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CHRISTIANS IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

By Paul Stenhouse

This is the first of a series of five articles



NOT VERY MUCH of substance has survived – independently of the Qur’ān – that can throw light on many of the religious beliefs and practices of pre-Islamic pagan Arabia. Some proverbs, legends and poetry allegedly from this time have, of course, been written down by Muslim authors – but this was many hundreds of years later.

Of the period before Muḥammad – described as *Jāhilīyya*, or ‘Time of Ignorance,’ in the Qur’ān¹ – what was retained was only what was necessary to help make sense of references to pre-Islamic times in the Qur’ānic text, or in the accounts of Muḥammad’s life. While the text of the Qur’ān is regarded as unquestionable and normative, its descriptions of Jewish and Christian beliefs are ‘well-known to be gross travesties of those systems, [and] we have no guarantee that its treatment of Arabian paganism is any fairer’.²

A veil was thrown over the memory of pagan customs and rituals throughout Arabia, and particularly in Mecca, a hot and barren sanctuary with its Ka’ba, where Muḥammad

was born, and fertile Yathrib [to be known as Medīna an-Nabī, ‘city of the prophet’] where, in 622 AD, Muḥammad made his home, gained supporters and later died in 632 AD

Christians in Mecca

A similar veil obscures for most modern-day Muslims the significant Christian presence and practice in

Arabia before the birth of Muḥammad around 570 AD.

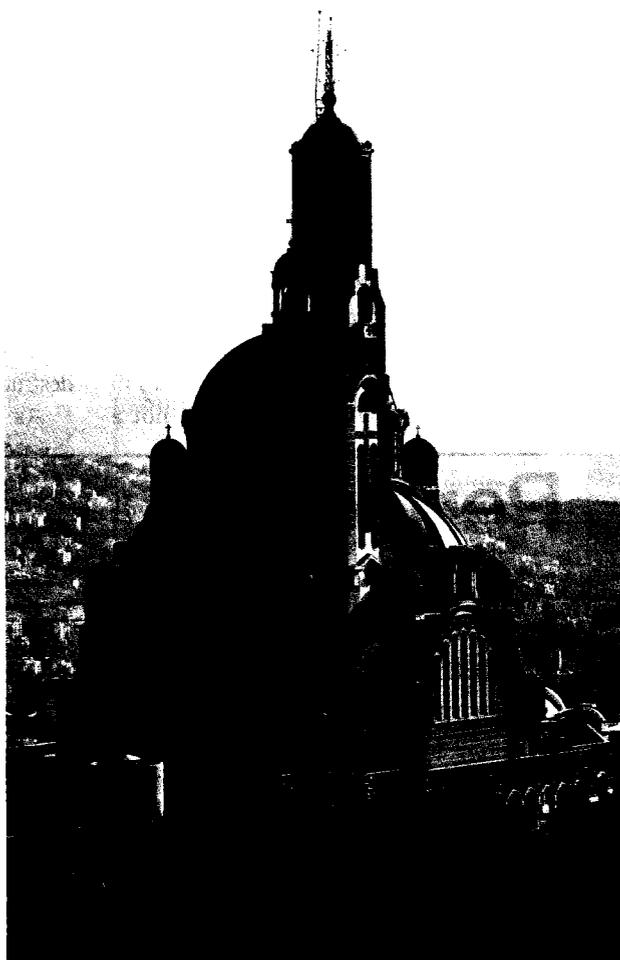
Large numbers of Christian tribes – the Kalb, Tamīmi, Taghlibi, Ayyūbi and many others like the Banu Nājiya – are known to have inhabited or moved around vast areas of Arabia in pre-Islamic times. Christian Arab merchants had been doing business in Arabia for centuries. The Christian tribe of the Banu Ghassan even had a stall close to the Ka’ba in Mecca because they were *ḥulafā*, ‘associates’ of the Christian Quraish clan of Banu Assad.³

Another Christian tribe, the Banu Ijl of Yamama in central Arabia and Hira in Mesopotamia, had their representative in Mecca from the Banu Bakr bin Wa’il tribe – Furat ibn Hayyan – who was *ḥalif* or ‘associate’ of the Quraish clan of Sahn.⁴

Non-Muslims banned from using Arabic ‘Muslim’ terms

How thoroughgoing this ignorance of a pre-Islamic Christian presence in Arabia is among our region’s Muslim populations was borne out by recent revelations that ten of Malaysia’s thirteen states had banned Catholics and other non-Muslims from using up to thirty-five Arabic terms.

