giving to the poor, but this was paralleled by the Bedouin virtue of generosity. The monasteries maintained open hospitality and the Arabs thought of God's bounty in the same way. What does **not** appear to come through these poets at all is any sense of **hope** – either for the individual or for mankind and certainly no **joy**.

- **The presence of Christians in the Hijaz**

Mecca has no recorded history before the time of Muhammad. It is situated in a hot, barren valley between mountains, 48 miles from the Red Sea. It is described in the Quran as *"unfit for cultivation"* (14:40). It was evidently a staging post in the western lowlands for the camel traders. About 500 A.D. it was occupied by the clans of the Quraish tribe. The Quraish had good relations with the Bedouin tribe of the Kinana who controlled the commerce between Yemen and Syria. Evidently at the time of the Quraish settlement Mecca was some sort of cult centre.

The urban population of the Hijaz was about 15% of the total. In urban areas like Mecca the astral stage of paganism had been reached. Al-Uzza, al-Hat and Manah – the three daughters of Allah – had sanctuaries. [In a weak moment the monotheistic Muhammad was tempted to recognise these deities in Mecca (22:51-52 and 17:74-76), but retracted them in a further revelation in 53:19-20.]

Al-hat had some "holy land" (hima and harem) near Taif – a sacred enclosure where no trees could be cut down and no human blood shed (similar to the cities of refuge!). Al-Uzza (represented by the planet Venus) was the most venerated by the Quraish tribe. Many of Muhammad's elderly relatives had the name Abdaluzza. Her sanctuary was three trees. Human sacrifice characterised her cult. Manah (from which comes 'manujah' = 'allotted fate') was the goddess of destiny. She was especially popular with two tribes – the Aws and the Khazraj who rallied to the support of Muhammad on his Hijrah from Mecca.

A male deity was worshipped in Mecca – Hubal (from the Aramaic for 'spirit'). He was represented by a human-form idol in the Ka'aba – an unpretentious cube-like building (originally roofless) that served as a shelter for a black meteorite that was venerated as a fetish. The usual sacred territory was spread about it.

Allah was the principal deity worshipped in Mecca amongst over 350 others. The name is an ancient one. There are rock inscriptions in Syria using the same 'Allah' from at least five centuries before Muhammad. Muhammad's father was called Abdullah. To the pre-Islamic Meccans, Allah was the tribal deity of the Quraish and was the creator and supreme provider – one who may be invoked in times of trouble. (See the Quran 31:24; 31:6; 6:137,109; 10:23 etc.)

The Meccans were in contact with Christians in Syria through commercial relations as well as the diffuse witness of the monks in northern Arabia. They were fully conscious of the long catastrophic dual between Byzantium and Persia that reached its climax of self-destruction in the early life of Muhammad. This dual is referred to in the Quran 30:1-3: *"The Rum* (Roman Byzantines) *have been defeated in an adjacent land, but even after their defeat, in a few years, they will be victorious. On that day believers* (probably referring to monotheists) *will rejoice."*

In ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad we see the importance of Bostra for the Hijaz trade. Bostra is now called **Bosra** in the Hauran south of Damascus. Apparently Muhammad's uncle, Abu Talib, frequently went to Bostra and on one journey Muhammad himself met a learned monk called Bahira who greatly influenced him. Bhira is the Syriac title 'reverend'. In all probability there was no influence of Christianity on Muhammad in the formative years in Mecca for there are no traces of it in any of the early suras of the Quran.

Bedouin are family and clan related and even today don't show great interest in non-related clans and relationships. So the monasteries and hermits in the northern Hijaz were probably very alien to the Bedouin.

It is true that the Judham tribal complex stretching from the Dead Sea to Medina (then called Yathrib) had become Christians. But their claim to be 'Christians' simply indicated their political allegiance to the Byzantine Empire. The early Islamic movement conveyed no hint of any religious Christian organisation – unlike the Jewish oasis communities. It appears that the Judham tribes abandoned their political allegiance to the Byzantines and freely adopted Islam once it was clear that Muhammad was a good military leader and they could plunder the rich cities to the north.

In the Medinan suras of the Quran we see indications of transient Christians in Medina, but no Christian place or families are ever mentioned in Medina. The presence of Christians in Mecca has better proof, but again they were non-Meccan visitors who attended periodic fairs.

The Banu Ghassan tribe, that was Christian, had a 'hostel' located near the Ka'aba. The Banu Ghassan was a division of the great tribe of Azd and had settled in the western Syrian desert and come under the influence of Byzantine Christianity.

At the time of the Emperor Valens, around 370 A.D., the dowager ruler of the Banu Ghassan won a battle against Roman forces and part of the peace deal was that she had the right to consecrate as bishop a monk of her choice.

Many of the monks east of Jordan were characterised by "power encounter". A childless chief of one of the tribes is reported to have been baptised and to have been followed in baptism by the whole tribe when a monk promised him an heir if he would become a Christian. In response to the monk's prayer, a son was born to him. Another sheik whose son – a paralytic – had been healed by a monk, also became a Christian with his entire tribe. The Quraish clan also belonged to the Banu Azd and there were good relationships between the Quraish and the Banu Ghassan.

Some Meccans have been found to have had Christian names prior to Muhammad – names like 'Nastas (Anastasius) and Yohannes. These people were referred to as 'hanifs'. Apparently there was a Christian cemetery in Mecca! These Christian Meccans were slaves or ex-slaves of the Meccan merchant class. They may have been Syrians. One slave, Zaid ibn Haritha, was freed and he became the adopted son of Muhammad. The cult around the Ka'aba was apparently exclusively for the ruling class of Mecca. Slaves were excluded.

Given the widespread religious syncretism of the commercial community, there seems no reason to doubt the tradition that the pillars (da'aim) of the Ka'aba were adorned with pictures of Jesus and Mary along with Abraham, prophets and angels. These were said to have been painted by an artist called Baqum in 608 A.D. when the Ka'aba was rebuilt.

In his book, Muruj, quoted by Ibn Ishaq, Mas'udi has a section on Arab monotheists (ahl at-tawhid) who believed in the resurrection and lived in the 'interval' (fatra) between Jesus and Muhammad. They were not Jews and it is said they worshipped 'The Lord of Abraham' and used the word 'Allah'. They lived an ascetic life and when they went to a Christian country they invariably became Christians.

One of these hanifs with the name Abd Amir ibn Saifi ibn an-Na'man of the Banu Amr ibn 'Auf of the Aws of Yathrib had this written about him by Mas'udi, "*He was a Sayyid* (tribal leader) *who adopted the ascetic life in the Jahiliyya period and put on sackcloth. When the Prophet Muhammad entered Medina he held a long discussion with him, then he departed leading a group of some fifty youths and he died in the Christian faith in Syria."*

The term 'hanif' or its plural 'hunafa' occurs 12 times in the Quran – mainly in reference to Abraham. In eight passages it describes the hunafa as being in *"the way of Abraham"*. For example – sura 3:60, *"Abraham was not Jewish or Christian, but he was a committed hanif and not a polytheistic one."*

The word ‘hanif’ comes from a Syriac root (h n p). In Syriac it is pronounced ‘hanpo’ and used to refer to natural pagan Arabs and Arameans. In Christian Syriac it meant a heretic. The Quran (30:29) refers to the hunafa as the primary religious orientation of the Semitic people who were monotheists.

Sura 16:121 says that Abraham was a ‘hanif’. Of the four hunafa mentioned in Ibn Hisham’s Sira, three became Christians. Zaid ibn Amr visited Syria in a search for true religion and became a Christian. Waraqa ibn Nawfal, cousin of Muhammad's first wife Khadija, became a Christian. The third, Ubaid Allah ibn Jahsh, an earlier follower of Muhammad, became a Christian in Ethiopia in 615 A.D.

