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Religion, Politics, and Power at the Birth of Islam

Translated by Joseph S. Spoerl

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I owe deeply felt gratitude
to my beloved wife,
who deleted excessive material,
relentlessly criticized inadequate formulations,
again and again expressed her confidence in me,
and counseled patience in the face of hostility from various directions.

Tilman Nagel

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Introduction

The Islamic perspective on Muhammad is fundamentally different from that of non-Muslim students of history, whether they be agnostics, atheists, or adherents of other religions. The latter all seek an understanding of the way of life of the man who, at the beginning of the seventh century, in the middle of Arabia, created a religious movement which, permeated by an aggressive war-like spirit, rapidly conquered large stretches of southwest Asia and North Africa, subordinating these regions to its own religion and creating a unique mode of governance. What are the identifiable preconditions of this event, what were the unpredictable, irreducible turning-points that influenced it? In short, the non-Muslim inquirer seeks the clarification and representation of an event of world-historical importance. This event is to be considered according to the methods of historical research that flow from a scientific world-view, and this means being content with findings that will always be provisional and revisable.

Provisionality and revisability, however, are impermissible in a Muslim representation of Muhammad's life. For Muslims regard him to be a man through whose proclamations, actions, and omissions Allah transmitted to humanity a final, unrevisable, and eternally true message. The Koran, according to Islamic belief, contains Allah's literal words to human beings, perfect and unadulterated, and the life of Muhammad, with which the proclamation of these words and the implementation of their norms is inextricably bound, must for this very reason indirectly bear the character of an eternally valid normativity. The words and deeds of the prophet of the Muslims must therefore be separated from the framework of the words and deed of human beings before and after him, not merely because they are determined by Allah – that is true of all creatures according to Islamic belief – but rather because Allah's legislative will is to be discerned in them. At least from the moment of God's calling, all aspects of Muhammad's life must be infallible manifestations of this legislative will; indeed, the pious tendency of Muslims to certainty in this matter inclines them to ascribe such sinlessness to Muhammad from birth on. This means, conversely, that all the norms that Muslims consider to be binding on them must have been exemplified by Muhammad, that is, one must be able to locate them in the Koran as the word of Allah transmitted [by Muhammad] and also in the traditional accounts of the prophet's life. The interest in knowledge for normative ends has therefore dominated Muslim discussions of Muhammad since the 8th century, and the question "what actually happened" ("*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*"), which can never be definitively answered, has been suppressed in favor of statements about what must have happened (*wie es gewesen sein muss*).[1] The demand for norms that

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must be authenticated through the traditional accounts of Muhammad's words and deeds has since then permeated every aspect of a Muslim's life, from the cradle to the grave. Every norm that is recognized as valid must, then and now, be derived from the Koran or from the life of the prophet in order thereby to be understood as an expression of the trans-historical legislative will of Allah.

Traditions regarding the life of Muhammad thus have to serve, alongside the Koran, as the authoritative source of the countless normative teachings of Islam. Because Muslims, too, cannot avoid changing times and living conditions, however, there must necessarily be changes in the content of the norms that are derived at any given time from these sources and that must be justified as the expression of the eternally valid and unchanging legislative will of Allah. But by no means do the historical traditions regarding Muhammad self-consciously present themselves as doing this. Rather, they are, on the one hand, bound tightly to the era of their origin and the milieu of ancient Arabia; on the other hand, they are manifold and multiform like real life, so that not infrequently a given norm and its opposite can both be deduced from them. The defenders of the one norm and the other both aim to establish their own interpretation as the only valid one. This gives rise to an arbitrary use of the sources, one that is driven by an interest in vindicating the preferred normative conclusion, and this approach involves a narrow and one-sided view that rarely does justice to the reported event: whatever does not fit with the normative prejudice [of the interpreter] is explained away. Of course, this is no way of refuting the argument for the opposing normative conclusion; for it relies precisely on the other portions of the tradition and explains away the parts that the other side takes to be decisive. Thus, for over thirteen hundred years, in a feud that flares up again and again, Sunnis and Shiites engage in bitter polemics regarding the normative substance of a few prophetic traditions; the question of how these traditions can be understood in the whole context of the history of Muhammad's life is never even raised. There is therefore no possibility of either conclusion being proven as exclusively true. For the motive driving the use of the tradition is precisely not the historical Muhammad, but rather the current need for certainty regarding the norm that is considered correct (see below, Chapter 13).

Claiming the right to satisfy this need in a comprehensive way, Islamic jurisprudence understands itself to be the appointed arbiter of the traditions regarding the life of Muhammad. Islamic legal experts recognized early on that this claim is eminently debatable. They devised formal procedures for the use of authoritative texts, namely the Koran and the *hadith*,[2] individual stories about Muhammad taken out of the chronologically organized historical narrative, in order to secure their logical consistency with a view to the normative content that was required in any given case – procedures that completely ignored the question of

the historical context of the transmitted material. Thus, one attempted to ascribe to the texts of the *hadith* different degrees of authority, which were based on the "truthfulness" of the respective transmitters, where "truthfulness" was defined by religious criteria. This method obviously led to furious debates. In order to maintain the logical consistency of the prescriptive teachings of the Koran, one developed the principle that [in the case of contradictory verses] the more recently "revealed" verse abrogated the older verse: Allah did not want to overburden his followers, so he led them step by step to the rules of his law; there could not have been any change in the religious and moral views of Muhammad, however obvious it might be from the sources that there was such a change. A standard example is the prohibition of wine drinking. In the late Meccan Sura 16, intoxicating drink is praised as a gift from God; in Sura 2, which stems from the early Medinan period, Muhammad recognizes the usefulness of wine, but warns that wine can also lead to sin, so that the harm outweighs the benefit. It is only in the late Medinan Sura 5, verses 90 – 92, that abstention from wine is commanded, because it incites hatred and division. From this formulation, the Islamic legal scholars deduced what they took to be the divinely given prohibition of wine, precisely because it abrogated the older and milder evaluation of wine.