Terms banned include the word *Allāh*, ‘God,’ *solat*



The Byzantine Rite Mekite Catholic Basilica of St Paul at Harissa Lebanon

[sic!] ‘prayers,’ and even *masjid* ‘mosque’. In the Malaysian state of Selangor, non-Muslims are barred from using twenty-five words either orally or in writing according to the Non-Islamic Religion Enactment 1988. Among these banned words are *Allāh*, ‘God,’ *Firman Allāh*, ‘Allāh’s decree,’ *solat* [sic!] ‘daily prayers,’ *rasul*, ‘apostle,’ *mubaligh* ‘missionary,’ *mufti*, ‘Qur’ānic lawyer,’ *iman* ‘faith,’ *Kaabah*, ‘Sanctuary of the Sacred Stone,’ *Qiblat* ‘direction in which Muslims pray’ and *Haji* ‘A Muslim who has made the pilgrimage’.

Selangor has also banned non-Muslims from using ten other phrases, among them *subhan Allāh*, ‘Praise God,’ *insya-Allāh* [sic!], ‘If God wishes,’ and *Allāhu akbar* ‘God is the greater’ orally or in writing.

‘Those found guilty of using such terms can be fined up to RM3,000 or jailed for up to two years, or both. Similar enactments are found in nine other states but not used in Sabah, Sarawak, Penang and the Federal Territory. Malacca, which does not have a sultan, has banned more words and phrases than most states.’⁵

Use of ‘Allāh’ by Christians before Islam Arose

Those responsible for all the foregoing enactments and for the ban on the use of *Allāh* by Catholics sanctioned by the Federal Court of Malaysia only recently, seem to be unaware of this centuries-old presence

Blaming Christians

NOTHING betrays more the bias of historians against the Christian faith than the fact that they blame in Christians the very human indulgences that they have praised in heathens. The same arts and allegories, the same phraseologies and philosophies which appear as proofs of heathen health turn up later as proof of Christian corruption. It was noble of pagans to be pagan, but it was unpardonable of Christians to be paganised. They never tire of telling us of the Glory that was Greece and the Grandeur that was Rome, but the Church was infamous because it satisfied the Greek intellect and wielded the Roman power.

— G. K. Chesterton, *The New Jerusalem*, London, Sheed & Ward, 1944, p.381.

of Christian tribes speaking Aramaic and Arabic in Arabia before Islam arose, although with blanket media coverage of the horrific violence in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and throughout the Middle East and Africa, and the targeting of Christian minorities there, this is difficult to comprehend.

The claim that *Allāh* is exclusively an Islamic word ignores Muḥammad’s father whose name was ‘Abdullah – ‘Servant of Allāh’. He was not a

Muslim. He died before Muḥammad was born; and depending on which year you take to have been his year of birth ‘Abdullah was either seventeen or twenty-two years old when he died. No matter how old he was, he died in 570, fifty-two years before the *Hijra* [AH] – when Muḥammad fled from Mecca to Yathrib – which marks the beginning of the first year of the Islamic era.

Most scholars accept that in all likelihood the Qur’ān is the earliest book written in Arabic.⁶

However, Origen Adamantius [writing sometime before 240 AD] says in the Introduction to his edition of the Hexapla, or the Bible in six translations, that he had also looked at an Arabic translation. Nothing more is known of this. It is thought to have been in Nabataean, and written using Nabataean script – for Arabic cursive script had not yet been developed.

North western Arabia – modern-day Syria and Jordan – was ruled by the ancient Arab Nabataean kingdom which had a trading network centred on oases that they controlled from the Euphrates to the Red Sea.

A Christian Arab, Marcus Iulius Philippus, known as ‘Philip the Arab,’ became emperor of Rome in 244 AD. He was born in AD 198 in a village now called Shuhba on the road from Damascus to Bosra the ancient Nabataean capital in southern Syria, in the district of Dara’a. Dara’a has been the scene of much death and destruction in recent years.

As for extant translations of the

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Bible into Arabic, all evidence points to a late 7th century date for the text of the Gospels in *Vatican Arabic MS 13*, and, with greater certitude, to an 8th century origin.⁷

The text of the Gospels in *Vatican Arabic MS 17*, copied in Cairo in 993 AD, always translates ‘God,’ and ‘Lord,’ as ‘Allāh’ [الله].