Muhammad’s understanding of Christianity was really rather meagre. For example 9:34 speaks of the less edifying aspects of the life of Christian clergy and monks, *“Believers, many priests and monks consume the wealth of the people in vain and hinder them from the way of God. And there are those who hoard gold and silver and do not spend it on the way of God.”*

There are many references to the divisions in Christianity (ahzab) – for example 30:31-32: *“Turning to God repentant, be conscious of God and pray and do not be idolaters who have divided their religion into sects, each faction pleased with its own.”*

There are also positive suras:

(5:82-86) *“And you will certainly find the closest of them in affection to the believers are those who say, ‘We are Christians’. That is because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not arrogant.”*

(57:27) *“We sent our envoys after them: we sent Jesus, Son of Mary, giving him the Gospel and we put kindliness and mercy on the hearts of those who follow him. But the monasticism they invented for themselves …..”*

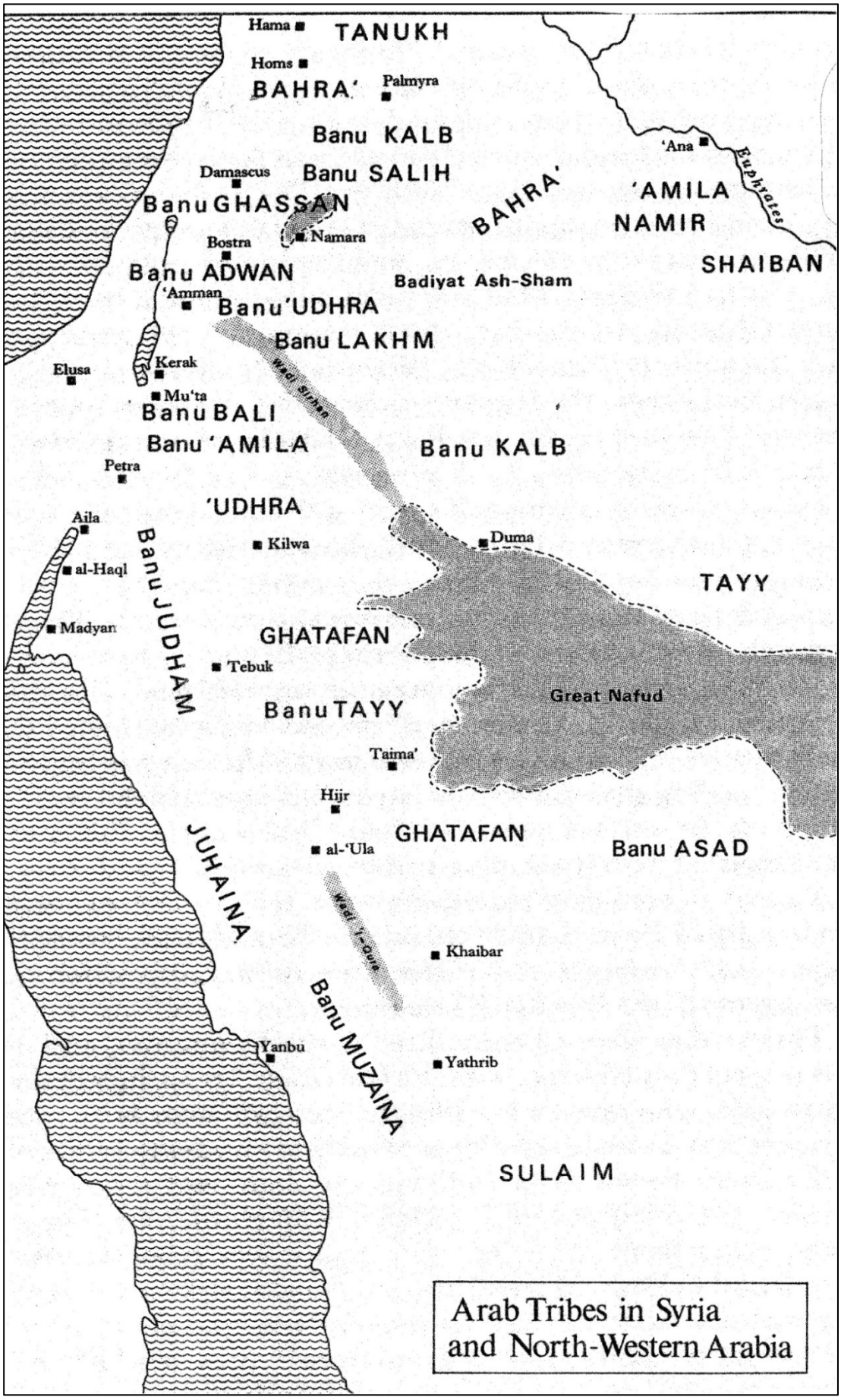
(24:36-37) *“In houses that God has allowed to be raised, wherein the name of God is remembered, the glory of God is celebrated in the mornings and in the evenings, there are men neither business nor commerce can divert from remembrance of God and persistence in prayer and giving alms, fearing a day when hearts and eyes will be transformed.”*

The vocabulary of the Quran contains numerous loan words from Syriac, Ethiopian, Persian and Hebrew hat are in some way related to religion. The dominant influence is Syriac since it is a Semitic language and because of the influence of Christianity on Arab culture.

Sadly there was no attempt on the part of Arab Christians to translate the Bible into Arabic. For example the Arabic words of the Hebrew prophets are derived from Syriac and not from Hebrew. The Quran has many terms that are traceable to Christian Syriac sources – for example ‘furqan’ related to the Syriac ‘purqana (salvation).

Again Isa al-Masih comes from the Nestorians Syriac – Isho ha Mshiha. [The definite article found in Aramaic has been lost in borrowing into Arabic: Yaum-a = the day in Arabic becomes yoma = day.]

So al-Masih appears to be a title, but it is certainly not a messianic role. This is hardly surprising since there was no genuine ‘messianism’ (bringing in of the kingdom) to be found in the eastern version of Christianity (Nestorian).


Hama
TANUKH
Homs
BAHRA'
Palmyra
Banu KALB
'Ana
Euphrates
Damascus
Banu SALIH
BAHRA'
'AMILA
Banu GHASSAN
NAMIR
Namara
Bostra
SHAIBAN
Banu ADWAN
Badiyat Ash-Sham
'Amman
Banu 'UDHRA
Banu LAKHM
Elusa
Kerak
Wadi Sirhan
Mu'ta
Banu BALI
Banu 'AMILA
Banu KALB
Petra
'UDHRA
Aila
Kilwa
Duma
Banu JUDHAM
al-Haql
TAYY
Madyan
GHATAFAN
Tebuk
Great Nafud
Banu TAYY
Taima'
Hijr
GHATAFAN
JUHAINA
al-'Ula
Banu ASAD
Wadi l-qura
Khaibar
Banu MUZAINA
Yanbu
Yathrib
SULAIM
Arab Tribes in Syria
and North-Western Arabia

In summary, we can safely say there were very many different influences in the Hijaz at the time of Muhammad – intellectual, religious and material – radiating from Byzantine, Syrian, Persian and Ethiopian (Axum) sources and conducted via Ghassanid, Lakhmid and Yemeni channels. But none of these influences transformed the culture of the Hijaz. Christianity doesn't seem to have made much of an impression. But clearly the antiquated paganism of the Bedouin seems to have reached a point when the spiritual needs of the people were not being met. Some, like Waraqah, were already Christians. Waraqah ibn-Nawful was a cousin of Khadijah – the first wife of Muhammad.

4. Christians in central Arabia

In central Arabia there was an alliance state called **Kinda** made up of different Bedouin clans and tribes united as a federation based on a religious contract. The Kinda federation was a model of the future Islamic state under the first Caliphs of Islam. So here is a political entity that was not based on genealogical formations



The Kinda federation had been based in the Hadramaut before the 4th century A.D. They crossed the Empty Quarter and entered the Nejd area of central Arabia. There were already clans in the Nejd by the name of Ma'add and so the Kinda and the Ma'add joined together by mutual covenant. A man

called Hujr ibn ‘Amr was the first to form the federation of which he was head. He ruled from 450-478 A.D. There are rock inscriptions of this covenant-based federation. For over 100 years the Kinda federation dominated central Arabia. It had significant power struggles with both Byzantium and the Persian kingdoms.

Such federations were built around a religious contract. The Arabic word “federation” (‘tahaluf’ from ‘hilf’- a covenant) was linked by a solemn ritual that involved a blood sacrifice and the use of aromatic water and salt thrown into a fire. This is probably the background to Muhammad’s statement that there is, *“no covenanting in Islam”*. So it was a religious ceremony that bound the tribes together.

The Kinda heartlands were in what is now south west of Riyadh – an area called the Ghamr Dhi Kinda. The Kinda federation included some permanent settlements – like Taima – situated in the oasis of Jawf and the Wadi Sirhan just north of the Nufud desert. The Kinda often went on raiding expeditions to the Gulf coast and as far up as present-day Kuwait into an area controlled by the Lakhmid dynasty of Hira. The Kinda were sometimes at war with the Himyar and sometimes in alliance with them.

The federation faced three major “powers” – Byzantine Syria, Sassanid Persia and Himyarite Yemen. Usually the Kinda tried to form an alliance with one of these powers against the other two. About 502 A.D. the Byzantines cemented an Alliance with the Kinda federation by the Kinda adopting Christianity as the federation religion! The Kinda ruling clan were certainly professing Christians. Muhammad led an unsuccessful military expedition against the Kinda at an oasis called Dumat al-Jandal which was part of the Kinda federation. During the lifetime of Muhammad many of the former federation leaders remained Christians.

