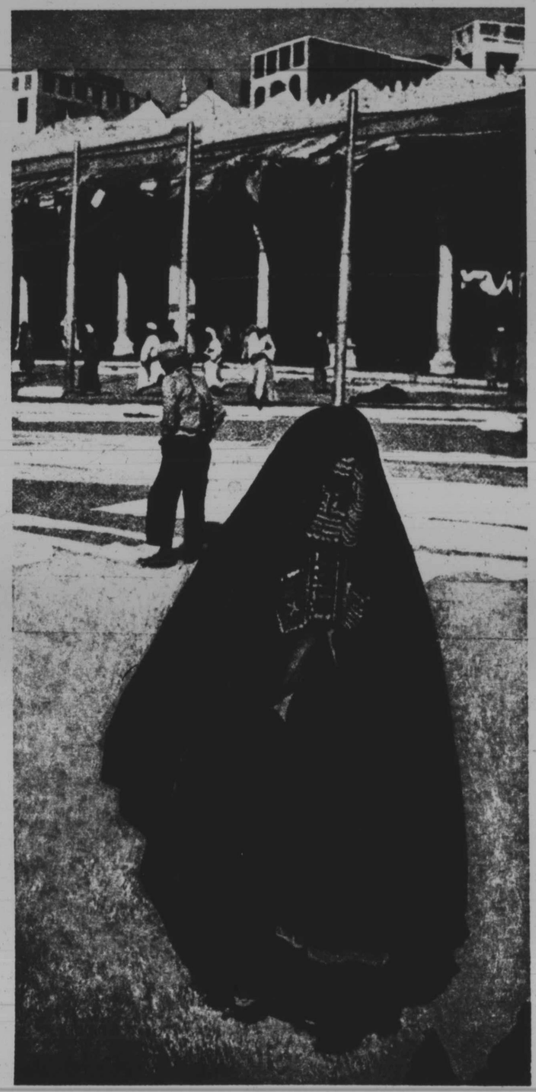
GREAT RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD:

Mohammedism



Rigid tradition prescribes the costume pilgrims must wear on the pilgrimage to Mecca. This Bedouin woman from Saudi Arabia is covered, as the law ordains, from head to foot.

Mohammedism has over 400 million practicing followers, and was founded by Mohammed bin Abdallah in the 7th Century. Two things are forbidden to the true believers, the drinking of liquor, and the eating of pork. The Sabbath is Friday, and pilgrimage to the Holy Places of Faith each Moslem must accomplish if he can, once in his lifetime.

By Rafat Habib

Mohammed bin Abdallah, the founder of Islam, lived a life dotted with crises and controversies. His trials and the manner in which he dealt with them provide insight into the man's character and intellectual development.

Abdallah, Mohammed's father, belonged to the exalted tribe called the Koresh, the guardians of the Kaba, a temple that is believed to have been built by the prophet Abraham. A few months before Mohammed's birth, Abdallah died at age 25. Mohammed's mother, Amina, died when he was six. Many historians attribute Mohammed's reflective and quiet nature to these early bereavements and the loneliness that ensued.

The polytheist Koresh were bitterly antagonized by Mohammed's criticisms of their gods. Severe persecution of the early Muslims followed. Mohammed's uncle, Abu Lahab, instigated the unbelieving Koreshites to throw dirt and other offensive things at him. When Mohammed went to tribal fairs to preach, Abu Lahab stood beside him, shouting, "Believe him not; he is a lying renegade."

Finally, some elders of Koresh complained to Mohammed's uncle and guardian, Abu Talib, who summoned Mohammed and told him, "Place not on me a burden heavier than I can bear." Mohammed steadfastly replied, "If the Koresh put the sun on my right hand and the moon on my left I still would not desist until either God makes my cause succeed or I perish in the attempt."

The Koresh then cut off all trade including the supply of the necessities of life with Mohammed's clan, forcing it into a mountainous exile. The clan endured great hardship because of this boycott, which lasted more than three years. Only with great difficulty was the clan able to obtain meager amounts of food. The Koreshites could hear the cries of the starving children of the banished clan.

The strangest episode in Mohammed's life is recounted by three of his earliest and most reliable biographers: Mohammed ibn Ishaq ibn Yasar ibn Khiyar (704-767), Mohammed ibn Omar Al-Wakidi (747-823) and Abu Jafar Mohammed ibn Jarir at-Tabari (839-923).