In recent times, many Muslims have claimed that this chronological technique of comparing texts, practiced by Muslims for more than a thousand years, corresponds precisely to the historical-critical analysis of sources practiced by Western historians; they argue that it is therefore unjust to say of Muslim scholars that their approach to the life of Muhammad excludes this method. This assertion is, however, inaccurate, for the considerations concerning the abrogation of older divine sayings by newer ones serve no other purpose than to rescue the authority of the texts and thereby their unquestionable, eternal truth. A historical-critical analysis of those three Koran passages would proceed in a completely different way. It would have to take into account evidence from a broader range of sources which tell us that there was within Arab paganism a movement permeated by sophisticated religious ideas, the so-called *hanif* movement, with which Muhammad demonstrably sought to associate himself several years after the beginning of his mission, when his earliest pronouncements had shown a completely different religious orientation. To be sure, he did not wish to burden himself or his followers with the strongly ascetic tendency of the *hanif* movement, including its prohibition of wine-drinking. In Medina,[3] however, he began to conceive of his newly proclaimed religious practice as a true revival of a *hanif* movement allegedly founded by Abraham and sharply distinguished from Judaism and Christianity, and the condemnation of wine

drinking became an essential mark of the difference between Islam and these two other religions, in both of which wine played an important ritual role.[4]

Scientific historiography of course approaches the sources that are relevant to researching the life of Muhammad and the birth of Islam with the same questioning, factual view that it applies to testimony about any other historical event. After becoming intimately familiar with the contents of the sources, it has to formulate the appropriate questions and search for answers without consideration for religious interests or sharia norms. It must not be deflected from this path by vociferously expressed challenges by Muslims. For Muslims, as noted, the Koran and the traditions interpreted by sharia scholarship and its specialists are the quintessence of the knowledge that Allah has bestowed on humanity (cf. Sura 2: 32); beyond this there is for them, in principle, no "true" knowledge. Therefore, an explanation of the origins of the wine prohibition that draws on non-Islamic sources and that stresses motives in Muhammad that are not coordinated with the postulated law-giving intentions of Allah are not suitable means to an increase of knowledge: such an explanation could never lead to "true" knowledge, which moreover cannot anyway be achieved by human beings, but is independent of human intellectual efforts and exists purely as something bestowed by Allah. Historical-critical analysis applied to the life of Muhammad and Islam, from this perspective, produces nothing more than a watering-down, indeed, a falsification of "true" knowledge. "Because Muhammad's life expressed the manifested and experienced essence of Islam's message, getting to know the Prophet is a privileged means of acceding to the spiritual universe of Islam. From his birth to his death, the Messenger's experience – devoid of any human tragic dimension – allies the call of faith, trial among people, humility, and the quest for peace with the One." This is the perspective with which a Muslim living in Europe presents the life of Muhammad both to his fellow Muslims and also to non-Muslims in search of simple, plain maxims for living.[5]

"Devoid of any human tragic dimension:" a life which, because it passed in uninterrupted union with the Most High, never knew error, never took a wrong turn, never became ensnared in sin.

> Throughout the twenty-three years of his mission, Muhammad sought the way to spiritual freedom and liberation [from the compulsions of the ego? –T.N.]. He received Revelation, step by step, in the midst of the circumstances of life, as if the Most High was conversing with him in history, for eternity. The Prophet listened to Him, spoke to Him, and contemplated His signs day and night, in the warm company of his Companions or in the solitude of the Arabian desert. He prayed while the world of humans was asleep, he invoked God while his brothers and sisters despaired, and he remained patient and steadfast in the face of adversity and insult while so many beings turned away. His deep spirituality had freed him from the prison of the self, and he kept seeing and recalling the signs of the

> Most Near [namely, Allah – T.N.], whether in a flying bird, a standing tree, falling darkness, or a shining star.[6]

Everything that a Muslim is taught about Muhammad therefore leads immediately, directly, infallibly, to Allah. There is in all of this, to repeat, nothing sinful; with regard to him personally, there is no such thing. All prophets lived without becoming ensnared in sin. Adam, the first prophet, and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit; Satan had tempted them to do so, and they had to leave paradise. So teaches the Koran (Sura 2: 35f). Acquiring the knowledge of good and evil was, however, not connected to the violation of the prohibition. Instead at the moment when he was expelled to the earth, Adam "received certain words (of promise) from his Lord, and Allah turned to him again..." (Sura 2: 37; cf. below, Chapter 11). It is all merely a question of being prepared to accept Allah's guidance, not a question of sin – and who was more unconditionally open to Allah's guidance than his last prophet?

"Devoid of any human tragic dimension:" Not all Muslims are prepared to tacitly accept such an amoral way of regarding the life of the prophet as a series of events and deeds which is by definition "right" and thus praiseworthy and exemplary because it is brought about by uninterrupted divine guidance. In his book *23 Years: The Career of the Prophet Muhammad*,[7] the Iranian Ali Dashti (1896–1981) undertook to excerpt the most important textual sources without the sort of dogmatic prejudice that has to declare even the most repulsive atrocities, such as the massacre of the Jewish Banu Qurayza (cf. below, Chapter 10), as the fruit of an unwavering spiritual communion with Allah. Obviously, one cannot satisfy the demands [of this prejudice] without an occasionally embarrassing casuistry. Dashti freed himself from this. In his judgment Muhammad was a normal human being with all the strengths and weaknesses of human nature. Steadfastness and perseverance and loyalty in carrying out the mission that he considered himself charged to fulfill characterized him as much as unscrupulousness in the pursuit of power. According to Dashti, suffusing all of this with the miraculous light of direct divine guidance does no honor to Muhammad and does humanity no good either. It only serves to solidify the power of Islamic scholars who seize the legacy of the prophet and boast of being his loyal and zealous imitators, thereby forestalling any criticism of their words and deeds by their fellow Muslims.[8] Dashti's writings on Muhammad's career began circulating in Iran in 1973. Immediately after the victory of the Mullah-revolution in 1979, Dashti was imprisoned and tortured, dying of his wounds in 1981.

European scholars can – still?[9]— do their work without being hindered by religiously grounded truth claims. If they want to be true to their vocation as scholars, they can and they must gather what the various sources tell them

about their topic, examine these materials soberly and objectively according to the rules of their discipline, be transparent about the standards they are using in doing this, and present their findings in a context that is plausible and that takes into account the possible interpretations of the sources. In doing this, however, scholarship on the life of Muhammad has not yet completed its task. In addition to establishing what can be said about Muhammad and the birth of Islam according to the standards just mentioned, it must also elucidate the "second" life of the Muslim prophet, namely, the development and content of the doctrine of Muhammad. Only then will it actually become clear how the dogmatic view of Muhammad came about and why so many Muslims find it so difficult to overcome it, and indeed why some of them perceive it as outrageous impudence that anyone should expect them to overcome it.