In 528 A.D. the federation of the Kinda broke up. The Himyarites attacked central Arabia. But throughout the 6th century the Kinda ruling clan professed Christianity. Even up to Muhammad's lifetime “al-Malek al Kindi” maintained his allegiance to the Byzantines. The people of Duma were certainly Christians until Caliph Abu Bakr’s time when they became Muslims. However Muslim writers mention many individual Kinda Christians in early Islamic times.

To the north of the Kinda federation was another federation called the Kalb based around the Banu Kalb. This federation maintained control of the desert between what is now the East Bank of the Jordan and the Euphrates River. The Kalb federation was Christian. They became Christians (Monophysites) during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Valens (364-378 A.D.). Their conversion to Christianity appears to have been the result of their interaction with some monks who lived in the desert and who were distinguished by their purity of life and their miraculous gifts. The Kalb leader was childless and he went to visit a man of great celebrity and told him of his problem. The monk told the leader he would pray for him and sent him away with a promise that if he would believe in the Lord Jesus he would have a son. He believed and he had a son. The leader was baptised and the whole tribe with him!

It appears that the Kalb federation were the slowest of the federations of Arabia to abandon Christianity and profess Islam. Some notable people from the Kalb federation who remained Christians were:

- Na’ila bint al-Furafisa. She was a Kalbiyya Christian married to the third Caliph – Uthman. She lost three fingers trying to save her husband from his assassins.
- Maisun bint Bahdal was married to the first Umayyad Caliph – Mu’awiya. She and her father and the whole family remained Christians.

Part of the Kalb federation went about under the name Tamim and they were mainly Christians. So were the Banu Ayyub in Yamama south of the Kinda. This can be mainly deduced from Christian names in the tribal genealogies.

The last we hear of the Bedouin tribes of central Arabia being influenced by Christianity concerns one of the Tamimi clans called the Banu Najiya. They became famous in early Islamic history when they staged the Khariji Revolt under Caliph Ali (658 A.D. 38 A.H.). The Kharijites or outsiders (seceders) sickened by the rivalries between the Beni Hashim (both Muhammad and Ali were from this branch of the Quraish) and the Beni Umaiya, demanded a theocracy ruled only by God. They adopted, a slogan, *"Arbitration belongs to Allah alone"*. They rose in arms and attacked Caliph Ali. Initially they lost. One of these Kharijites called Abd-al-Rahman ibn Muljam, assassinated Caliph Ali at al-Najaf. Then the first Umayyad Caliph took over. Mu'awuja was proclaimed Caliph in Jerusalem in 40 A.H. (660 A.D.). He moved the capital of the Muslim Empire from Mecca to Damascus. Many who had become Muslims returned to the Christian faith and boasted of their Christianity when they were taken prisoner.

Mu'awuja relied mainly on Syrian troops who were still mainly Christian to the exclusion of Muslims from the Hijaz to expand into North Africa and east into Khurasan (eastern Persia). The Oxus was crossed and Bukhara was raided (674 A.D.). He got rid of the typical tribal organisation which was replaced by the Byzantine framework of a stable organised state. His favourite wife was a Monophysite Christian!

Many famous poets of Umayyad times belonged to Tamimi clans - some from Yamama. At the time of Muhammad the Tamim were under the leadership of a Christian prophetess called Sajah bint al-Harith whose maternal kinsfolk were from a Christian Taghlib tribe!

5. The early Christianisation of Oman, eastern Arabia and the islands prior to Muhammad

The church that helped Christianise Oman and eastern Arabia was the "Church of the East" – often called by westerners the Nestorian Church. From about 80 A.D. onwards the "Church of the East" had a great missionary vision. It quickly gained a stronghold in Parthia (Iraq). At that time (and until the Arab conquest of Persia) Persia exercised direct control over all of eastern Arabia, Oman and the islands. The "Church of the East" workers followed the trade routes both coastal and inland. The heavy persecution that periodically affected the "Church of the East" in Persia caused many believers to migrate to the Arabian side of the Gulf. In fleeing from Persia they would mainly go by sea. So the coasts of the Gulf, Oman and the Hadramaut were settled by these Syriac-speaking believers. Some of them would enter northern Arabia by the border city of Al-Hirah on the Euphrates River not far from Al-Najaf which was a major camel caravan route.

Bahrain, which in those days included not only the island of Bahrain but the fertile oasis on the land of Al-Qatif and al-Hofuf, had bishops from the "Church of the East" in the 4th century A.D. There is an 8th century church in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia neared Jubail that was built at this time. It is almost certainly a "Church of the East". There are also many graves with crosses on them.

About 90 km north-west of Jubail at Thaj, there are the ruins of a Christian church. Thaj was a large city (about 8 km^{2}). This church is dated to about the third century A.D. and in a village about 10 km north east of Thaj is the village of al-Hinnah where there is a large Christian cemetery implying quite a density of Christian population in the Eastern Province until the 7th century A.D.

The peninsula of Qatar ranked as a "Church of the East" diocese with many churches. There was a Nestorian bishop in Qatar as early as 225 A.D. The island of Bahrain (then called Darin) formed a separate diocese. Churches were established there by the early 5th century A.D. The oldest episcopal See was on the island of al-Muharraq. A church synod was held in 410 A.D. on Tarut Island. There were bishops until at least 676 A.D. when the last bishop – Yashu-yab – was appointed.

There was another diocese in what is now Abu Dhabi at least by the end of the 4th century. Christianity was not confined to the coasts, but spread inland into the oasis villages and to the nomadic tribes. Information about this comes mainly from Arab sources – the pre-Islamic poets. There are references to tribes as far away as the Nejd having names like Abd al-Masih and Abu Maryam. The "Church of the East" did not widely baptise people and when it did, it just baptised them in their usual "pagan" name as was common in Western Europe until the Reformation. Recently there has been an excavation of a Christian church on the island of Failaka in Kuwait.

In many ways this resembles the Jubail church but is much larger and more elaborate and is dated the 8th – 10th century A.D.

Under Persian control Oman was called 'Mazun' and had a considerable number of Christians – at least along the coast – in the 5th century A.D. The capital was Sohar which was then an important trading centre with a vibrant textile trade. Omanis settled in many places. In the Euphrates/Tigris ports there was a large "colony" of Omanis. Sohar had an archbishop to oversee bishops in a number of towns in Oman.

Many tribes of the interior were Christian by the time of Muhammad. One major tribal confederation was the Bakr ibn Wa'il. One branch of this – the Hanifa tribe – lived in oases cultivating cereals and date palms. The Hanifa became Christians. Their principal settlement was al-Hajr near modern Riyadh. The Shaiban tribe retained their Christian allegiance even during the early Caliphates. This tribal confederation remained Christian and paid no tribute to Muhammad. It didn't commit 'ridda'. One of the main reasons was perhaps that the tribal leaders were loyal to the Persians. What characterised central/east Arabian tribes was that they were against using force to spread their religious beliefs.

There was a synod in 676 A.D. during the Ma'awiyah's rule as Caliph (Umayyah). It was for "Church of the East" Gulf bishops (Arab side) with bishops from Qatar, Bahrain and al-Hofuf along with the archbishop from Muharraq. The proceedings showed commonplace concerns:

- There was to be an emphasis on great simplicity in funerals.
- No new church construction was to be undertaken without the permission of the bishop.
- The bishop was to make provision for the education of orphaned children.
- Christians should only drink in Christian-owned taverns!
- The church was responsible to collect 'jizya'.
- Christian women should only marry Christians. Monogamy was strongly affirmed. Marriages were to be conducted only with the consent of relatives in the presence of the Holy Cross and with a priestly blessing.
- Church members were urged to worship in public on Sundays and feast days in churches.
- All lawsuits were to be settled within the church not by other agencies or officials.

This continued to be the situation for 40 years after the Muslim conquest of the area!

It is possible that the conversion to Islam was not as popular as is often portrayed. This is shown by the fact that most of the northern and eastern Arabian tribes, with the exception of the Abd al-Qays, entered into rebellion on the death of Muhammad. Probably there had been no great intention to convert all to Islam for when the partner with whom the treaty was made died, the Arab tribes thought the treaty was abrogated.

Abu Bakr chose to call this action 'al-ridda' (the apostasy) and invaded eastern Arabia and conquered it militarily. Having done that however, there was no forced conversion of the populace to Islam. Islamic sources imply a wholesale adoption of Islam, but other records do not substantiate this.

What records exist suggest that the primary religious allegiance of much of the population was Christian. But gradually – over a couple of centuries – this dwindled and finally disappeared. There are several reasons for this:

- the burden of the 'jizya'
- isolation from outside Christian contact
- convenience!

