

WHAT ARABIA OWES TO MOHAMMED

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THERE is an old Midrashic phrase "Beat the Gods that the priests may tremble (*Tanchuma Vaera*, S. 13, this is really what Mohammed had to do in order to reach his goal)." In spite of the fact that various diminutive epithets have been applied to Mohammed with regard to his becoming a religious teacher, to him alone does Arabia owe the greatest debt. If he did nothing more than cast out a number of the innumerable superstitions that existed in Arabia his name well deserves to be handed down to posterity.

The object of this paper will be to describe in more or less minute detail some of the superstitions of Arabia prior to the time of Mohammed. There is no doubt as records prove that Jews (Ibn Hish'am, p. 17; cf. also Muir, *Life of Mohammed*, p. xcvi) and Christians for a number of years fought vehemently against the gross superstitious idolatry practiced in that country and that as a result of their untiring zeal several of the Arabs accepted Christianity and others became followers of the Jewish and Mazian religion.¹ Although we are able to establish that in spasmodic cases an individual or a tribe was won over, yet the masses persisted in clinging to their superstitious practices.² So steeped were they in superstition during the period known in Arabic literature as the "Time of Ignorance" that necromancy was bound up with the minutest details of their daily life.

If we turn to the Kā'aba we find that it contained three hundred and sixty idols thus enabling the average Arab to worship a new idol every day. But in spite of these numerous idols we find that each individual tribe had its own special deity and each household

¹ Graetz, *History of the Jews*, Vol. III. p. 61.

² See Muir, *Life of Mohammed*, p. 521.

a family god worshipped as the Penates of old. In so great veneration were these family idols held that the first act of a traveler, either coming or going, was to prostrate himself before the household gods, offer up sacrifices to them and make a number of circuits about them. On one occasion a servant was sent by his master to offer up a cup of milk and butter to a family idol. After placing the offering before the idol the servant, according to instructions waited to see what would happen. He soon saw a dog run up, lick the milk and run away.

But even these numerous idols did not satisfy the worshipping nature of the pagan Arab. He needs must worship every white and beautiful stone, and where it was impossible to find such a stone he was so crude as to worship a hill of sand. Before departing on a journey the Arab would take with him four stones, three of which were to serve the purpose of a hearth, the fourth to be used as an idol. "The adoration of stones among the Ishmaelite says Ibn Ishak, "originated in the custom of men carrying a stone from the sacred enclosure of Mecca, when they went upon a journey, out of reverence for the Ka'aba; and withersoever they went they set it up and made circuits round about it as about the Ka'aba till at last they adorned every goodly stone they saw, forgot their religion and changed the faith of Abraham and Ishmael into the Worship of Stones."

Herodotus tells us that the Arabs had great reverence for stones.³ When stones were not available the Arab, while on the road, would worship⁴ any stones or heaps of sand that he found in the neighborhood. Can this be a remnant of the old Canaanites' custom against which the Deuteronomic code was issued?⁵ To Mohammed is due the great credit of abolishing these abominable superstitions from the mosque and daily life.⁶ If the prophet had accomplished no other reform than this his name well deserves to be enrolled with those of the great prophets and religious teachers.

In spite of the fact that Mohammedanism at the present time

³ Cf. Herodotus III, 8.

⁴ The Deuteronomic historian regarded the downfall of the people due to the erection of stones by Judah and Israel, 1 Kings, 23.

⁵ Cf. Deut. xii. 3; also xvi. 22.