These twenty chapters on the prophet of the Muslims undertake this task from Chapter 13 on and attempt to trace this topic into the present. Allah's Messenger himself worked from the beginning of his mission to be recognized by his followers as the sole transmitter of messages from the transcendent [realm]. The content of these messages changed profoundly after Muhammad had also begun to understand himself to be the prophet and proclaimer of the only valid belief system, formerly imparted to Abraham: to the tireless praise of the all-creating Allah was added the exposition of his legislative will. This [will] revealed initially only the rites with which Allah wished to be honored day by day, but extended in principle to all aspects of human life, which thus were to be subordinated to divine guidance. Allah and his Messenger, as the Medinan Suras state again and again, determine what is right and proper, and thus already in Medina was created the precondition for the triumph of the Muslim model for every community: in all of its manifestations, it must satisfy the eternal and unsurpassably true principles which, according to Islamic belief, were proclaimed for the last time in human history by none other than Muhammad. But not only that! He also realized [this ideal community] in Medina in unsurpassable fashion, and this in turn means that "Muhammad in Medina" is transfigured into the ideal against which every era after Muhammad must forever be measured. Thus, the Messenger and prophet of Allah, Muhammad, remains after his death the figure who towers far over all others in the political and religious life of Muslims, indeed, only after his death did he take on the superhuman dimensions that Islamic literature on Muhammad never tires of depicting in its efforts to do justice to history. Those who concern themselves with the life of Muhammad must learn to distinguish this second life from the first and must understand how the second life developed out of the data of the first.

The environment in which Muhammad grew up and acted was shaped by the religious, political, social, and moral customs of the ancient tribal culture

of the Arabs. Although the message that he proclaimed was addressed to all human beings and thus in principle judged human beings regardless of clan or tribal affiliation, the prophet of Islam remained enmeshed in the unwritten maxims of his tribal society throughout his entire life. They determined his practical-political *modus operandi* – a contradiction that Islam inherited. The conflict which broke out in the 8th century over the privileged status of the Arabs as the people of the Messenger of Allah vis-à-vis other Islamic peoples, still ongoing today, is one aspect of this contradiction. Another is manifested in the often invoked, specifically Muslim sense of solidarity; it regards non-Muslims as people who, because they do not "belong," are obviously to be assigned an inferior legal status – the Islamic community appears as a super-tribe with special privileges that are withheld from those who stand outside of it. Human beings as such do not possess inalienable rights; human beings possess rights only thanks to membership in Islam, as is made clear by the "General Islamic Human Rights Declaration" published in 1981 by the "Islamic Council for Europe," a viewpoint that was reinforced by the 1990 "Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam."

If one wishes to understand the fundamental conflict that runs throughout the life's work of Muhammad, it is essential that one inform oneself about his position within the tribal system that remained valid in his lifetime. Knowledge of this position is not only of genealogical interest, but more importantly, it makes clear the possible range of actions within a social order that was shaped by certain religious ideas and by the politics of clan and tribe. The unifying and dividing impulses of this social order were understood as the unavoidable result of blood relationships; they defined the group membership of the individual and therefore also determined who his friends and enemies were and, last but not least, what his religious duties were. The movement of an individual or of an entire clan from one solidarity-community to another was possible under certain conditions and a few cases of this are documented. In general, the staying power of tradition was so strong that the new integrating factors, the tribe-transcending religion and the jihad, were not able to vanquish solidarity based on blood but were only able to complement it. To assist the reader who is trying to follow the thread of the narrative, and to avoid repetition of this basic information about a culture that is foreign to the reader, I decided to write a brief excursus, [included in this translation as Appendix 1], entitled "Muhammad and His Position in Ancient Arab Genealogy." This should especially make the reading of the first chapter easier. To understand the historical figure of Muhammad, we must understand the extent to which he was, in his words and deeds, an interested party, that is, to what extent there was in his person a conflict between the clan interests to which he knew he was obligated and the universal-religious aspects of his message. The historicity of the prophet becomes tangible, histor-

icity in a double sense: 1. He *actually* lived and is no bloodless construct of an obscure near-eastern religious sect, as has recently been claimed.[10] 2. He actually *lived* and was not merely the medium of an eternal-unchanging law ascribed to the One [God].

Chapter 1: Mecca

> That the Quraysh may bring together, may bring together the caravan journey of the winter and the summer, for this they shall worship the lord of this house, who gives them nourishment against hunger and security before that which they fear! (Sura 106)

Islam, a "Religion of the Desert"?

In the clear nights of the desert, undisturbed by the affairs of the day, the starry heavens make an overwhelming impression, and the human observer is overcome by feelings of awe before the powerful One. How great, how sublime is He, whose work proclaims itself at such moments in all of its incomprehensibility! He is so great and so sublime that any comparison of His nature with earthly categories, within which human standards are necessarily imprisoned, is totally forbidden. *"Allahu akbar*, Allah is incomparably great:" this insight grips the night-time observer with irresistible force. *"Allahu akbar!"* – the greatest doctrinal truth of Islam, indeed the core of this faith, animates every dogmatic speculation and eludes any [critical] reflection. "Islam" is the experience of the smallness of anything earthly before the One, and nowhere is this experience more compelling than in the desert at night: Islam is the religion of the desert. One often reads, and even more often hears, this idea or something like it, above all from civilization-weary intellectuals in whose fantasy the desert is a place of unblemished purity and crystal-clear vision unobscured by any human works. The Creator and Preserver of the universe, and the nullity of the human being – a chasm whose depth cannot be plumbed with human concepts but can only be acknowledged with deep awe and reverence.