By 900 A.D. most of the population was islamised. But there are rumours of indigenous Saudi Arabs in the eastern province who are secretly still Christian and whose forebears had continued to practice

Christianity through the centuries, handing their faith down to their children generation after generation and never converting to Islam.

An archaeologist in Arabia in 1986 gave a private lecture to a group of local people on Biblical archaeology. In the course of the question-and-answer period he was asked about the recently found church at Jubail and the history of Christianity in the eastern province.

In the process of answering he said he had heard a very persistent rumour that some early ARAMCO personnel had met and talked with local Arabs living north of Dammam who were part of that enduring Christian community. To the surprise of about 70% of the people present a young woman stood up and verified the rumour saying she was a Chaldean Christian from the Mosul region of Iraq and her grandfather was part of that Saudi Christian community. He had emigrated to Iraq as a young man. So at least secretly in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia Christianity has continued through the centuries to the present.

6. Christians in south west Arabia (Yemen)

- **Yemen in pre-Islamic eras**

Yemen is the only part of the Peninsula whose inhabitants created a unique and advanced civilisation extending from about 1000 BC to the 6th century. Yemen gets regular rain on the mountains and the early Yemenis took advantage of this to develop water storage schemes (dams), terracing and irrigation along with intensive methods of cultivation. Together with agricultural development went urban living. Writing was developed with many other material arts.

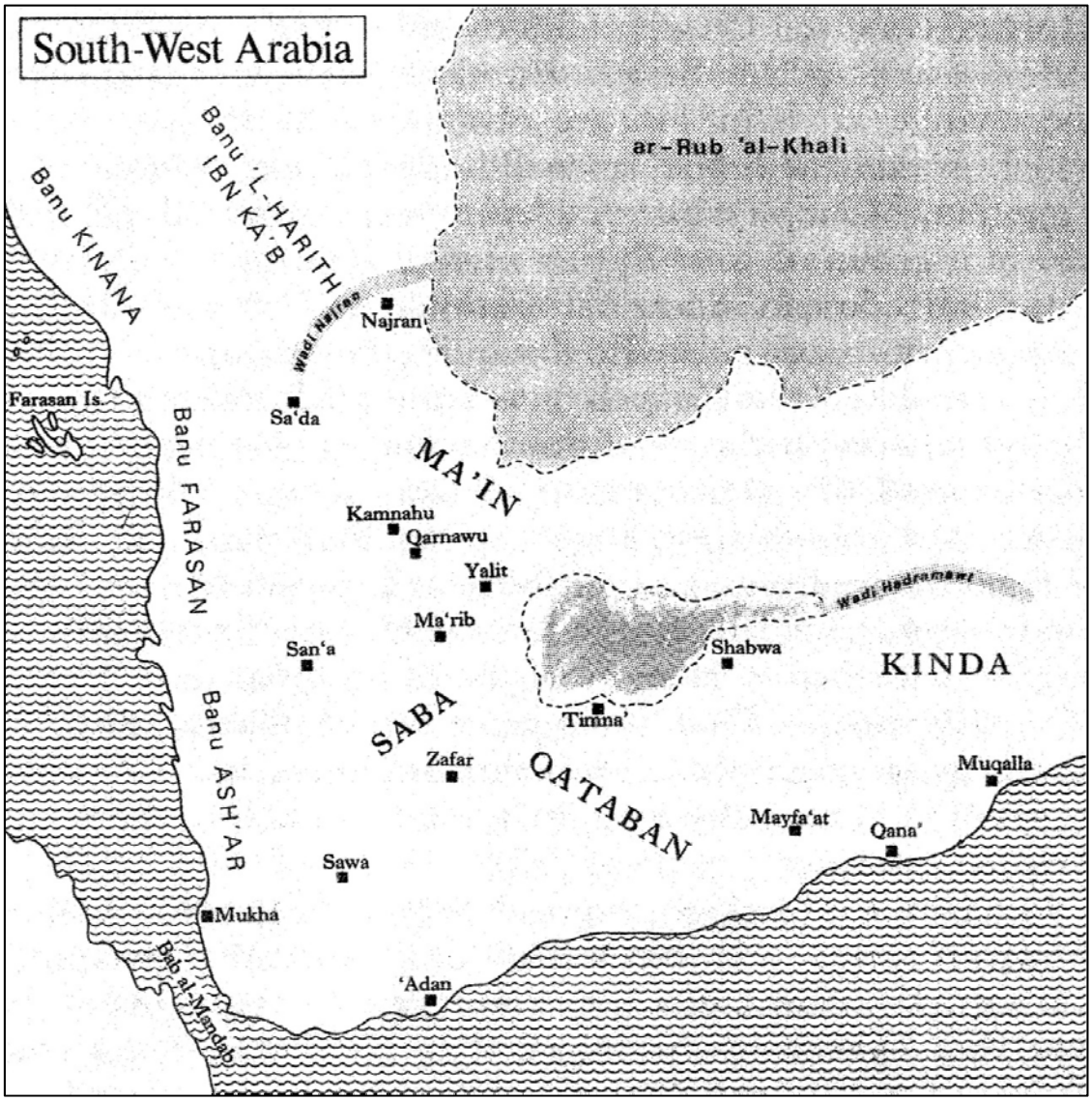
Politically there were a number of states that developed overland trade routes – for frankincense etc. More importantly they developed maritime routes to the wider world. These states coalesced into one state in the 3rd century A.D. This was followed by a rapid and catastrophic decline from which Yemen has never recovered.

In their history BC, the people of Yemen moved gradually across the Red Sea into the highlands of northern Ethiopia. They introduced their highly developed civilisation and mingled with the Kushite peoples to form a new people speaking the Yemen Semitic language. The various tribal governments in Ethiopia united into the State of Axum in the 1st century A.D. This new state had expansion policies. They invaded Meroe on the Nile (in present Sudan) – a fused Kushite-Egyptian culture. They also invaded Yemen across the Red Sea. The rulers of Yemen were descended from the house of Himyar so the people were called Himyarites. Tradition tells us that the first to preach the Gospel in South Arabia was the apostle Bartholomew.

The Kingdom of Axum became politically Christian in 318 A.D. Before this – in the late 280s A.D. – they had gained control of the Sabean Kingdom. The first Christian king of Axum (and Yemen) was Ezana (320-342 A.D.). Shortly after his death Yemen regained its independence which lasted until 525 A.D. when again the Axumites invaded and conquered the whole of Yemen.

A Syrian monk called Frumentius was sent to Yemen by Athanasius about 330 A.D. to win Yemen for the Lord Jesus. We know that at least in 325 A.D. representatives of the Christians from Yemen (then called Himyar) visited Constantinople. The church in Ethiopia became Monophysite in the 5th century. Most importantly they translated the Gospels into 'Ethiopic' and this, above all else, helped indigenise Christianity into Ethiopian culture where it has remained until today.

This didn't happen in Yemen mainly due to the influence of Judaism. The Himyarite King, Dhu Nuwas (522-525 A.D.) adopted Judaism as Yemen's state religion. This was probably for political reasons to show independence from both the Byzantines and the Axum Kingdom. Dhu Nuwas began to crush and kill Christians in Yemen mainly in the capital Zafar, but also in Wadi Najran. The Byzantine Emperor Justin I wrote to the King of Axum asking him to help these persecuted Christians.



There was a full-scale massacre of Christians ordered by Dhu Nuwas in Wadi Najran and this resulted in a full-scale Axumite invasion of Yemen. The result was that a Yemeni general – Abraha – became the leader in Yemen and he paid tribute to Axum. It was during this period that the dam at Marib broke causing economic devastation and rapid decline in Yemen.

- **The arrival of Christianity in Yemen**

Eusebius, the early historian of the church, tells of a Sicilian called Pantaenus who was a stoic philosopher. He was converted to the Lord Jesus and was sent to Yemen in the 2nd century A.D. (~180 A.D.) to preach the Gospel. But when he arrived in Yemen he found that the apostle Bartholomew had already been there. He also found some people there with the Hebrew version of Matthew's Gospel. After a while in Yemen, Pantaenus was asked to take responsibility for the theological school of Alexander (177 A.D.) where he taught Clement.

Around 305 A.D. certain rumours from Yemen reached the church in the Roman Empire that a number of Himyarites had been converted through a woman slave.