⁶ There must have been a belief amongst the Semites that a stone was the habitation of a deity; cf. Gen., also compare the Greek boeclutus. The Phoenicians also worshipped stones in the temples of Melkart at Tyre; cf. Herodotus ii. 44.

is charged with being a loose-moraled religion, it is only after one has inquired into the condition of woman prior to the time of Mohammed, and that not from biased missionaries, but from the broad-minded native writers, can one really appreciate the new era that dawned for the Arabian woman after Mohammed's reforms had taken hold of the elusive east. Evils affecting sexual relations were deep-rooted in Arabia during the pre-Islamic period. Prostitution was recognized as a necessity, and was practised everywhere and perhaps legalized, as it seems to be to-day in a number of civilized lands as a necessary institution. Or, as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, where mistresses were very numerous. Polyandry was likewise universal. (Tafsir-i-a-Ahmadi, p. 257).

In a number of cases it is recorded that the husband himself allowed his wife to have illicit intercourse.⁷ This degrading practice was called Istibz and is explained by Lane in his Arabic-English lexicon as a kind of matrimonial connection practiced by people in the "Time of Ignorance." When an Arab found he had no male issue he was permitted to have recourse to the Istibza so that he might fulfill the great debt to his ancestors⁸ namely, the propagation of a direct line of descendents. Can this be the reason for Mohammed's innumerable marriages? (See Amoer Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, p. 338.) This custom is still prevalent in India to-day. (Dubois and Beauchamp, *Customs, Manners and Ceremonies*, Vol. II, p. 371.) On such occasions the customary wording by which the husband would inform his wife of his intention would be, "Send thou to such a one and demand of him sexual intercourse to obtain an offspring." The husband would then keep away from her society until she had conceived by the man indicated, but after her pregnancy became apparent he would return to her. This abominable custom originated from a desire to secure a noble seed (Kashfu'l Ghumma, Vol. II, p. 56). The Arya Samaj is still adhered to in India and claims its sanction from the Veda, but in reality the custom is only a remnant of the Istibza practised by the Arabs during the "Time of Ignorance." Of grosser significance is the Arya Samaj of India for it allows the practice even in cases where there is only a sensual motive. It is recorded that in Arabia the custom was prevalent only among the lower classes who were

⁷ *Mohammedan Jurisprudence*, Abdur Rahim, p. 7.

⁸ See Arya Samaj, an account of its origin, doctrines and activities, with a biographical sketch of its founder, by Sajpat Rai.

actuated by the desire for the birth of a noble offspring, while the upper classes were free from this degrading practice.

Another evil in those days was the "Law of Inheritance." If an Arab wishes he could make his bequest in favor of anyone he chose, even in favor of a stranger, leaving his own parents and kindred in want (Tafsi'r-i-Ahamadi, p. 60-1). According to Jewish law however if one said before his death, "This my son shall have no portion of my estate," or if he should chance to appoint a stranger as his heirs in place of his legal heirs this declaration is void for this would be against the prescription in the Bible (cf. B.B. 130a, 133b). Each one of the sons of the deceased would receive his share of the estate of his father or his mother except the first-born of the father who received a double share. Jewish law even allows a share to go to a son who was born after the death of his father (cf. Yeb. 67a). On the death of an Arab such property as had not been disposed of, together with his wives, was inherited by the son capable of bearing arms (Tafir-i-Ahmadi, pp 234-5).

The method of proving a wife's fidelity was another cruel and pagan practice. When an Arab was about to set out on a journey he would fasten a string to a tree or tie one branch to another. Woe betide the wife if on his return he should find the tie broken; he would immediately accuse her of unfaithfulness. If on the other hand he found the tie unbroken it proved conclusively that his wife had been faithful during his absence. This was termed the Ratma or Ratam. This Ratam was also employed as a remedy for fever. The superstition in this case being that the fever was transferred to the one who tied the Ratam.

Another method employed to find out the unchastity of a woman was by means of a horse. If a branded horse should by chance perspire under her husband the woman would immediately be accused of unchastity.

Such were some of the sexual evils that the prophet succeeded in abolishing. Drinking (See Lyall *Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, p. 146 seq. VV25-31) was another evil that sapped the strength and vitality of the Arab. All classes drank to excess, only the woman abstaining from this dire evil. Drinking bouts were quite the order of the day, and each household was well supplied with intoxicating liquors. It is recorded that when they ordered wine and other intoxicating liquors to be banished from the Arabian

household so many jars of intoxicants were broken that it flowed like rain-water in Medina.