The oldest known *extant* copy of the full *Qur’ān* dates from the 9th century AD⁸

The *Mt Sinai Arabic Codex 151*, the oldest known *extant* copy of the whole bible translated into Arabic, also dates from the 9th century – from 867 AD – when, we are told, it was ‘done’.⁹

Does ‘done’ here mean ‘copied’ or ‘translated’? Many authors imply, and the unnamed author whom I’m quoting asserts, that this was the date of the translation. As I’ve not seen the colophon – the description at the end of a MS, often much ornamented, giving the copyist’s name, date and place of the copying etc – I can’t verify if this date is the date the text was copied by a scribe, or the date when it was translated and written by the author. Having worked for many years on Arabic MSS of Samaritan histories I can confidently say that it would be extremely rare to find such an autograph copy.

In this early Arabic Bible – the *Mt Sinai Arabic Codex 151* – ‘God’ is always translated by ‘Allāh’ [الله].¹⁰

We know, moreover, that ninety-nine years before the *Hijra* – in Najran in south Arabia in what is today Yemen, many hundreds of local Christian Arabs were murdered in 523 AD by the Himyarite King Dhu Nuwas who had converted to Judaism. Ten of his victims were called ‘Abdullah – a north Arabic name used as a Christian Arab baptismal name in this south western Arabian town.¹¹

One of the leading Christians murdered at that time – Abdullah bin al-Thamir – is said by Ibn Ishaq¹² to have worn a ring that said ‘Allāh is my Lord’ [ربي الله].

A pre-Islamic fragment of Psalm 78 [77] discovered in Damascus has the Greek text on one side and the Arabic text in Greek characters on the other. In this fragment, the Greek word for

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‘God,’ *Theos*, is translated into Arabic as ‘Allāh’ [الله].¹³

The earliest dated inscription in Arabic is on a Martyrion – a church or shrine containing the relics of a Christian martyr – built in 512 AD. Texts are in Greek, Syriac and Arabic. ‘God’ is referred to as ‘Allāh’ [الله].

Christian Cathedrals in Yemen

In addition to the *Ka’ba*, which is, as the name suggests, the *cube-shaped* former pagan sanctuary in Mecca

that Muḥammad made the centre of Islamic devotion and pilgrimage, there were two other *Ka’bas* in Arabia – one in the same Najran on the Sa’ūdī-Yemeni border where the Christians were killed by Dhu Nuwas, and the other in San’ā, the present-day capital of Yemen. Christian Cathedrals once stood on the sites of both these old sanctuaries.¹⁴

The earliest datable church to be built in the Roman Province of Arabia seems to have been in Umm al-Jamal, which today is in Jordan, about 10

km from the Syrian border. It was built in AD 345 – two hundred and seventy-seven years before the *Hijra*. Umm al-Jamal – the whole town was Christian – had fifteen churches from different periods, all now in ruins.

Of course many churches had been built before that, but not all the buildings bore a date or could be dated easily by other means.

In the third century Christians were very numerous among the Nabataeans of Idumaea. Nelson Glueck identified three hundred early Christian sites in the Negeb region of today's Israel, which was then part of Idumaea.¹⁵

A well-known tradition speaks of a mass-movement of 30,000 Saracens in the Ba'albek region of modern Lebanon who became Christians at this time through the activity of a priest from Antioch called Nonnus.¹⁶

Bishops from Arabia at Early Church Councils

In 325 AD – two hundred and ninety-seven years before the *Hijra* – the First Council of Nicaea met not far from Constantinople. Pope Sylvester was represented by his Legate, Bishop Hosius of Cordoba in Spain. Three hundred and eighteen bishops were present of whom five were from the Roman Province of Arabia as it then was: including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palmyra, and Arabia proper.

Among them was one, Bishop Pamphilos, of the Bedouin Arabs [Tāyyāyē] of Mesopotamia. This Council defined the Divinity of Christ, the Son of God against Arius, and fixed the manner for determining the date of Easter which Catholics still follow today. It also gave us the Nicæan Creed which we recite at Mass on Sundays and Solemnities.

In 381 AD – two hundred and forty-one years before the *Hijra* – the first Council of Constantinople met in Constantine's 'New Rome'. One hundred and fifty bishops attended, and at least four of them were from Arabia. Neither Pope Damasus I nor his Legates attended because of friction between the Emperor and the Pope. This Council defended the decrees of the Council of Nicaea

Real Dialogue

COME against you, not like so many of us, with weapons, but with words; not employing force, but reason; not out of hatred, but out of love.