The first officially sponsored mission was undertaken in 337-361 A.D. by Theophilus who originally came from the island of Socotra. Apparently this island was already largely Christian as it was a major stopping place for sailors to replenish their water etc. going to and from the Red Sea to East Africa and India. Socotra was then named "The Fortunate Isle". A report of the first period of Theophilus' mission is still in existence:

"... ambassadors (missionaries) *were sent to those formerly called Sabaeans but now called Homeritae – a tribe descended from Abraham by Keturah. As to the territory which they inhabit, he says it was called by the Greeks "Arabia Magna" and "Arabia Felix" … its metropolis is Suba the city from which the Queen of Sheba set out to see Solomon …. The purpose of the embassy was to induce them to come over to the true religion.… At the head of embassage was Theophilus …. On his arrival among the Sabaeans, he endeavoured to persuade the ruler of the tribe to become Christian and to give over the deceits of heathendom. Hereupon the customary fraud and malice of the Jews was compelled to shrink into deep silence as Theophilus had once or twice proved by his wonderful miracles the truth of the Christian faith. The mission turned out successful, for the prince of the nation, by sincere conviction, came over to the true religion."*

One very real motive behind the mission lay in the international politics of the day and the rivalry there had been between the Byzantine and Persian spheres of influence.

Eventually this mission founded churches in Zafar and Aden together with a third in an unknown place called the Straits of Hormuz (Sohar?) and one in Sana'a. Accounts we have of this mission show there were both Jews and Christians in Zafar (the capital) and in the various trading places. But there is little or no evidence that indigenous people became Christians. Four bishoprics were established for the Greek Orthodox Churches in these four centres. In fact the mission appears to have been encouraging Roman imperial influence by exploiting Christianity with the aim of countering Persian influence! In 339 A.D. there was an outbreak of war between the Romans and the Parthians. It may also have been an attempt to contain the growing influence of the Patriarchate of Alexandria over Axum where Christianity was now the state religion.

Himyaritic rock inscriptions of this period indicate growing monotheism. But in the 4th century it doesn't appear to be either Jewish or Christian monotheism, but the prevailing Arab view of a supreme God. The dominant name of God is 'lu or 'Ilhu connected with rhmnm. Its northern Arabic equivalent is Al-Rahman. Sura 19 is dominated by this inscription to the Christian God.

Just when and how Christianity came to the island of Socotra is not known. In the 6th century it was a Greek-speaking island with many Christians. Muslim writers in the 9th century said that the people had become Christians when the Greeks had done so. They remained "Church of the East" Christians until the 15th century. They remained Christians until the 17th century by which time it was a much debased sort of Christianity and they were forcefully converted to Islam because of the fear that the island may be turned into a Portuguese Christian island colony.

- **The Christians of Najran**

The one area in S.W. Arabia where Christianity seems to have been securely established was in Wadi Najran. This is a fertile valley with a perennial water supply coming down from the mountains around Saa'da and flowing north and north-east into what is now Saudi Arabia. This valley had many villages full of palm groves. The main town is Najran and this is the point in Yemen where the commercial routes passing through Yemen divide. The one route goes through the Hijaz up to the Mediterranean and the other crosses the desert to Wadi Dawasir and to Yamama in Central Arabia passing just south of present-day Riyadh and continuing from there to the east coast of Arabia and to Iraq.

It was along these routes, in particular the route from Iraq, that the Gospel came to Najran. In the histories of the "Church of the East" (Nestorians) the story is told of a Najrani merchant named Hannan (or sometimes Hayyan) who came in contact with Christianity in Hira on the Euphrates in the early part of the 5th century A.D. (~410 A.D.) He had also been to Constantinople. He frequented the company of Christians and studied the Bible. He was baptised and continued with them for some time. On his return his family was converted through his witness and they formed a house church. Apparently a number of the people of Najran became Christians and began to bring Christianity to others in Yemen as well as to people in Axum territory. This is said to have taken place around 399-420 A.D. Najran was apparently the name for the northern part of Yemen and not just for Wadi Najran.

Early Muslim historians are interested in the Christians of Najran because of their contact with Muhammad and to give a wider picture of the Quranic reference to this community (Quran 85:4-8) where this community is called the *"ashab al-ukhdud"* (Lords of the Pit or Trench). Muslim sources ~110 AH speak of a Syrian Orthodox Christian called Fimiyyan. He was a wandering ascetic who supported himself by his trade as a builder (tentmaking is not so new in the A.P.!!). His "prayers were answered" and he was captured by the Bedouin and sold into slavery in Najran. One night his owner discovered him engaged in his prayers with the whole room filled with light. He saw this and other signs as evidence of holiness and the truth of his knowledge of God. Fimiyyan is said to have had a local sacred palm tree destroyed and to have seen a whole village in the Wadi Najran turn to Christianity. In Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad, the initial turning to Christianity of the whole community was the result of the miracle working of a Najrani, Abdullah ibn Thamir, who was converted through Fimiyyan. Another inscription says that, *"Abd Kulal, his wife and two sons constructed a house with the help of the Merciful"* in 458 A.D. "The Merciful" was beginning to be used fairly widely by the Himyarites to describe the unique, supreme God.

Sadly the records of the clergy of Wadi Najran show that they didn't have any **local** priests. The records name priests called Moses and Eliyya who came from Hira, a couple more from the Greek Orthodox Church, one from Axum and one from Persia – probably Nestorian. But in the records of the massacre, the majority of those martyred had Arab names. (Most were south west Arab names with some from the north – i.e. there were ten Abdullahs killed.) The liturgical language of the Christians of Najran was Syriac. Up to this time, as far as we know, there does not seem to have been anything of the nature of a general persecution of Christians either in Wadi Najran or in Yemen although there is reference to the martyrdom of one Azquir in 467 A.D.

A Christian historian, Theodore the Lector, writing in 575 A.D., says there were several churches of Yemeni Christians along the coast and they had had a bishop since 513 A.D. These Christians were apparently formerly Jews who had been converted as a result of missionaries sent by the churches of Alexandria in Egypt.

At this point the spread of Christianity became heavily involved in political issues and the influence of regional powers was growing. In Yemen itself there was a power vacuum in the Himyarite line of kings. The Axumites took advantage and maintained a large garrison in the capital, Zafar, and in the sea port towns. This produced an anti-Christian reaction which, in reality, was anti-Axumite and anti-Byzantine. A new Himyarite prince began to rule – Dhu Nuwas (probably an Arab nickname referring to his long curly hair!). His proper name was probably Masruq. His father was a pagan but his mother was a Jewess. Dhu Nuwas adopted Judaism simply because the Jews of south west Arabia were not linked to any foreign power!

When persecution began, the Christians appealed to the King of Axum and he responded by sending troops against Dhu Nuwas in 519 A.D. The Jews were defeated, their army disappeared into the mountains and the Axumite troops returned home. Christians along the coastlands and on the islands co-operated with the Axumites. They were attacked and their churches were destroyed including the church building in Zaraf. This happened in 523 A.D. Even prior to this date there was growing persecution by the Jews in Yemen, but not in Najran. Christians were not altogether blameless! It is reported that a martyr gloried in the fact that her father had set fire to one of the Jewish synagogues. So there may have been some provocation.

The subjugation of Zafar was accomplished by stealth. Dhu Nuwas sent messengers – Jewish priests pretending to be Christians – from Palestine plus some from Hira. They carried a letter from Dhu Nuwas in which he pledged himself by very solemn oaths, that if they would surrender the town no harm would befall them. The message was believed. The leader of the town and 300 soldiers went out to surrender believing the "Christians". Every one of them was killed. The town was invaded. The Christians gathered in the church. The building was set on fire and all in it were burned to death. Dhu Nuwas now determined to exterminate all Christians in Yemen. He gave instructions that all Christians should deny Christ and become Jews or they would be killed. The death of the King of Najran gave Dhu Nuwas the opportunity to annex Najran.

Dhu Nuwas tried to eliminate the Christians in Wadi Najran because he feared their links with the Sassanid Empire of Iran. The principal tribe in the region of Najran were the Banu'l Harith ibn Ka'b and these were all Christians. Many Christians were massacred. One heroine, Habsa, the granddaughter of Hayyar (perhaps the first believer in the Wadi) is reported to have said, *"You should know that not only will I not say that Christ was a man, but I worship Him and praise Him because of all the benefits He has shown me. I believe that He is God, Maker of all creatures and I take refuge in His Cross."*

Dhu Nuwas sent his army to besiege Najran but he met with defeat and suffered a heavy loss. So he tried subterfuge and wrote a letter. What worked in Zafar also worked in Najran. One hundred and fifty of the Christian leaders went out to Dhu Nuwas. He treated them kindly and sent them back telling them to bring him all their silver and gold and then they would be free. They did as they were commanded. When they returned he placed a cross on the ground and he commanded them to deny Christ, spit on the cross and become Jews. If they did their lives would be spared. Otherwise they would be thrown into a fire.