The glorification of the desert and its dwellers, the Bedouins, to whom one ascribed a character unspoiled by the comforts of civilization, began already in the ninth century in the metropolitan centers of the still-young Islamic empire. It made its way to the educated classes of Europe in the Romantic era and implanted in them the prejudice that the "desert religion" of Islam is dogma-free religiosity in itself, with which all of humanity can agree. No one expressed this idea, which converts today are fond of citing to justify their conversion, more movingly than Goethe: Abraham long ago acknowledged "the Lord of the stars"; "...Moses in the distant desert / became great through the One ... And so must the law appear / that Muhammad imposed; only through the concept of the One / did he conquer the world," he waxes enthusiastic in a poem found in the posthumous

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portion of his *West-eastern Divan*. No wonder a zealous, recently converted Muslim has declared Goethe in a *fatwa* to be a fellow Muslim![1]

In any case, Muhammad's allegedly unmediated experience of God is also an indubitable fact for the vast majority of Muslims, who know nothing of European literature and just as little of the polemics of their new Western co-religionists. We will discover the reasons for this later. By directing our attention now to the historical record, we will quickly see that Islam is nothing less than a desert or Bedouin-religion. Far from emerging out of a civilizational no-mans-land, it shows itself as being connected in many ways with the religious and secular history of the Near East.

Mecca: A Place with No Secure Basis for Life

Sura 106, one of the earliest sections of the Koran, gives information on the living conditions that form the background for Muhammad's actions. Allah, the lord of the Kaaba, deserves thanks and reverence for ensuring the security of the Quraysh, Muhammad's tribe, and for protecting them from hunger. In the Koran, Muhammad repeatedly refers to the precarious situation of Mecca, the dependence of its residents on the importation of foodstuffs. The Meccans object to Muhammad's demand that they comply with his message: "If we follow you with the correct guidance, then we will be torn from our home!" He replies with soothing words from Allah: "Have we not guided them to a secure sanctuary, to which through our action fruits of every sort are brought as nourishment?" (Sura 28: 57). Shortly before his flight [from Mecca] in 622, Muhammad threatened his fellow Meccans: "God shows you a parable: There is a town that lived in complete security and drew its provisions abundantly from every place – but it did not thank Allah for his blessings! So Allah let it taste what it is like when hunger and fear overpower it" (Sura 16: 112). Moreover, for Muhammad it is absolutely clear that the Meccans owe their unusual position to the prayers that Abraham once addressed to Allah: "Our Lord, I have settled some of my descendants in a valley without cultivation near your holy house! Our Lord, they shall carry out the ritual prayer! Incline the hearts of some people towards them and nourish them with fruits! They will hopefully thank you for that" (Sura 14: 37).

What these Koran verses tell us is clarified and expanded by traditions about the market and pilgrimage customs on the Arabian Peninsula. In pre-Islamic times several localities competed for the favor of merchants and pilgrims. Commerce and religious cult in many ways went hand in hand. Both could be carried out in a tribal society only if unwritten rules were observed. If the pilgrims and merchants were to get to their destinations, they had to be able to travel through

the territories of foreign tribes unmolested. At specific times of the year, in the relevant regions, feuds could not be pursued; escorts were organized [to guarantee safe-passage]. A complicated, easily disturbed framework of reciprocal obligations between the tribe on whose territory the pilgrimage site or market was located and the others, without whose agreement caravan traffic would have been impossible, determined the ancient Arab "domestic politics." The order guaranteed by these means was of course highly unstable; rash actions by individuals, committed in the thoughtless pursuit of material interests or to restore damaged honor, constantly threatened it. In addition, the attempts by the Byzantines and Sassanids[2] to increase their influence in Arabia by using the ambition of a few clan leaders had a destabilizing effect.

A tradition recorded in early Islamic times gives us information about the caravan traffic in ancient Arabia that was based on the solar calendar. In the northern part of the [Arabian] Peninsula, the market of Dumat al-Jandal fell in the third month of the old Arab calendar year, which, with twelve months, each of which was measured from new moon to new moon, and comprising 365¼ days, roughly agreed with the solar year. A few tribes whose territory lay in the vicinity were customarily responsible for the safety of visitors during the relevant days. Merchants who travelled from the Hijaz or Yemen trusted themselves to one of the escorts organized by the Quraysh, which guided them through the territory of the Mudar Arabs; the Quraysh regarded themselves to be the most excellent of the descendants of a man named Mudar, whom they declared at least in Muhammad's time to be the most noble of the offspring of Ishmael. We will have more detailed things to say about this later. Dumat al-Jandal itself, as long as the market was underway, stood under the control of a so-called "king," who belonged either to the princely house of the Ghassanids, who ruled in what is today Jordan, or to the south-Arabian tribe of the Kindites. The latter had attempted in vain in the sixth century to bring all the tribes of the peninsula under their rule, which amounted no more and no less to attempting finally to put an end to the problem of feuding, which disturbed the social order and made caravan commerce extraordinarily difficult. The "king" had the right to put his goods up for sale first and to collect a tithe of all the other commercial goods. Markets operated from the sixth to the eighth months in a few coastal localities on the Persian Gulf. The Sassanids, to whom Arabia for purely geographical reasons could not be a matter of indifference, attempted to install "kings" agreeable to themselves; for example in al-Musaqqar in the region known today as al-Ahsa' [they installed as ruler] a member of the Banu Tamim. – We shall encounter this tribe again in connection with the Quraysh and Muhammad. – There was no "king" in as-Sihr on the Indian Ocean; thus there was no tithe to pay, but instead it was necessary to pay for an escort. In Yemen, which in Mu-

hammad's lifetime was in part ruled by a Sassanid expeditionary force, one did have to pay the tithe, but was spared the expense of hiring an escort. Finally, at the beginning of the eleventh month the market was open for business in 'Ukaz north of al-Ta'if; at the beginning of the twelfth month one set out for the marketplace of Du Magaz, then travelled from there a short time later to Mecca to complete the pilgrimage rites there and at a few other places in the immediate vicinity.

This somewhat idealized depiction of the ancient Arab market practices, which describes conditions at the end of the sixth century, allows us to understand why Muhammad exhorts his tribe to give appropriate thanks to the "Lord of this house." The Quraysh owed their survival to their successful participation in this venerable but precarious political framework, which in addition was repeatedly exposed to tensions caused by interventions by the two great powers with an interest in Arabia – Sassanid Iran and the Byzantine Empire. The sources assure us that the Meccans were no one's subjects; but that does not mean they were spared attempts to exert influence [over them.] On the contrary, the rivalry between the two great powers sowed division between the Quraysh clans, and [this rivalry] was one of the established facts that affected the life of Muhammad, leaving traces in his preaching, as we shall see. First, however, we must keep our focus on pre-Muhammadan Mecca and review what the sources tell us about the efforts by the Quraysh to ward off "hunger and fear."