Still another evil that weakened the Arabian character during the "Time of Ignorance" was gambling. The man (*Sura* ii216, and especially *Sura* V. 93f) who did not drink or gamble was regarded as a fool, and he who played most recklessly was looked upon as a great and generous man. When eulogizing a man the poet praised his drinking and gambling habits.

But to the modern mind the greatest of all evils was the burying alive⁹ of helpless innocent female children, a custom which still exists in India to-day (Dubois and Beauchamp, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Vol. II p. 65). This evil is recorded to have been customary in Arabia for a number of centuries prior to the coming of the prophet (W. R. Smith *Religion of the Semites* 465). The practice was common among all tribes, its origin was doubtless the high sense of jealousy, the political unrest and above all the unsettled state of government in Arabia. The upper classes fearing that their women would fall into the hands of the enemy, often entombed their young girls alive. When a girl reached the age of six or seven years she was dressed most lavishly by her father and then taken to the desert where he had already dug a pit (Fneytag, *Arabian Proverbia*, Vol. I, p. 229). At her father's request the child would look into the pit and the father, seizing (Koran *Sura* XVII, 33; cf. LXXXI, 8-9) this opportunity, would push her over the brink. The heart rending cries of the innocent child victim were soon stifled by the falling earth (cf. also Tiele—*Gehrich Relig. im Alterthum* I, 212, 240, Maspero *Peuples de L'Orient* I: 680).

A heart-rending story is told of such an incident. A man once came to the prophet and told him the story of the entombing of his only daughter in the manner described above. (One of the most touching Poems, where a father struggling with dire poverty desires to kill his daughter in the above manner, is "The Poor Man's Daughter." See Lyall, *Ancient Arabic Poetry*, p. 26.) She was loving and submissive and when he called her she came to him with great joy. He told her to follow him, which she joyfully did, and

⁹ The birth of a daughter was reckoned calamitous. See Koran *Sura*, 59-61. The reason for this custom during the J'ahileyyu was due to the frequent famines with which Arabia was afflicted through lack of rain and partly to a perverted sense of honor, fathers fearing that they would not be able to feed their daughters or else that they might be made prisoners of war.

he led her to a pit which he had already prepared. Holding her hand he threw her into the gaping tomb and even her pitiful cries did not move him. During the recital of this tale tears flowed from the prophet's eyes until his beard was wet. When the Arab had finished his tale the prophet commanded him to act righteously in the future.

It was also customary at a marriage to make an agreement with the bride that the girls she bore should be killed and spared alternately. In this case it was the mother who was responsible for the death of her innocent child. If a mother refused to part with her child the husband had a perfect right to divorce her. This ceremony was the cause of much joy and festivity. Relatives, friends and neighbors gathered to witness the pagan act. In India the Sattu or Widow burning caused equal joy. (Dubois & Beauchamp, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Vol. II, 361). The annals of Arabian superstition record cases where girls were either drowned or thrown from steep hills. With the coming of the prophet this abominable institution was banished once and for all from the pages of Arabian history.

The burial of renowned and generous Arabs was associated with a ridiculous ceremony called Baluyyah. In a pit beside the grave a camel with her forshank bound to her leg and her head thrown back, was left to die (cf. Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, Chap. XVIII). The death of the camel was indispensable if one wished to be led by a happy road into the other world. Those who had performed this pagan act, when they arose, would find a camel ready to convey them to the great beyond. In India there is a similar custom called the Godama. A dying Brahmin will present a cow to some other Brahmin so that when he arises he will find a cow waiting to convey him over the river of flame to Yamaloka (Dubois and Beauchamp, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Vol. II, p. 489).

It was also supposed that when the bones of the man had decayed a bird would come forth from his head, which was called Suda or Hama.