According to Muslims sources, a large trench was dug and filled with fire. Apparently they refused and said they believed in the Lord Jesus, *"Who had saved them from the second death which* (addressing Dhu Nuwas) *is reserved for you that you may die for ever together with Satan your father".*

Together with the people of Najran (who called themselves not "Christians" but "the blessed ones) there were church leaders from Hira, a Greek presbyter called Sergios, an Orthodox deacon called Hananya, a Persian church leader called Abrahim and a priest from Axum. One of these leaders said, *"I will not deny the Lord Jesus Christ but confess Him that He is God, the Son of God indeed."* He and all the other leaders were burned to death – 427 leaders in all.

The next day all the male adult believers were thrown into the fire. The following day the same fate befell all the freeborn women with their children and so on. Muslim sources say that in all about 20,000 were burned to death. Some tried to flee but were captured. One, on being captured, was asked, *"Are you a Christian?" "Yes, I am a Christian"* he replied. He was ordered to hold up his right hand. He did so and it was cut off by the sword. Again he was asked, *"Are you a Christian?" "Yes." "Then hold up your left hand".* It too was immediately cut off. *"Are you still a Christian?"* they asked. *"Yes"* he replied, *"In life and in death I am a Christian."* Enraged, they cut off his legs and he died.

Before all the women were thrown into the fire with their children they made this statement: *"God forbid that we should deny Our Lord and God Jesus Christ for He is God and the Maker of all things and He has saved us from eternal death and God forbid that we should spit on His Cross or that we should treat it with contempt for by it He has prepared for us redemption from all errors …. And we pray that as our husbands died we may be deemed worthy to die, we also, for the sake of Christ God".*

The massacre of the Christians in Wadi Najran stirred up the Christian world and led to a full-scale Axumite invasion of about 70,000 men. Other Bedouin tribes refused to help Dhu Nuwas. Neither would the Persians help him. The invasion took place in 525 A.D. Dhu Nuwas was overthrown and killed. Sadly the Jews also suffered much. An indigenous Christian, Sumyafas Ashwa was placed on the throne by the Axumites as "governor" on behalf of the King of Axum. Some Christians were also killed because they were not able to say, *"We are Christians"* in Ethiopian! So they began to tattoo a cross on their hands. When the cross was seen they were set free.

Four years later there was a rebellion against Samyafa, a general from Axum (called Abraha in Arab history). He took control of Yemen in 550 A.D. on behalf of the King of Axum, but with a great deal of independence of action. He didn't control the whole of what is now Yemen. Hadramaut was still controlled by the Kinda tribes.

It was in this period that the Marib Dam broke which was a major catastrophe for the country referred to in the Quran 34:15. Abraha was successful in enlisting the cooperation of many disaffected tribes to help in its restoration. There is a long inscription at Marib commemorating this event which begins, *"By the power of the Merciful One and His Messiah* [rhmnn/wmshhw] *and of*

the Holy Spirit [rh quds]". The inscription tells how he brought all the resources of the country – both material and spiritual – to help repair the dam. At the end they all prayed at the church. [The word used is bʿt – the ordinary Arabic word used was bi'a but the priests were given their Syriac name 'qashish'.]

John of Ephesus, who died in 585 A.D., gives some idea of what happened then to the Christians of Yemen. The patriarch of Alexandria sent a Monophysite Coptic bishop to Yemen to strengthen the church. Soon after he left, the Byzantine Emperor replaced the patriarch with Greek Orthodox Chalcedon patriarch of his own choice and the bishop was withdrawn. Yemeni Christians urged both Axum and Byzantine to send priests but **none were sent** and after 25 years the Yemeni priests chose and consecrated one of their own by all laying on their hands.

The result was that the Greek Orthodox, the Coptic Orthodox of both Egypt and Axum and the "Church of the East" all declared the Yemeni Christians heretics and took what opportunities they could to stir up dissension. A bishop was sent by the Monophysites of Iraq. An Italian bishop arrived! The Nestorians also sent influential priests – partly with the support of the Persian government. This was not for mere theological overtones, but it had a strong emphasis on gaining political power through religion!

The failure to get Christianity deeply rooted into the hearts of the people of Yemen can be ascribed almost entirely to the dissensions and disunity among Christians in the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires with their satellites like Axum. This disunity was disgracing Christianity in a part of the world far from the mountains in south west Arabia.

In 567 A.D. Abraha built a cathedral in Sana'a called Al-Qalis (Is this an Arabic translation of 'Ekklesia'?). Muslim sources said that this cathedral was built with the intention of making it a rival to Mecca for pilgrimage, since pilgrimage was a considerable source of income for the people who lived in Sana'a. Muslim authors describe the building in considerable detail. It had much marble and many mosaics and was apparently an amazing building. There is evidence that it was still used by Christians a century after Caliph Umar is supposed to have decreed the expulsion of Christians from the Peninsula. It was finally demolished during the Caliphate of Mansur (754-775 A.D.)

Abraha sent a military expedition against Mecca which, according to an inscription, occurred in 568 A.D. or 547 A.D. The reason for the expedition was a reprisal for the assassination of one of Abraha's Hijazi allies. The Meccan Quraish were not directly involved. The expedition was accompanied by a number of African elephants. This is apparently the source of the Quranic sura – surat-el-Fil. The expedition took place some time between 540 A.D. and 547 A.D. at the latest. But there is a tradition that Muhammad was born in the Year of the Elephant (amr al-fil – sura 105). But he was probably born in 570 A.D. In any case, clearly the elephants made a big impression on the Meccans.

Abraha was succeeded by his two sons and the dynasty was finally overthrown by a Persian army in 575 A.D. The Persians ended the influence of Axum on Yemen and also that of the Byzantines. The church in Najran survived and apparently thrived. Then came what Muslim historians called the "wufud period".

Zwemer says, "The defeat of Yemen brought anarchy to the whole of central Arabia. The idolaters of the north overran the south and could not stay the decay of Christianity."

Abraha built Sana'a. The cathedral was built from the ruins of ancient Marib.

The "wufud period" was when tribal delegations came of their own accord to visit Muhammad in Medina to arrange alliances. In 628 A.D., eight years after the Hijra, a delegation came from Najran. Muslim tradition says sixty men came from Najran including fourteen nobles – both political and religious leaders. Ibn Ishaq's biography preserves the story probably to throw light on a verse in the Quran (3:54). The group was accompanied by Bishop Abu Haritha ibn Alqama of the Bakr ibn Wa'il tribe – a powerful northern Arabian tribe.

This bishop was the Metropolitan (like a Pope) of all the Monophysite Arabs in the Peninsula. Ibn Ishaq says he was recognised by the Byzantine Emperor – which may be right if his territory was only the

Arabian Peninsula outside Byzantine control. Muhammad came to an agreement with the delegation. Here is an extract of the agreement:

"The Apostle of God wrote to the Bishop of the Banu'l Harith ibn Ka'b and to the bishops of Najran and their priests and those who followed them and their monks …, 'The people of Najran and their dependents shall enjoy the protection of God and the dhimma of his apostle, for themselves, their community, their land and their property; for their churches [biya], and the practice of their worship (no bishop or monk or wafih will be forced to give up his position) and for all that is in their land, little or big, provided it derived not from usury or blood money from heathen times.' "

This agreement reveals not only that Wadi Najran had a number of bishops, but also that the tribe of the Banu'l Harith had its own bishop. In the rest of Yemen, Christians went over to Islam when threatened with attack in 10 AH and later. But the people of Najran did not. They maintained their faith when the whole of Yemen came under Muslim Arab control. Their treaty with Muhammad was confirmed by succeeding Caliphs. Caliph Umar's measure that no Christians were to remain in the Peninsula did not apply to the Christians in Najran. A Bishop of Najran appears in 835 A.D. and we hear of Christians in Najran at least until 897 A.D.

Elsewhere in Yemen, Christianity was largely seen just as an alien allegiance associated with two political powers – Byzantium and Axum, with Byzantium being involved in a war of attrition with Persia.

In the lifetime of Muhammad, help was given by various Christian communities in Arabia to secure the submission of various non-Christian tribes in other parts of Arabia. This continued under Abu Bakr, the first Caliph (632-634 A.D.). Among the people who helped Abu Bakr's generals in a critical engagement against the Persians was the Christian tribe – the Beni Namr. It was chiefly due to the valour in battle of the Beni Namr warriors that victory was secured. But the most valiant feat of the day's fighting was performed by another Christian from the Christian tribe of Beni Taghlib.

Muslims accepted the help of Christian tribes when they needed help, but when they did not need help they had a tendency to kill all male Christians and enslave all women and children just as they did on the island of Darin (Bahrain?).