In 614 A.D. when the persecution had become very severe, Mohammed allowed about 15 of his followers to leave for Abbysinia. He had been greatly moved at their sufferings and he sought a compromise with the Koresh.

One day he appeared at the Kaba where the Koresh elders had gathered and sat next to them. Mohammed announced that new verses had been revealed to him. These verses, which are in the 53d chapter of the Koran, described a visit by Gabriel to him. They also referred to Lat, Uzza and Manat, revered Koresh deities.

Mohammed recited, "His (Gabriel's) sight never swerved, for truly he saw the signs of the Lord, the greatest. Have you seen Lat and Uzza and another, the third (goddess) Manat?"

Then came the most controversial utterance Mohammed ever made. Continuing his recitation of divine words, he spoke, "There are exalted females whose intercession verily is to be sought."

That the Koresh idols were impotent had hitherto been a key tenet of Islam. Therefore the new

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verses stunned and delighted the Koresh. The entire assemblage prostrated itself and worshipped. The Koresh told the prophet, "Since thou hast conceded unto our gods (powers of intercession), we are content to follow thee."

This accord must have lasted for weeks because news of it reached the refugees in Abbysinia who headed home upon learning that the Koresh had been converted.

However, sometime later Mohammed told the Koreshites that the lines praising their gods had been put in his mouth by satan and that new verses had canceled the old ones. The new verses, as they appear in the Koran, are: "Have you seen Lat and Uzza, and the third goddess, Manat? These are nothing but names you have devised."

The unbelievers must have deduced from this lapse that Mohammed's revelations were of human manufacture and his call was bogus. After this incident it must have taken all the resolve and powers of persuasion Mohammed could muster for him to have insisted on the legitimacy of his faith.

Mohammed was triumphant over the Koresh at the battle of Badr. He proclaimed that "Allah is with the believers." This slogan was hard to explain a year later when the Koresh routed the Muslims at Ohad, just outside Medina.

The battle took place March 21, 625. At first the 700 Muslims repulsed the 3,000-man Koresh army. However, a number of Muslim archers deputed to guard a strategic pass fell to plundering the fallen enemy, leaving their posts.

Seeing the opportunity, Khalid bin Walid, later a great Muslim general but at this time an unbeliever, attacked in the rear of the Muslim ranks, throwing great confusion among the believers.

Only the heroic defense by a few soldiers saved Mohammed. However, a missile broke one of his teeth and cut his lip. A blow from a sword drove the rings of his helmet deep inside his cheek, causing a deep wound. The cry, "Mohammed is dead," rang out in the battlefield.

Had the Koreshites persisted in the attack, Islam might have perished. However, the Koresh army, about 200 miles from Mecca and its lines stretched thin, retreated.

THE KORAN

After Mohammed's death someone asked Ayesha, his favorite wife, "What was the prophet's disposition?" She replied, "Thou possessed the Koran and readest Arabic. Art thou not an Arab? For the prophet's disposition is no other than the Koran itself."

Numerous passages in the book are linked to incidents in the lives of Mohammed and his followers. The evolution of the chapters parallels Mohammed's spiritual and intellectual development. Far better than the Hadith (recounting of Mohammed's sayings and actions) and the Tradition (sayings of his companions), the Koran offers a keen insight into Mohammed's psyche.

The alliteration and eloquence of many parts of the Koran is held by the believers to be proof of its divinity for Mohammed's illiteracy is well documented. However, eloquence was a widespread Arabic tradition.

Mohammed during his 23-year prophethood received a steady stream of messages through the angel Gabriel. On these occasions he would be entranced with his eyes shut. He claimed that in whichever direction he turned he would see the angel. His followers recorded the messages. Years after his death the revelations were compiled into the book called the Koran.

Curiously, the book is upside down. The early short chapters are in the last part of the book and the much longer chapters received after Mohammed went to Medina are at the beginning. The brief chapters are lyrical, creating a feverish eloquence that is sometimes transcendent. The 112th chapter is typical:

Qul Hu-Allah o ahad. (Say, "He is God, the one and only). Allah-us samad. ("God, the eternal). Lam yalid va lam yulad. ("Sirer of none, sired by none). Va lam yakullahu kufuvan ahad. ("And there is none like Him.")

Verses like these support the claim of uniqueness: "if you are in doubt as to what We have revealed, then produce a chapter like thereunto." (Chapter 2, line 23).

