

## Christianity in Pre-Islamic Times

Most scholars call the pre-Islamic time “The Age of Ignorance”. The term originated from the concept of religious ignorance; but as we examine the religious life in Arabia on the eve of the rise of Islam, it becomes apparent that the Arabs were not isolated from the rest of the ancient world and its civilizations. The sedentary as well as the tribal life of the Arabs in both the Southern and Northern regions of Arabia were exposed to the religions and cultures of the neighboring countries, especially in Yemen. Archeology has proved that Yemen had enjoyed a high standard of civilization and that Christianity and Judaism dominated the life of its residents before Islam. Yemen was filled with monasteries, churches and monks. After the collapse of the Dam of Ma’rib, many of its tribes immigrated to the northern regions, carrying with them their Christianity.

It is appropriate here to hint at the different religions that existed in Arabia before Islam, without elaborating or even examining them. These religions were:

1. Judaism
2. Hanifites
3. Polytheism
4. Zoroastrianism
5. Christian heresies
6. Christianity

But, since the purpose of this lecture is to discuss Christianity in Arabia before and on the eve of the advent of Muhammad, we will focus on three regions of Arabia in particular: Mecca, Medina and Najd.

In his book, *Islam and the Oriental Churches*, William Shedd alludes that “Christianity entered Arabia from three distinct geographical sources” (p.12). The first was Palestine and Syria; the second was Mesopotamia and Babylonia. From these two regions Christian influence had dominated almost all of Northern Arabia “from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf” (ibid. 13).

The third source was Africa, especially Abyssinia with whom the Himyarite Christians in Yemen allied themselves (ibid. 18-19).

### Mecca

Mecca was a commercial, religious and cultural center, highly respected by the Arabs. Caravans from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, China, and Persia came to trade with the Meccans. At the same time, Meccan merchants were accustomed to going to Syria for trading at least twice a year. Thus Mecca was vibrant with life and activities and merchants from everyway of life carried with them, besides their goods, their civilizations, religions and cultures. Islamic sources recount many trips Muhammad made to Syria with his uncle Abu Talib as well as after he was employed by Khadija, who later became his first wife. During these trips, it was said that he encountered Christian monks and other Christians. When his followers were persecuted in Mecca, he sent them to the Christian Abyssinian king to find refuge in his country.

Trade, however, was only one means of communication between Arabia and the outside world. Christian missionaries, Nestorians or Monophysites contributed significantly to spreading the religion of Christ in Arabia, as well as Mecca, Medina and other parts of Arabia.

It is believed that some of Jesus' disciples, such as Matthew and Thomas, had preached the Gospel among the Arab quarters in different regions of Arabia and Hijaz. The scholar Yusuf al-Sim'ani quoted a large number of the Greek, Syriac and Arab authors attesting to the zeal of these disciples to witness to the Arabs about the Gospel of Christ. Also, the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldun denotes in his *History* that Bartholomew made missionary trips to the land of the Arabs and Hijaz.

Since Mecca was in existence before Christ and revered by the Arabs who continued to make the pilgrimage to the Qa'ba, undoubtedly these disciples paid great attention to this city, which later became the birthplace of Muhammad. Arab historians like Ibn al-Athir, Ibn Khaldun and Abu al-Fida' recorded that the sixth king of the tribe of Jarham was called Abdul-Masih (the slave of Christ) Ibn Baqiah Ibn Jarham. Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani indicates that during the reign of this king the Qa'ba was under the authority of an Episcopal (Al-Aghani 13:109). In his *Akhbar Mecca*, al-Azraqi remarks that the pillars of the Qa'ba were designed with pictures of the prophets, among them the images of Jesus and Mary (ed. Wustinfeld, 110-112).

In his *History*, al-Ya'qubi (Leiden ed. 1:298) says, "Those who became Christians from among the quarters of the Arabs were peoples from Quraish from Banu Asad Bin 'Abdul-Izza, among them Uthman bin al-Huwayrith bin Asad and Waraqa bin Nawfal." Some scholars regard Waraqa as the Bishop of Mecca during the early life of Muhammad. He was also the cousin of Muhammad's wife Khadija and presided over her wedding. Al-Azraqi also states that the Christian cemetery was behind the Maqla' on the road of the well of 'Anbasa in Thi Tawa (p. 501). The Maqla' is the mountain that is down from Mecca at the right hand of whoever is leaving (Mecca) on his way to Medina (Yathrib).

Sheikho provides us with a list of Christians who resided in Mecca, who were well known among the residents of the city (*Al-Nusraniyah wa Adabuha Bayna 'Arab al-Jahiliya*, p. 120). Moreover, it is recorded in the *Book of Al-Kharaj* (ed. Th. Juynboll, 1896, p.53) that "The messenger of God...imposed on every Christian in Mecca one dinar every year." This implies that there were a number of Christians who dwelt in Mecca during the time of Muhammad.