Settlement on Holy Ground

Tradition tells us that, five generations before Muhammad, several clans of the tribe of Quraysh, led by a certain Qusayy, settled in the sacred territory surrounding the Kaaba. The other pilgrimage sites of Arabia that we know of were not inhabited places. If necessary a few custodians were permanently present. But, we are told, Qusayy had stone lodgings erected directly adjacent to the Kaaba, a violation of tradition. Allah, the divinity who was worshipped beside others at the sanctuary, became the special protector of the Quraysh, who called themselves "Allah's people." The pilgrims who completed the ritual circumambulation of the shrine understood themselves to be the guests [of the Quraysh] with the right to claim protection from them. It is impossible to say whether these ideas were actually presented by the Quraysh at the time of their usurpation of the shrine – for that is what it was – or whether they were conceived only later to justify this transgression of the customary practice. In any case, in the lifetime of Muhammad, this was considered to be the truth, as the Koran verses presented above make clear. Moreover, people believed at the time that there was

a special relationship between the Kaaba and Jerusalem; one prayed standing before the southern wall of the Kaaba facing north, in the direction of Jerusalem. One of the threatening speeches in the Koran against the Quraysh can only be interpreted in one way, if the Quraysh were convinced of their connection to Jerusalem. Muhammad places the relevant words in the mouth of Moses: Twice, Allah has decreed, would the Israelites transgress against him, the creator; the first time is in the past, [when] they were driven from their homes, but with Allah's help, were allowed to return. If "you," the Quraysh, "do good, you do good for yourselves," Muhammad continues; otherwise enemies will "enter the place, as they did the first time" and "destroy completely what they have seized" (Sura 17: 7). This proclamation could only make an impression on the Quraysh if they referred this second destruction to Mecca. We will encounter again much later this idea that the Kaaba, allegedly founded by Abraham, is a sort of branch establishment of Jerusalem. We note in passing that the Byzantine church historian Sozomen, who came from the vicinity of Gaza and wrote in the fifth century, reports of pilgrimages to the tomb of Abraham in Hebron; Arab pagans as well as Jews and Christians participated in these pilgrimages, the Arab pagans bringing sacrificial animals and abstaining from sexual intercourse during the festival days – customs that one encounters again in Mecca. Sozomen also notes that the Emperor Constantine (r. 306 – 337) put an end to the veneration of Abraham in Hebron due to its unchristian character. Qusayy himself, to return to him, spent the first part of his life in the region of Tabuk, which lies in the Arab regions south of modern-day Jordan that formed the border zone between the Hijaz and the Byzantine Empire. Qusayy's father Kilab, whose genealogy is traced in a direct line back to Ishmael, died shortly after the boy's birth; his mother then entered a marriage with a man from the tribal federation of the Quda'a, which lived in the same region. As a young man Qusayy made his way to the Hijaz, where he married into the clan that at that time was in charge of the cult surrounding the Kaaba. This clan belonged to the tribe of the Khuza'a, whose genealogy had no connection to Mudar and who therefore could claim no descent from Ishmael. "As the sons (of Qusayy) increased, their wealth grew and their reputation rose, his (father-in-law) died. Now Qusayy saw that he (due to his descent from Ishmael) had a greater right to the Kaaba and Mecca than the Khuza'a and (their allies) the Banu Bakr (b. 'Abd Manat b. Kinana), [he saw] namely that the Quraysh represented the branch of the purest descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham." Qusayy gathered men from his tribe, persuaded a few others to join them, and occupied the Kaaba, but to hold it, he had to take up permanent residence in the sacred zone surrounding the shrine, in which the use of weapons is forbidden. His precarious position prevented him from joining in the customary pilgrimage practice of traveling out of town to

the locale of ʻArafat after completing the rites at the Kaaba. Qusayy rationalized this unusual practice by asserting that [he and his clan] were "Allah's people" and did not worship other deities.

In Muhammad's day, the Meccans connected a number of further distinctive aspects of their daily lives to Qusayy. Thus, he was said to have erected the boundary markers of the sacred territory and the "house of deliberation." As the Quraysh saw it, in the era of their "founding father," the Khuza'a had spoiled the true Kaaba cult, which Qusayy was thus justified in taking over. [The Khuza'a] had to forfeit this office. It was a different matter with the ritual activities that we read about outside of Mecca, which remained under the control of the former custodians, but ones who did not belong to the Khuza'a. However, an important part of the rites, the opening of the route from ʻArafat to Muzdalifa, passed to a clan of the Banu Tamim after the family that had occupied this office died out; the Banu Tamim were an important tribe with many branches, especially in northeastern Arabia. Qusayy was said to have divided control over Mecca's internal affairs among six offices, which were allowed to be occupied only by his descendants; all other Quraysh clans were excluded from them. At least, this is what we are told, and it is clear that this assertion reflects the clan rivalries that we will consider in the next chapter. Three of these offices relate directly to the pilgrimage, namely the gatekeeper of the Kaaba, the feeding of the pilgrims, and providing them with water. The remaining three can be interpreted as the beginnings of an institutionalized exercise of power: leading the consultative assembly, bearing the war banners, and exercising high command in war.

However, there was one office that was highly important for the orderly unfolding of the pilgrimage and that remained outside the control of the Quraysh, namely, the determination of the leap-month. If one calculates the 12 months of the year precisely according to the phases of the moon, as was customary in pre-Islamic Arabia, then one arrives at a total of only 354 days. But the date of the pilgrimage, as noted above, was linked to the solar year, so at regular intervals a leap-month had to be intercalated [or inserted into the calendar]. The details of this [intercalation] had to be proclaimed each time at the Kaaba. But above all, they had to be spread abroad outside of Mecca, because people had to know when the sacred months began, when it became possible for pilgrims to travel to and from pilgrimage sites without being subjected to attacks by highway robbers. Near the end of his life Muhammad would condemn the leap-month as a remnant of polytheistic darkness (Sura 9: 37). In an Islamized Arabia only the pilgrimage to Mecca remained permissible; if its date according to the lunar calendar shifted through the solar seasons, then the system, sketched above, that had once prevailed across the peninsula would collapse; Mecca would have no competition – assuming it could hold all of Arabia under its power.