Another superstition that it might be well to record was the means employed to bring about rain. When a drought came upon the country in the "Time of Ignorance," bundles of Wshar and Sala-i-e, two kinds of plants, were tied to the tails of several bulls

and cows. The Jews, however, in Talmudic times would pray on Monday, Thursday and Monday when they had no rain. (There is however a story told about Honi ha—Me'aggel which is worthy of some notice. Ta'anith 23a). The animals were then driven up the mountain side and their piteous bellowing would be heard by the pagan spectators in the plain. Inasmuch as the fire resembled a flash of lightning the Arab took this as a sign that rain would be made to descend. This practice is frequently found mentioned in verse.

Like other pagan peoples the Arabs were not free from the evils of vengeance for murder. Should the murdered man belong to a powerful tribe and the murderer to a weaker, retaliation or the death of the murderer was demanded by his fellow tribesmen, and the customary blood-money was in most cases rejected. But when the tribe that sought vengeance was not powerful enough to enforce its will, a milder course was adopted. An arrow would be shot upward to reveal divine judgment, whether war or peace should follow, or in other words whether revenge or blood-money should be sought. Should the arrow come back stained with blood it was a sign from the gods that blood should be shed or in other words that there should be a tribal war. On the other hand should the arrow come back clean it signified that the gods wished a peaceful settlement. We can conjecture that the arrow came back clean except in those cases where it had been stained by the pious relatives beforehand. No doubt the Arabs adopted this custom as a strategic means of employing peaceful methods without disgrace. The heirs of the murdered man were able to accept blood-money without jeer of derision from their fellow men.

When an Arab was hungry he attributed it to the bite of a serpent, called *Şafar*, which was supposed to be lodged between his ribs. The modern man, with his knowledge of the human organism, stands aghast at such sheer nonsense, but the Arab attributed all natural conditions to supernatural powers. Most diseases were attributed to demonical powers, and as a remedy especially for madness all kinds of filth, or rotten bones, were tied about the sufferer's neck. The poets of the day very often eulogized this custom. It is recorded of a woman whose son had died in spite of the fact that he carried the prescribed charm about his neck that she said: "I made him carry filth but it did not benefit him and

surely lives cannot be saved from death." It is peculiar to notice that Rabbi Simon ben Jachai said, "a precious stone was worn round the neck of our Father Abraham, and every sick man who beheld it was restored to health." To account for chronic diseases the doctors said that the patient had stepped on a snake or other reptile and as a result was afflicted with the disease. One could hope for no recovery until the evil spirit had been compensated. I shall briefly describe the means of atonement.

A she-camel of clay was modeled and loaded with barley and dates. With the setting of the sun the camel was placed in a westerly direction in a pit. If on the next morning it was found that the camel had remained in the same position in which it was placed, it was concluded that the evil spirit was pacified. Their number, was then increased until the artificial camels were found prostrated on the earth.

It was customary that where one killed a snake some cow-dung (In India cow-dung is also used for purification and as a means for warding off evil spirits. See Dubois and Beauchamp, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Vol. I, p. 155) should be placed upon its head so as to ward off evil spirits.

A woman whose son died in infancy thought that by tramping on the body of a murdered man she would be able to ward off the untimely death.

If a man was lost and no trace could be found of him it was customary for those seeking him to find some secluded well and, looking into the water, call him by his name a prescribed number of times. If there was no answer it was concluded that the man was dead.

When one arrived on the outskirts of a city where there was a plague raging, it was customary to bray like an ass and wear a hare's bone as a charm against the evil spirits of the plague. It was customary to wear female ornaments as a prevention against snake bites.

The blood of the middle finger of a king was supposed to prevent dangerous complications setting in after the bite of a mad dog.

As if at a stroke these superstitions were all banished with the advent of the Prophet. When these reforms had once taken hold of Arabia, history shows us more civilized and more efficient people.