– Peter the Venerable [1092-1156] eighth Abbot of Cluny, addressing Muslims. *Liber contra sectam Saracenorum*, Migne, PL vol. 189, pp. 673-674.

against the followers of Macedonius who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Pope approved the decrees of the Council *post factum*, and thereby legitimized it.

In 431 AD – one hundred and ninety-one years before the *Hijra* – the Council of Ephesus was attended by more than two hundred bishops, at least twenty of whom came from the Province of Arabia. Pope Celestine was represented by two bishops – Arcadius and Projectus, and a Roman priest, Philip. The Council Fathers declared Mary to be the Mother of God [Theotokos] and condemned the heresy of Nestorius the bishop of Constantinople, who was excommunicated.

In 451 AD – one hundred and seventy-one years before the *Hijra* – the Council of Chalcedon defined the two natures [Divine and human] of our Lord, against Eutyches, the 'Archimandrite' – an honorary title similar to 'Monsignor' in the Latin Rite – of a Monastery near Constantinople, who was excommunicated.

This Council was attended by Pope St Leo the Great and 150 bishops including at least twenty who were from the Province of Arabia three of whom represented nomadic Arab tribes. These latter were: John, Bishop of the Saracens, named John of the Tāyyāyē; Eustathius, Bishop of the Saracens, one of the signatories to the letter of the Bishops of Phoenicia to Pope St Leo the Great regarding the murder of Proterius of Alexandria in 457 AD; and John, Bishop of the Bedouin Encampments in the desert

between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea.¹⁷

Linguistic factors underlying heresies

Greek and to a lesser extent Latin were the languages of the Ecumenical Councils and of the Eastern, Byzantine Empire. Not all who attended the Councils from the Province of Arabia and whose mother tongues were Aramaic and Arabic, however, necessarily understood clearly what was discussed, and the theological subtleties of decisions taken. Also they were culturally not always at home with the superficially more sophisticated Greek speakers.

Many of them were men of simple faith, and after the Council of Ephesus, numbers – mainly of the Western tribes – embraced Nestorianism or what they called Nestorianism.

After the Council of Chalcedon some of them from the eastern tribes, with their followers, often led by personal loyalties, drifted into the Monophysite [sometimes called Jacobite] heresy – attributing one only nature to our Lord.

Christian Refugees from Persia in 339 AD

Around 339 AD persecution of Christians by Shapur II in Persia drove thousands of Christian refugees down the Arabian side of the Persian Gulf, preaching Christianity and establishing monasteries.

One such refugee – 'Abdisho, 'Servant of Jesus' – built a monastery around 390 on the island of Bahrain. The first known Nestorian Christian Synod was held in 410 AD and included delegates from Qatar and Bahrain.¹⁸

In the fifth century there was an extensive community of Christians mainly of the Tanukh tribe, in Hirta, west of the Euphrates and not far from Babylon.

In the third century, when many of them were still Catholics they had settled there following the fall of the Parthian dynasty in Persia, around

AD 225 – 397 years before the *Hijra*. This is what is sometimes called the Lakhmid dynasty after its tribal founder. Numbers of these Eastern Tanukhs became Nestorians after the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

St Moses, 4th century Bishop of the Nomadic Arabs

The Eastern Tanukhs had connections with the Western Tanukh confederation of tribes that ranged the deserts and territories from the Euphrates to modern-day south-western Turkey.

When the sheikh of the Western Tanukh federation died around 371 AD his wife, Māwiyya [Maria] assumed leadership of the tribes, and bested the armies of the Arian Byzantines. She fought them after they unleashed a savage persecution against the Catholics and especially the monks, in Alexandria, in Egypt.

Māwiyya eventually agreed to make peace with Constantinople on condition that a certain holy man, Moses, who lived in a nearby desert – probably Sinai – was consecrated bishop for her tribes. Moses refused Byzantine demands that he be ordained by Arian bishops. They had to send him back into the desert to be ordained by exiled Catholic bishops there. He is honoured as a saint by the Catholic Church. His feast day is February 7.¹⁹

Two Popes join hands across the centuries

In 740 AD – a little over 100 years after Muḥammad's death – the Holy Father Pope Gregory III [731-741] encouraged the Wessex-born monk St Willibald to leave his Monastery of Monte Cassino near Naples and help St Boniface who was his cousin, to evangelize the German tribes. To inspire the young Anglo-Saxon monk Pope Gregory held up St Moses, the holy bishop of the nomadic Western Saracen tribes, who died in the fourth century AD, as an example of zeal and courage.²⁰

In 2014 AD, the Holy Father Pope Francis [2013 and still reigning]