When Umar succeeded Abu Bakr as Caliph (634-644 A.D.), he deported to Iraq all Christians who refused to embrace Islam. Conversions from Christianity to Islam in large numbers are reported to have taken place in Oman, the whole of the Gulf region, Yemen and in central Arabia. The reason for this apostasy of many was the hope of saving their property. About 650 A.D. a Nestorian bishop wrote, "Where is the great people of Oman which has precipitated itself into the great Gulf of apostasy for the love of half its goods?"

Muslim historians freely admit that the early conversion of the Arabs to Islam was largely motivated by material possessions. "When the Arabs of the pathless desert 'fed on locusts and wild honey', once tasted the delicacies of civilisation and revelled in the luxurious palaces of the Persians, they said, 'By Allah, even if we cared not to fight for the cause of God, we could not but wish to contend for and enjoy <u>these</u>, leaving distress and hunger henceforth to others.' "

Lessons can be learned from all this:

1. Indigenise the local churches from the beginning so that Christianity is not seen as "a church for ex-patriates".

2. It would be helpful if the carriers of the Gospel in our day were from the Global South where it is not seen that the advance of the Gospel is motivated by western political power.

3. Maintaining unity among workers is absolutely vital.

7. The ephemeral influence of Christianity among the Arabs

The world of Arabia during the first six centuries A.D. was largely dormant at least in terms of what was to happen in the 7th century with the beginning of Islam. What happened in the Arabian Peninsula needs to be understood in the light of the long dual between the Roman/Byzantine empires and the Parthian/Sassanid empires.

There were other difficulties alongside this great political conflict:

- The conflict between the Hellenistic churches of Greek Orthodoxy (the official religion of the Byzantines) and the Monophysites and members of the "Church of the East" (Nestorian) was significant.
- Although there were Arab Christians, it appears there was no attempt by Arab Christians or others to express their faith in Arabic. They seemed quite content to use Syriac.
- The only Arabs who appear to have been 'christianised' to any extent were those who had undergone cultural change as they were being urbanised. So Syriac Christianity merely touched the surface life of Arab Bedouin Christians and it seemed incapable of penetrating Arab life and transforming it from within. The nomadic lifestyle was too resistant to any fundamental change. So the Gospel remained marginal to Arab society.
- There was a deep spiritual dualism within the Syriac churches of the Near East. The church was mainly made up of a celibate elite. The rest of the Christians were merely recipients of the benefits of belonging to the church, but they did not participate in its values. This parallels pre-Reformation Europe. So in Arabia the initiated and dedicated Christians stood out and separated themselves from their communities in order to serve the community as a hermit, a monk or a priest. These people were loved and appreciated provided they left the values of the Arabs undisturbed. There was no challenge to change. So sadly, the particular interpretations of the Gospel that the Arabs were introduced to presented no challenge to the Arab way of life and did not even attempt to help Arab Christians express their faith in their own heart language – Arabic.
- Having suffered under Persian rule for some centuries, some tribes in eastern Arabia saw Muhammad's invitation to join Islam as a means by which to throw off Persian rule. Al-Mundher bin Sawa, the Arab governor under Sassanid rule of the eastern provinces of Bahrain, personally concluded a treaty with Muhammad.

The other major factor was that the Bedouin way of life of the Arabs of the Peninsula possessed within itself exceptional powers of resistance to any cultural or value change. Nomadic culture is one-sided. It doesn't derive its self-sufficiency from a material life. In fact the Bedouin depend on the settled agrarian village/town life for many of their necessities. The real distinction – their one-sidedness – is found in the social consciousness of the Bedouin. A tribe's consciousness – the ground and being of the meaning of life – is from the "soul" of the tribe. The outlaw from his tribe is a dead man. The nomadic life, based on this deep-seated humanism, is not a life focused on the individual, but rather focused on the clan or the tribe. It is in marked contrast to the two-world understanding of the farmer/townsperson – the worlds of the natural and the supernatural.

Settled people saw the Bedouin as belonging to a different world (worldview). They felt that within themselves the Bedouin were a menace to their society, even though they often encountered them in market towns. Those few Bedouin Arabs who were in a transitional stage to becoming "townies" tended to adopt a form of Christianity. But nomadic Arabs adopted Christianity, not as an allegiance to a Saviour the Lord Jesus who was One with God, but on the same level as they recognised **and used** the other gods of Arabian life.

Clearly, in the early days of Islam, the clans and tribes who discarded their gods didn't feel they had lost anything vital to clan life. So in pre-Islamic times when a clan or part of a tribe became Christian, there was just a shift in a functional relationship in regard to the supernatural world – just as if you added another insurance policy to your portfolio of insurance policies. Under Islam, the Bedouin **only**

changed when he changed to another environment – the environment of urbanised living with political power.

The only other period in the Arabian Peninsula's history where there was a massive cultural shift was with the discovery of oil and in particular since 1973 when the price of oil rose 500% as a result of the Oil Embargo that produced massive and rapid urbanisation.

So the Bedouin viewed Christianity primarily in terms of political expediency. Any spiritual power they did recognise was only in hermits and monks (nuns and priests) who exclusively engaged in relationships with the supernatural world on behalf of themselves and partially on behalf of their clan/tribe. In north west Arabia this political allegiance was within the political orbit of the Byzantine Empire – in the south west to Axum and the Ethiopian highlands and in the east of Arabia to the Sassanid Empire.

The nominal assent – without much inward conviction or comprehension of the message of the Gospel – that characterised a large proportion of Arabs, was part of the price of the popularity of political expediency. Being a "Christian" added the potential of being under military protection and it probably helped considerably in trade where the Mediterranean cultures were the main consumers.

The vast majority of the Bedouin tribes abandoned these political alliances for Islam once the tribal leaders realised there was a new Arab Imam using an Arab slogan and an Arab book and crucially demonstrating striking **military efficiency** in defeating both Byzantine and Sassanid military forces.

Consequently, the Arab Bedouin of Arabia offered no resistance that came from the heart when an Arab monotheistic religion that related to them more than Syriac Christianity was imposed on them by one of their own. The Christianity of the more settled peoples of Egypt, the Nile Valley and the Fertile Crescent was much more firmly held and survived well with the majority of the population remaining Christians until the Crusades.

Islam chose a more effective way to enforce her uncompromising monotheism on the Bedouin Arabs of the Peninsula – the legalistic way of Judaism.

In theory Islam tolerated Christianity, but it placed Christians under considerable financial disabilities which led many – upon whom their faith sat lightly as convention – to abandon it for the more profitable creed of the Muslims! In addition there were very stern laws against apostasy from its own ranks.

In the last analysis, we Christians completely failed to win the people of Arabia to the Gospel and were content just to superficially 'christianise' them despite the fact that we had considerable advantages:

- ecclesiastical organisation with the ability to send workers out into missions
- formal admission through baptism
- monasteries that sent out many workers (perhaps the forerunners of mission agencies?)

Islam overran Christians again by political/military conquest. Islam triumphed in territory its armies controlled. In areas ruled by animists – in west Africa etc. – Islam did expand by peaceful means, but not in lands previously ruled by Christians. But it must be admitted that forcible conversions from Christianity to Islam were relatively rare. Probably one of the major reasons was that the military victories of Islam led nominal Christians to believe divine favour was with the Muslims. This was followed by the desire to escape the discriminatory taxes and inferior status that was the usual lot of Christians under Muslim rule with Muslims as political overlords.

Christianity survived much better in the Fertile Crescent as well as in Persia, Egypt and Sudan. This appears to be for two reasons:

1. Christians were largely in the merchant class. In Persia the "Church of the East" expanded into Central Asia for four centuries after the death of Muhammad. These merchants had extensive contacts along the trade routes of Africa and Asia as well as up the Red Sea and in the Gulf.

2. Because of their interest in trade, their commercial contacts brought them into contact with each other and with pagans. So world evangelism continued – evangelising the pagans of north and west Europe as well as those in the cities of Central Asia as far as China and Japan. The Gospel also advanced in India and eastwards as far as Java.

It is said that many Christians from eastern Arabia fled to Persia where they were still a minority, but better treated by the Muslim rulers than in Arabia. Also many fled to the lower parts of the Euphrates/Tigris Valley.

But the reality is that for the first six centuries of their history Christians experienced no major reverse and made no permanent surrender of territory. Persecutions they knew well and some of these proved costly in terms of people becoming believers. Some possibly retarded the spread of the Gospel. But it was largely natural obstacles – such as the Sahara – that imposed an impassable barrier except down the Nile corridor where the Gospel did travel. In the north west of Europe the Gospel did spread outside the Roman Empire to the Irish Celts and with the collapse of the western part of the Roman Empire the Gospel began to spread to Germanic peoples and Nordic peoples such as the Vikings.