On the History of War in Pre-Islamic Mecca

But let us return to pre-Islamic conditions! There were tribes that cared nothing about the sacredness of the Kaaba or the pilgrimage to it; they could be attacked even during the sacred months. The distinction between "sacred" and "profane" thus had the correlative meaning of respecting or failing to respect the Quraysh claims to power and the Meccan cultic praxis that was traced back to Abraham and Ishmael. The tribes that did not participate were called "the profaners"; religion and politics were tightly bound together. To hold their own against "the profaners," it was necessary to have a military force composed of more than just the Meccan clans. The first attempts to form a sort of protective force are attributed to ʿAbd Manaf, a son of Qusayy. He gained the support of a tribal federation named *Ahabis*, whose founder was not a Quraysh but was thought to be closely related in his genealogy to the Quraysh. From this time on, the *Ahabis* formed the core of the Meccan military force, and they also distinguished themselves later in the battles against Muhammad and his followers after they had been driven to Medina. When he took control of Mecca, Qusayy was able to count on the support of Quda'a, the tribe into which his mother had married after she was widowed and in which he had grown up. ʿAbd Manaf lacked such support, so it was a significant advantage for him to be able to enter an alliance with the *Ahabis*. This secured for him access to Tihama, the coastal plain along the Red Sea, through which important trade routes ran. – Shortly after his arrival in Medina, Muhammad will stake everything on disrupting these routes to the detriment of Mecca. – To the *Ahabis* belonged two Mudarite clans, which would later be absorbed into the Meccan-Quraysh clan of the Banu Zuhra b. Kilab; furthermore, the Khuza'a clans would play a role in their affairs, the Khuza'a of course being the former lords of the Kaaba. Traditions report that the Quraysh together with the *Ahabis* strove to impose peace in the Tihama, which they succeeded in doing after lengthy and eventful battles. The names of the Meccan participants show that these events lasted into the youth of Muhammad.

The so-called *figar* wars also occurred in these decades, battles which, if one follows the common etymology, were caused by violations of the duty to refrain from violence during the sacred months. Thus, the prince of Hira, a vassal of the Sassanids, had hired a leader for the caravan that he wanted to send to the market of ʿUkaz. A man from the tribal federation of the Qais ʿAilan, in whose sphere of influence that locality lay, had offered him his services but had been rejected. The spurned man got his revenge. He lay in ambush for the caravan from Hira and killed its leader. Word spread of the atrocity in ʿUkaz, which was filled with Qaisites, since the pilgrimage was about to begin. Commercial activity came to a halt due to fear of fighting between them and the Quraysh, whose in-

tervention was expected due to the proximity of the Meccan pilgrimage season; it finally was settled that a year hence the Quraysh and the *Ahabis* would challenge the peace-breakers to combat. Extensive but confused traditions, focusing more on details than on the overarching narrative and thus allowing no clear summary, depict the fighting, which did not end well for the Quraysh. At the end both parties calculated the blood money that was owed and it turned out that the Meccans had to pay considerable sums. Until they had done so, they had to hand over hostages. One of them was Abu Sufyan b. Harb, a grandson of the respected ‘Abd Shams; he in turn had been one of the sons of ‘Abd Manaf, [the sons] whose rivalry forms a core theme in the history of Mecca and is directly connected to the life of Muhammad. A further striking aspect of his fate is also clear from the reports on the *figar* wars: the Quraysh rivalry with al-Taif, in whose sphere of influence ‘Ukaz lay. The Banu Thaqif, who at that time controlled al-Taif, probably supported the Qais ‘Ailan in the *figar* wars.

Peaceful Attempts to Extend the Influence of Mecca

These wars ended by 590. Around this time several Quraysh clans concluded a treaty in which they bound themselves to prevent the cheating and robbing of foreign merchants on their territory. The sources narrate scattered accounts of such crimes; Qusayy himself, no less, was said to have laid the foundation of his fortune by plundering an Ethiopian merchant on his way home from Mecca. This was far in the past. In the meantime, many Quraysh clans had become convinced that the security of merchants and the inviolability of their property were necessary conditions for the prosperity of Mecca. When a member of the Quraysh clan of the Banu Sahm attempted to defraud a foreigner who had no one in Mecca to protect him, the clans of the Banu Hashim and Banu al-Muttalib, both descending from ’Abd Manaf, together with the Banu Zuhra b. Kilab and the Banu Taim b. Murra, swore that they would from that time on always stand up for victims of injustice and ensure redress for them. In other words, clan and tribal solidarity had to give way to a generally valid principle of equity. This “confederation of eminences” was concluded in the house of ‘Abdallah b. Jud’an of the Banu Taim b. Murra, one of the wealthiest Quraysh in those days, who incidentally was a *hanif*, that is, an Arab who practiced a more religiously and morally profound version of paganism. As a member of the Banu Hashim, Muhammad was included in this confederation, and later, long after he was known as a prophet, he is reported to have said that he could hardly think of anything more splendid than his presence at this event. Of course, the parties to this agreement would have had no occasion to mention his presence there,

if in fact he was present; he was at that time a poor man, and merely being a descendant of Hashim would not have outweighed this disadvantage. We find in the Koran repeated exhortations to be honest in commercial dealings (e. g. Sura 6: 152; Sura 83: 1– 3), which shows agreement with the principle behind the "confederation of eminences." The "purification payment" (Arabic: *az-zakat*), a donation for the atonement of illicitly acquired wealth, adopted by Muhammad shortly after the beginning of his mission as a prophet, was the religious transformation of a principle that had long before penetrated into the pagan Arab milieu and which transcended the principle of clan solidarity.

Oath-based and tribal confederations were the most important institutions by which to achieve socially useful goals, goals that required the renunciation of short-term selfish interests in the service of a higher purpose. Their awareness of this is what made the Quraysh, who organized "the caravan journey of the winter and the summer," more advanced than the tribes who lived by posing a potential danger for such enterprises [i. e. by raiding caravans]. In the meantime, to defend the interests of the Quraysh against such raiders over the long term, the military forces of the *Ahabis*, who were not a standing army, were no longer nearly sufficient. There was, therefore, finally no other option than to cultivate friendly relations with the most important clan leaders of foreign tribes. Thus, the multi-branched tribal federation of the Banu Ghatafan, which ruled the region northeast of Mecca and so could threaten the route from Mecca to Hira, was hostile to the Quraysh; nonetheless, the Quraysh managed to recruit a few of their leaders. To be sure, one could avoid the direct route from Hira to Mecca by swinging to the west. Mudarite territory began at Dumat al-Jandal, where the Quraysh were secure, whereas members of tribes that did not have friendly relations with the Mudarites would need a protective escort to travel further south, as noted above.