However, in the much longer and latter chapters this rhapsody is lacking. The longer chapters describe the earlier prophets, excoriate the infidels and comment on the believers' mundane affairs. They deal with the day-to-day exigencies. A large part of these chapters is a repetitious and chaotic mess.

This dichotomy leads to an obvious conclusion: The key goal of the earlier chapters was to win converts, hence the eloquence; when military victories had obviated conversion efforts the eloquence was abandoned.

A glaring contradiction concerns Mohammed's power to perform miracles. The Koran repeatedly says that Mohammed performed no miracles. "They (the unbelievers) swear that if a sign (miracle) came to them they would believe.

The Koran, however, shows a startling ignorance of or disregard for Judeo-Christian precepts. It says that Abraham, on divine orders, prepared to slay Ishmael, his son. The Genesis says the son was Isaac.

The Koran says (Chapter 4, line 157) that Jesus Christ was not slain or crucified. It calls Alexander the Great by his ancient name, Zulqarnain (the two-horned one), and hints that he was a prophet who received divine guidance.

Even the borrowings are convoluted. "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light," becomes "He said, 'Be,' and it is," (Chapter 2, line 117).

Mohammed died June 8, 632, around noon. Hs companions quickly dispersed. Shortly afterward they gathered in one of the chambers of the city of Medina where a bitter, loud and prolonged quarrel broke out among them. Some accounts say that the dispute lasted until the night. Mohammed's body lay unburied for about 36 hours after his death.

The quarrel was about the selection of a successor to Mohammed. The Koran does not encompass a law of succession.

Black vs. Arabic Muslims

By Rafat Habib

Most of Elijah Muhammad's teachings are being set aside by his son, Wallace, who acknowledges that many wrongs were committed in the past by adherents to the religion.

Wallace Muhammad is striving to bring his group closer to the orthodox Islam practiced in the Middle East. He has succeeded in winning over many converts from the Nation of Islam, as Elijah Muhammad's followers were called. The group headed by Wallace is reported to be growing stronger day by day.

The result is the steady weakening of the Nation of Islam, which is now headed by Louis Farrakhan, a lieutenant of Elijah Muhammad.

There are other splinter groups, the most famous of which by far is the Hanafi group based in Washington. The sect, which was headed by Khalifa Hamaas Abdul Khaalis, defies definition.

The Hanafi school, which is the most popular Muslim philosophy in the East, was founded by Imam Hanaf. The school's appeal lies in its moderation, which is distinct from the strict Wahabi ideology practiced in Saudi Arabia and the narrow Shafa'ai and Hanbali philosophies followed elsewhere.

Khaalis's group was struck by tragedy on January 18, 1973, when seven of his relatives were murdered in his Washington apartment. In addition, two other persons including Khaalis's wife were attacked and disabled.

The Hanafis blame Elijah Muhammad for the murders, citing Khaalis's anti-Elijah pamphleteering and propaganda drive. In articles published just before the murders, Khaalis had called Elijah Muhammad a charlatan.

Despite the apparent chastening by Wallace Muhammad, the Hanafis have refused to return to the Nation of Islam, saying they still object to many of the black Muslims' rituals.

The Chicago brand of Islam has several fundamental conflicts with the religion that sprang from Mecca about 14 centuries ago. Elijah Poole Muhammad's teachings are a far cry from Muhammad bin Abdullah's.

Islam's monotheism is hard to square with the Black Muslims' deification of W. D. Fard, also known as Master Fard Muhammad. Fard is credited with establishing the Islamic organization now based in Chicago. He disappeared in 1934. The Black Muslims observe his birthday, Feb. 26, as Savior's Day.

That no man is God is the irrevocable tenet of the religion that was born in Arabia. Islam rejects the deification of all prophets including Jesus Christ. Mohammed bin Abdullah repeatedly told his companions, "I am a man just like you."

There are other differences. Elijah Muhammad is known as the "Messenger of Allah." In the autumn of 1963, Malcolm X gave a speech at the Columbia University journalism school in New York City.

I was in the audience and asked him, "How do you reconcile your belief that Elijah is a messenger of Allah with the Islamic belief that Muhammad bin Abdullah was the last prophet?"

Malcolm, who at that time still followed Elijah, heatedly replied, "We don't care what you preach over there in the East. Where were you when we had 200 years of slavery in this country?" My question went unanswered.

Malcolm X later split with Elijah and called him a "racist." Elijah often said, "Black man is supreme; white man is the devil." He asked his followers to prepare for a black-white Armageddon.