So the rise of an Arab Empire and the spread of Islam caused the greatest territorial defeat that Christianity has ever suffered. It continued to suffer for the next 1000 years. By 1600 A.D. the whole of the Middle East, Central Asia, most of South Asia, parts of South East Asia and the eastern coast of Africa, as well as much of West Africa, were all under Muslim rule. Muslims had captured the Balkans and parts of central Europe such as Hungary. They were knocking on the doors of Vienna. They had invaded much of southern Russia as far as the Volga River. The Mongols of Chinese Turkistan embraced Islam and the scattered communities of Christians disappeared.

I think it is a general principle that what you lose spiritually you will have a major battle to win back again. But the recovery began slowly in the 19th century and the pace quickened throughout the 20th century. Perhaps in the 21st century we will see the breakthrough – not in territory but in the hearts of men and women in the Muslim World.

Islam advanced largely through conquest by Muslim rulers, but it is true that forcible conversions from Christianity to Islam were the exception rather than the rule. There was a slow shrinkage of faith along with increasing ignorance of the Scriptures. This led to the view that God's favour was always on the side of the powerful and victorious. This was followed by a desire to escape discriminatory taxation and an inferior social status as followers of the Lord Jesus. The movement was nearly all one-way from being a Christian to becoming a Muslim for the law made death the penalty for unrepentant apostasy from Islam.

In Arabia itself, Caliph Umar – in response to what is believed to be a saying of Muhammad that two religions could not exist at the same time in Arabia – expelled some Jews and Christians. Yet Muhammad did give protection to the Christians of Najran and it was in spite of his promise that many of them were removed to Iraq. By 710 A.D. it is estimated that the number of Christians in Najran had declined to about 8000. Christian communities in Yemen seemed to have survived at least until ~ 1000 A.D.

There are so many **'ifs'** in this history of the church in Arabia:

- What if the Christians in Arabia had lived more spiritual lives with their focus on the Kingdom of God and not on political influence in this world?
- What if the Bible had been translated into Arabic?
- What if smallpox hadn't broken out in the Ethiopian/Axum-Yemeni army camp in the invasion of Mecca in 547 A.D.? [The army withdrew. If it hadn't, then probably Mecca would have become a "Christian town"!]

But wishful thinking will not change history! We are responsible for our own times at the beginning of the 21st century. May God grant us the vision and the willingness to bring all that we are in terms of language, culture, nationality etc. and submit all to the control of the Lord Jesus. May the furtherance

of His Kingdom for His glory be our **only aim**. May we reject even minor worldly concerns to promote other agendas.

Let us learn that "christianising" is never good enough. Shallowness is never acceptable. Let us learn from the past and so not see a repetition of the past in the Arabian Peninsula. Let us be wise and skilful master builders in laying down the foundation. (1 Cor. 3:10)

This is a sad history! Islam met and vanquished Christianity in the formerly Christian lands and it was able to do so because the church inadequately evangelised the Arab Bedouin peoples. I hope this goes some way to explain the causes of this defeat. I hope in the next decade defeat will turn to victory.

Appendix: Christian denominations in the Middle East up to the 7th century

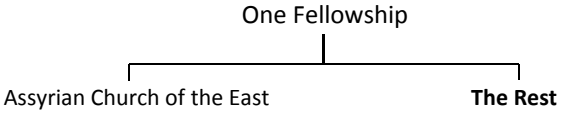
This is a brief overview. The world's oldest denominations are found in the Middle East. After 325 A.D. (the official date of the "christianising" of the Roman Empire) five patriarchates emerged. Each was self-governing:

- Constantinople
- Alexandria
- Antioch
- Jerusalem
- Rome

After the collapse of the western Roman Empire, the patriarch of Rome (the Pope) had little influence in the Middle East until the Crusades. There were two further centres in the non-Christian Parthian Empire:

- Seleucia – Ctesiption near modern Baghdad
- Echmiadzin in Armenia

The first major divisions began in 431 A.D. at the Council of Ephesus. The "Church of the East" (Nestorian) was not able to attend either the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. or the Council in 431 A.D. Both were held in the Roman/Byzantine Empire which was at war with the Parthians/Persians. So the Assyrian Church of the East was the first to be expelled.



The reasons were mainly political – war between Persia and Byzantine Empire.

Division then arose at the Council of Chalcedon. The debate and division was over the nature of human and divine in the person of Christ. Some patriarchs also objected that the Patriarch of Constantinople claimed to be "the first among equals". This led to a major split between the Chalcedon churches (Diophysite) and the non-Chalcedon churches (Monophysite). The breakup had less to do with theology and more to do with culture and language – the Semitic people of the Near East and Egypt (more holistic) vs. Greek dichotomisation and language.



The Armenians became Monophysite because they lived under Persian rule. They didn't want to align themselves with the enemies of Persia – the Byzantines. Secondly the debate was in Greek and centred on the meaning of two words "nature" and "person". But in Armenian these two words are exactly the same! As far as they were concerned there was no debate!

- **The Assyrian Chaldean Church of the East**

In the late first century, Edessa (Urfa in present day eastern Turkey) became a major Christian centre. The population was Aramaic-speaking. This church used Syriac (a formalised form of Aramaic). Edessa was in the Parthian Empire. The Sassanids replaced the Parthians in 220 A.D. War with Byzantium began in 270 A.D. Mazdeanism – related to Zoroastrianism – was the official state religion.

Terrible persecution was endured by the "Church of the East" from 340-380 A.D. This was possibly the most severe persecution the church anywhere has endured in its history. In 410 A.D., the Sassanid ruler (called the Shah) recognised the "Church of the East". He did so when it was widely recognised that it had no ties with the Byzantine Empire. This led to huge expansion for it was now a "national" church – an "insider movement" with no foreign involvement!

From the 2nd century to the 5th century membership of the church was for celibates only. Baptism was only permitted to them. Married couples could be members as long as they were celibate. All church members had seats on church councils. There was no infant baptism and marriage was not considered a "sacrament". They called themselves "The Sons and Daughters of the Alliance".

From the 6th century onwards there was restructured membership. Clerical celibacy was abolished in 499 A.D. They had never heard of Nestorius, but because Nestorius was despised and rejected and this was also true of them, the name was somehow given to them by others. They were different from the Monophysites. They recognised the two natures of the Lord Jesus and saw them as distinct and separate. Mary was **not** the 'Mother of God', but only the mother of His human nature.

In 634 A.D. Arab armies invaded Persia. The Zoroastrians fled east towards India. Today the Parsees of western India are a remnant of this migration. The "Church of the East" welcomed the Arab Muslim armies and many had a major influence particularly on the Abbasid dynasty. Their great missionary vision slowly dwindled for many reasons beyond the scope of this paper.

- **The Monophysite Syrian Churches**

They held up the Lord Jesus as gentle, mild and non-confrontational. They emphasised His forbearance, but didn't emphasise at all His strong character and His confrontation with hypocrites. Nor did they emphasise His mighty works! There was no emphasis on His coming Kingdom. Of the nature of the Lord Jesus (divine and human) we should only attempt to copy His human nature. In our union with the Lord Jesus, we are only united with His humility and weakness, but not with His spiritual power and authority. There was a strong pull to monasticism – ascetics, hermits and anchorites. These lived lives of prayer, abstinence and good works. But they demonstrated very little joy and no passion to change their spiritual environment. All this led to the implication that God's favour is shown by worldly success.

- **The Monophysite Coptic Church of Egypt**

In Egypt just prior to the Muslim invasion there were huge battles between the Coptic people, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Byzantine soldiers who supported the "state church". In Alexandria the battles were between the soldiers and "the mob". In retaliation the Byzantine government cut off the supply of corn and grain from Alexandria and introduced martial law. Perhaps most Copts wanted independence from the Byzantine Empire. As a consequence, many Copts welcomed the Arab armies as liberators when they arrived. It was a church weakened by civil wars and schism.

- **The Ethiopian Monophysite church of Axum and Meroe**

This church had many Jewish features:

- They observed both circumcision and baptism.
- They observed both the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday.
- Dancing was a major part of their worship.
- Polygamy was allowed in civil law, but the clergy had to be monogamous.
- The centre of devotion was the "Ark of Zion" – believed to be the Ark of the Covenant rescued somehow from the destruction of Jerusalem.
- There was an annual festival that included collective immersion for the remission of their sins.
- There were many fasts.

In general, the Greek Orthodox Church suffered more than the Monophysite churches when the Muslim armies came because they were perceived to be loyal to the Byzantine Empire.

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[Maps used are from **Christianity among the Arabs in pre-historic times** – cited above]