The reports in the traditional sources are not complete enough for us to trace all the alliances of the Quraysh; moreover, we do not know about the comparable webs [of alliances] that must have spread out from other localities. One can hardly doubt that they existed, when one recalls the annual markets described above. That the Sassanids were able to intervene in these matters, especially in eastern Arabia, shows how weak these efforts at self-governance must have been in general. It would also be incorrect to assume that the Quraysh net, once woven, never changed. It consisted of personal relationships that varied and had no source of stability beyond the parties involved. Only the religious attraction of pilgrimage rites would have tended to make the relationships more permanent. "The Quraysh carry out for all of us the religious duties that Ishmael gave us as our legacy" – all Mudarite tribes were said to have been convinced of this, and that is why they allowed to pass unmolested through their territories any travel-

ers who enjoyed the protection of the Quraysh. A closer collaboration developed with the Banu Tamim, who came to control 'Ukaz after the Qais 'Ailan had been driven out. When, under the Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiya I (r. 660 – 680), there were efforts to claim a connection back to the legacy left by Qusayy, the precedence that the Quraysh claimed over all other Arabs was illustrated by means of an image: the Arabs were like a beast of prey, and the Quraysh were its breast while the Banu Tamim were its neck and torso.

We have now an idea of what Muhammad meant when he said that the Quraysh owe great thanks to Allah, because Allah has granted to them the opportunity to organize the winter and summer caravans. Muhammad b. Habib (d. 860) was one of the early Islamic philologists, to whose diligent collecting we owe many reports whose contents had grown obsolete due to the rapid Islamization of the [Arab] world-view. He wrote, "Those in charge of the 'bringing together' [of the caravans] among the Quraysh are those through whose actions Allah elevated (this tribe), and it is they, through whom he revived the poor in their midst. 'Bringing together' means namely the agreements (with the other tribes). (The organizers of the 'bringing together' are thus) Hashim, 'Abd Shams, al-Muttalib, and Naufal, the sons of 'Abd Manaf." While Hashim organized two caravans each year, namely in winter and in summer to ash-Sha'm[3], 'Abd Shams was said to have organized trade with Ethiopia; al-Muttalib traveled to Yemen and Naufal to Iraq. "Each of these four was the leader of the merchants who set out with him to his destination. For (each) had negotiated (for the Quraysh) treaties with the 'kings' and elders of the tribes." – In Sura 106 Muhammad mentions only the two caravans attributed to his great-grandfather Hashim and passes over the others in silence. As we shall often have occasion to note, he is highly partisan in his statements. To understand this, we must now turn our attention to the factions within the Quraysh tribe. Their discord at the same time gives us a perspective on the great political events in Arabia at the turn of the sixth to the seventh century.[4]

Chapter 2: The "Year of the Elephant"

> Have you not seen how your lord dealt with the companions of the elephant? Did he not turn their attack against them? He sent against them flocks of birds, which pelted them with stones of baked clay. Thus (your lord) transformed (your enemies) into a field of grain chewed up by grazing animals! (Sura 105)

The Fame of 'Abd al-Muttalib

The event to which Muhammad refers in these words is dated to the year 882 of the Seleucid era, which was known on the Arabian Peninsula together with other dating systems. This era began on 1 October 312 before the birth of Christ; its 882nd year would thus be from fall 570 to fall 571. In the winter [of this year], Abraha al-Ashram, the Ethiopian military governor in Yemen, traveled up into the Hijaz with his army, whose most noteworthy weapon was a war elephant. The destination of the campaign was al-Taif, but the residents of that town succeeded in persuading Abraha that the town of Mecca, unloved by al-Taif, was much more deserving of punishment. At Mujammas, two-thirds of a *parasang* [or about four kilometers] from Mecca on the road from al-Taif, we are told that the elephant could not be induced to go any further; the animal would not enter the sacred zone in which no fighting was allowed, and this came about as follows: 'Abd al-Muttalib b. Hashim b. 'Abd Manaf, Muhammad's paternal grandfather, from whom the invaders had stolen a herd of camels, went to the enemy's camp representing the Meccans. He demanded the return of his valuable livestock, but to Abraha's amazement, be said nothing about the danger facing Mecca. Abraha asked him why he had nothing to say about the most important matter, to which 'Abd al-Muttalib responded that the lord of the Kaaba himself knows how to protect his shrine and his people. Back in Mecca, 'Abd al-Muttalib advised the townsmen to move themselves and their property out of harm's way. He then removed the metal knocker on the door of the Kaaba and had it sent to Abraha. One of the Arab prisoners in the Ethiopian army whispered something into the ear of the elephant, which then refused to budge. The animal was finally killed by the enraged soldiers. The next day in Mecca people heard a strange rattling sound. Flocks of birds were flying from the direction of the Red Sea and pelting the enemies of the Kaaba with pebbles made of clay, which they had carried in their beaks and claws. Those who escaped this rain of stones soon saw the small wounds left by the pebbles turn into suppurating pustules that caused a miserable death. "O Allah, as a man protects his riding

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animals, so too you protect what is rightfully yours! – Neither their cross nor their [archangel] Michael shall triumph tomorrow over your power. – If you should allow them to penetrate to our place of prayer, then you must have something evil in mind!" By these words 'Abd al-Muttalib, the leader of the Meccans, explained his decision not to act [in defense of the Kaaba], a decision that had been miraculously justified.

One of the results of the *figar* wars, which ended about 20 years after this event, was the treaty that gave the Meccans unhindered access to the shrine at al-Taif that lay outside of the walls of this fortified city; in exchange, the Banu Thaqif were granted the right to visit Mecca whenever they wished. A few of them entered alliances with descendants of 'Abd Shams b. 'Abd Manaf and appear later in events having to do with Muhammad on the side of his Quraysh enemies. One such Thaqif involved with Meccan affairs was al-Ahnes b. Sariq,[1] and his family told the story of the affair of the elephant a bit differently. According to their version, it was not Abraha but one of his officers who commanded the expedition to the north. The specific occasion of the campaign was simple Quraysh greed. For a grandson of Abraha had been robbed by Quraysh on his return journey from Mecca, where he had carried out the pilgrimage; this robbery occurred in Najran, where he had stopped to visit a church. In retaliation, the Kaaba was to have been destroyed. The officer was the one who had spoken outside of Mecca with 'Abd al-Muttalib, who then withdrew to a secure place and waited for events to take their course and then, after a fair amount of time had passed, sent his son al-Harith to find out what had happened. The son brought back the news of the defeat of the enemies. "Then 'Abd al-Muttalib and his companions went and took for themselves the property (of the dead). This property laid the foundation of the wealth of the Banu 'Abd al-Muttalib."