### Medina (Yathrib)

The existence of Christians in Medina before Islam is not a matter of discussion anymore. Wellhausen claims that Medina was inhabited by Jews and Christians under the authority of Aramaic religious leaders (*Das Arabish Reich und Sein*, Strurz, p.4). H. Herenboug states that Christianity had various followers in the Arab Peninsula. Both the Ghassanid and the Lakhmid kingdoms dominated its northern border, while its central and southern regions were controlled by Yemenite episcopates (*Opuscles d'un Arabisant*, p. 16).

When Muhammad passed away, his poet Hassan bin Thabit eulogized him:

The Nasara of Yathrib and its Jews  
rejoiced when (Muhammad) was buried  
in a dug grave.

It is obvious here that the poet was talking about the Christians and Jews who lived in Yathrib.

In the ancient Calendar of the Caldanian Church, which was published by the priest Butros 'Aziz in 1909 (p.8) it was recorded that the Nestorians had assigned a Metropolitan to Yathrib in which three churches were established. They were called The Church of Ibrahim al-Khalil, The Church of Ayyub the Righteous and The Church of Musa al-Kalim. This account may be suspicious, yet other historical hints attest that Christianity existed in Yathrib from the early Christian centuries. The Islamic historian Ibn Abu Jarir al-Tabari quotes a tradition on the authority of the people of Yathrib that there was on the Mount of Aqiq a grave for one of Jesus' disciples in the neighborhood of their city (1:737-738). These traditions may be questionable, but some scholars, on the basis of some documents, claim that among the two major Arab tribes who inhabited Yathrib were Christians by the evidence that one of the leaders of the tribe of Aws was called Abu 'Umar the Monk (refer to Sirat Ibn Hisham, 561-562).

### Najd

A number of tribes embraced Christianity, such as Tay', Sukun, Sakasik, Kinda, etc. In addition to that, there were a number of monasteries such as the Monastery of Sa'd and the Monastery of Umru on the mountain of Tay'.

In part two of his book, Sheikho examines the Christian terminologies and the "vocabularies" that were in vogue among the Arab tribes, their churches, monasteries, feasts, and various other aspects of the Christian religion that were familiar to the Arabs in general and their poets in particular. Unfortunately the allocated time does not allow us to discuss the many facets of Christianity in the pre-Islamic time.

It is worthwhile, lastly, to allude that the terms "Christian" and "Christianity" were unknown to the Arabs. Instead, they used the terms "Nasara" and "Nusraniya". The origin of this term is very controversial. Only in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, during the reign of the Ottoman Empire, did the terms "Christian" and "Christianity" become known among Muslims.

## **Christian Arab Tribes In Pre-Islamic Times**

The following is a list of the Arab tribes that embraced Christianity partially or as a whole:

- Al-Azd
- Amru' al Qays (children of Ban' Amru' al-Qays from the Tribe of Tammim)
- Al-Aws
- Bakr
- Balli – a branch of Qada'a
- Bahra' – a branch of Qada'a
- Taghlib
- Tammim
- Tannukh
- Tha'laba – three branches of Tay'
- Jutham
- Jarm – from the tribes of Qada'a
- Jarham
- Al-Hadda' wa al-Simt – branches from bani Amru' al-Qays
- Al-Harith bin Qa'b
- Himyar
- Hanifa
- Al-Khazraj
- Rabi'a – includes seven other tribes that were majority Christian
- Al-Sakasik and Al-Sakun
- Salih – a branch of the Tribe of Ghassan
- Shayban – branch of the Tribe of Bakr
- Dubai'a
- Tay'
- 'Amila
- Al-'Ibbad – the inhabitants of al-Hira
- 'Abd al-Dar – a branch of Lakhm, lived for a period in Mecca
- 'Abd al-Qays – a tribe of Rabi'a
- 'Ijl – a large tribe from Bakr
- 'Uqayl – branch of Ghatfan
- Ghassan
- Farasam – from the Tribe of Taghlib
- Quraysh
- Quda'a – it is believed that the entire tribe embraced Christianity
- Al-Qayn
- Kalb
- Kinda
- Lakhm

- Mazin
- Mathhaj
- Ma‘ad – Syriac chronicles mentioned and listed the Christians of Ma‘ad and their episcopals
- Mahara
- Najia
- Al-Nakha‘ from Najran
- Al-Narm bin Qasit – a branch of Rabi‘a
- Yashkur – branch of the Tribe of Bakr