How Islam Survived

THE MIGHTIEST confederation of tribes in the vast steppe region between Syria and Mesopotamia [at the time of Mohammed] was the Kalb. The large majority of the Kalbites were Christians. They had more or less taken over the role of the former buffer state of the Ghassanids. They controlled the watering places and oases along the entire desert border as far southwards as the Hijaz. This enabled them to control the caravan traffic from the south and east, for their own benefit. Relations between the Kalbites and Mohammed had begun at an early date, and for this reason Islam found ready acceptance with them. Mu'awiya [the first 'Umayyad Caliph at Damascus] too had allied himself with this powerful tribe, among other things by marrying a Kalbite woman who gave birth to his son and successor, Yazid.

The Kalbites, however, in traditional Arab fashion, were irreconcilable enemies of the tribal group of the Kais who, not so long ago, had dwelled in Central Arabia but had gradually marched north. The Kaisites had embraced Islam rather late, and their Northern Arab ancestry contrasted with the Southern Arab origin vaunted by the Kalbites. In different times this contrast would have been sufficient to render the formation of a durable Arab state impossible.

Thanks to Islam's postulate of unity, however, the 'Umayyad empire was able to outlive the repeated crises born of tribal enmity, notwithstanding the support which several claimants to the throne obtained from the Kais. If, however, the central power of the new empire had remained in Medina, it would probably have perished – in spite of Mohammed.

— Kramers, *Analecta Orientalia*, Leiden E.J.Brill, 1956, vol.ii, pp.248-249.

in order to provide spiritual care for Arabic and Aramaic speaking Chaldaean Catholic refugees from Iraq and Syria who have fled to Australia, has just appointed His Excellency Archbishop Amel Shamon Nona, formerly Chaldaean Archbishop of Mosul in Iraq, to be Bishop of the Chaldaean Eparchy of St Thomas the Apostle, in Australia.

Māwiyya, Queen of the Arab federation of Western Tanukh Christian tribes would have been proud.



For all its length, this too brief survey of a Christian presence – Catholic [also called Chalcedonian or Melkite], Nestorian [also called Church of the East] or Monophysite [also called Jacobite] – in pre-Islamic Arabia has barely skimmed the surface. It offers a foretaste of what it is hoped will appear in a series of articles on pre-Islamic Arabia and Islam planned for *Annals* throughout 2015.

Next month: Understanding Islam II: Creating the vacuum Islam was to fill.

1. *Jāhiliyya* occurs four times in the Qur'an: Q3,154; 5,50; 33,33; and 48,26.
2. D. S. Margoliouth, 'God, Arabian, pre-Islamic' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, T & T Clarke, Edinburgh, 1913, vol.vi, p.247.
3. Ya'qūbi, *History*, vol. I, p.298 quoted J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic times*, Longman, Beirut, 1979, p.263. See also p. 260.
4. Ibn Ishaq, in the edition of Ibn Hisham: *As-Sira an-Nabawiyah*, Dar Ehia al-Tourath al-Arabi, Rue Dakkkache, Beirut, Lebanon, vol.3, p. 56.
5. See *Islam Today*, February 15, 2010.
6. Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 116.
7. *ibid* p. 127.
8. *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, Crone, Patricia & Cook, Michael, p. 3 Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977.
9. <http://www.arabicbible.com/arabic-bible/codex.html?showall=1>
10. Cf. scanned copy of first page of the Epistle to the Hebrews, in *Mt Sinai Arabic Codex 151*. See note⁶.
11. J. Spencer Trimmingham, *op.cit.* p.295. Also J. Ryckmans, *La persécution des Chrétiens Himyarites aux sixième siècle*, 1956, p.7.
12. Ibn Ishaq, : *As-Sira an-Nabawiyah*, ed.cit. vol.1, p.29.
13. Michael McDonald, quoted Rick Brown, 'Who was Allāh before Islam?' October 19, 2007, pp.9-10.
14. Alfred Guillaume, *Islam*, Penguin, 1982, p.10.
15. *Deities and Dolphins: The Story of the Nabataeans*, New York, 1965, p.527.
16. *ibid.* p.119, note⁴⁸.
17. Trimmingham, *op.cit.* p.118.
18. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Harper San Francisco, 1992, p.275.
19. 'De S. Moyses, Episcopo Saracenorum in Arabia.' *Acta Sanctorum*, Bollandists ed. 1657, Tomus 5, ii Februarii, pp.43-45.
20. Trimmingham, *op.cit.* p.99, note¹⁸.