According to this version of the story, too, which is somewhat unflattering to him and his offspring, 'Abd al-Muttalib played a role in the events surrounding the failed attack on Mecca. It was only later, in poems composed by Muhammad's enemies during the wars against Muhammad, that 'Abd al-Muttalib was passed over in silence. Only the holy power of the Kaaba and of Mecca – not *your lord* – were now said to have annihilated the attackers. For already before the Dog Star [Sirius] was created, Mecca had been declared inviolable. Now and then one reads in the sources of a certain religious practice in which 'Abd al-Muttalib must have distinguished himself from his fellow Meccans. One of his sons, Abu Talib, who took in the orphaned Muhammad and then supported him when he declared himself to be a prophet, invoked this type of divine worship when he rejected conversion to Muhammad's new religion. In short, his offspring and the partisans of his clan see a connection between the figure of 'Abd al-Muttalib, the failure of the Yemeni-Ethiopian attackers, and the inviolability of the Kaaba, an

inviolability that emerges clearly in this event. An additional "Islamic" flavor is added to this version through the claim that the campaign was triggered by a Quraysh insult aimed at the Ethiopian efforts to strengthen Christianity in Yemen. The Thaqif tradition tries, in contrast, to obscure the religious background. It does this presumably because the victory of Islam had led to a burgeoning polemic that never tired of condemning the behavior of the Thaqif in the "year of the elephant:" the man who showed Abraha the route to Mecca was said to have been a member of the Thaqif tribe. He died near al-Mujammas, where, out of righteous anger, people pelted his grave with stones in early Islamic times. [Early Muslims] saw the Thaqif themselves as the cursed offspring of the people of Tamud, who, as Muhammad repeatedly claimed, had been wiped out because of their refusal to heed Allah's call (e. g. Sura 89: 9; 53: 51; 7: 73).

When in the Koran Muhammad recalls how *his lord* repelled the attack on the Kaaba, he intentionally uses the most glorious honorific title for his paternal grandfather. As in the case of the Winter and Summer caravans, he uses his status as prophet to take sides in the conflicts among the Quraysh clans: the Hashemite 'Abd al-Muttalib is the measure of all things Meccan. But the descendants of 'Abd Shams had achieved important things for Mecca in the settlement of the *figar* wars, when 'Abd al-Muttalib had long since passed away. In another context, we shall also have occasion to note that, by the time Muhammad had reached adulthood, he was basking in the rays of a faded family glory, one that had long since been surpassed by the achievements of other clans. His career was likewise affected by the fact that he perceived as enemies the Banu Thaqif, who had been drawn into Meccan affairs by their alliance with the Banu 'Abd Shams. Meanwhile, his position within the Quraysh quarrels carried with it a partisan stance in the competition between the two great powers for preeminence in Arabia, and this fact too will come to our attention again and again. We shall therefore take a moment now to describe the main features of this conflict.

Byzantines and Sassanids

The Khuza'a, from whom Qusayy took control of the Kaaba, are classified by the genealogists as members of the Yemeni Arabs; they contrast them with the tribes descending from Ishmael, among whom again the Mudarite tribes, of whom the Quraysh are one, regard themselves as the true heirs of Ishmael. In any case, this is how things stood in the time of Muhammad. The two-fold genealogical system, which sharpened into a destructive antagonism after the middle of the seventh century, testifies to a profound and consequential change, which one can de-

scribe as the penetration of a high-religious tradition, rooted in the Jewish and Christian traditions; we have already touched on this theme. More generally, one can speak of a reversal of cultural influence, which especially affected the Hijaz: If this part of Arabia had fallen up to a certain unknown point in time within Yemen's sphere of influence, now it was more open to [influence from] Syria-Palestine, whose population, apart from the cities, was largely Arabized in late antiquity. Syriac, as the language of Christian liturgy, hymns, and theology, occupied a dominant position there. At the beginning, we are told, the Quraysh in Mecca still used the old south-Arabian script; but they soon replaced it with the cursive script derived from the Syriac alphabet, which was commonly used in Muhammad's day and today is still used in many Islamic languages in addition to Arabic. The standard Arab names used in Islam for the days of the week and months likewise stem from a northern influence; the name *jaum as-sabt*, "day of rest" or "Sabbath," clearly reveals this origin. As late as the ninth century there were memories in the Hijaz of once being under south-Arabian dominance. Mecca, we are told, was at the center of several Yemeni administrative districts that stretched a bit more than a day's journey to the north, but all the way to the border of Najran in the south. These districts are designated in the sources by the term *mihlaf*, which is only used in relation to Yemeni affairs.[2]

In the sixth century, the Byzantine Empire extended its power deep into the Arabian Peninsula. In the year 502 it entered an alliance with the Banu Kinda. Their settlements and grazing lands lay in Palestine and modern-day Jordan, but they had developed a network of relationships based on personal connections that encompassed many important tribes. Byzantine interests were strengthened even more when in 524 an Ethiopian fleet sailed across the Red Sea and landed troops on the coast of Yemen, imposing the rule of the Negus there. Six years later the Emperor Justinian sent an ambassador to him, presumably in order to deepen cooperation between the two Christian empires. For the Ethiopian intervention had a prehistory that requires us to shift our attention to the other side of the infiltration of high-religious ideas, namely, the Jewish influence. Of this side we know less, but we find its traces again and again in the history of Muhammad. Jewish proselytizing achieved its most noteworthy success in 522: The Yemeni ruler Du Nuwas converted to Judaism and, from that point on, called himself Yusuf. There are indications that this Yusuf had connections to the Jewish community in Tiberias, which in turn illustrates social and political activity spanning great distances and contradicts the mistaken idea that Arabia at that time was a totally closed, impenetrable, desert wilderness. In any event, around 523, Yusuf went to war against the Christians of Najran, which must have prompted the Ethiopians to rush to the aid of their co-religionists in the