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Mahomet Founder of Islam

Gladys M. Draycott

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"Il estimait sincèrement la force.... Jetée dans le monde, son âme se trouva à la mesure du monde et l'embrassa tout.... C'est l'état prodigieux des hommes d'action. Ils sont tout entiers dans la moment qu'ils vivent et leur génie se ramasse sur un point."

ANATOLE FRANCE

MAHOMET

INTRODUCTION

The impetus that gave victory to Islam is spent. Since its material prosperity overwhelmed its spiritual ascendancy in the first years of triumph its vitality has waned under the stress of riches, then beneath lassitude and the slow decrease of power. The Prophet Mahomet is at once the glory and bane of his people, the source of their strength and the mainspring of their weakness. He represents more effectively than any other religious teacher the sum of his followers' spiritual and worldly ideas. His position in religion and philosophy is substantially the position of all his followers; none have progressed beyond the primary thesis he gave to the Arabian world at the close of his career.

He closes a long line of semi-divine teachers and monitors. After him the curtains of heaven close, and its glory is veiled from men's eyes. He is the last great man who imposed enthusiasm for an idea upon countless numbers of his fellow-creatures, so that whole tribes fought and died at his bidding, and at the command of God through him. Now that the vital history of Islam has been written, some decision as to the position and achievements of its founder may be formulated.

Mahomet conceived the office of Prophet to be the result of an irresistible divine call. Verily the angel Gabriel appeared to him, commanding him to "arise and warn." He was the vehicle through whom the will of Allah was revealed. The inspired character of his rule was the prime factor in its prevailing; by virtue of his heavenly authority he exercised his sway over the religious actions of his followers, their aspirations and their beliefs. In order to promulgate the divine ordinances the Kuran was sent down, inspired directly by the angel Gabriel at the bidding of the Lord. Upon all matters of belief and upon all other matters dealt with, however cursorily, in the Kuran Mahomet spoke with the power of God Himself; upon

matters not within the scope of religion or of the Sacred Book he was only a human and fallible counsellor.

"I am no more than man; when I order you anything with respect to religion, receive it, and when I order you about the affairs of the world, then am I nothing more than man."

There is no question of his equality with the Godhead, or even of his sharing any part of the divine nature. He is simply the instrument, endowed with a power and authority outside himself, a man who possesses one cardinal thesis which all those within his faith must accept.

The idea which represents at once the scope of his teaching and the source of his triumphs is the unity and indivisibility of the Godhead. This is the sole contribution he has made to the progressive thought of the world. Though he came later in time than the culture of Greece and Rome, he never knew their philosophies or the sum of their knowledge. His religion could never be built upon such basic strength as Christianity. It sprang too rapidly into prominence, and had no foundation of slowly developed ideas upon which to rest both its enthusiasm and its earthly endeavour.

Mahomet bears closer resemblance to the ancient Hebrew prophets than to any Christian leader or saint. His mind was akin to theirs in its denunciatory fury, its prostration before the might and majesty of a single God. The evolution of the tribal deity from the local wonderworker, whose shrine enclosed his image, to the impersonal and distant but awful power who held the earth beneath his sway, was Mahomet's contribution to the mental development of his country, and the achievement within those confines was wonderful. But to the sum of the world's thought he gave little. His central tenet had already gained its votaries in other lands, and, moreover, their form of belief in one God was such that further development of thought was still possible to them. The philosophy of Islam blocks the way of evolution for itself, because its system leaves no room for such pregnant ideas as divine incarnation, divine immanence, the fatherhood of God. It has been content to formulate one article of faith: "There is no God but God," the corollary as to Mahomet's divine appointment to the office of Prophet being merely an affirmation of loyalty to the particular mode of faith he imposed. Therefore

the part taken by Islam in the reading of the world's mystery ceased with the acceptance of that previously conceived central tenet.

In the sphere of ideas, indeed, Mahomet gave his people nothing original, for his power did not lie in intellect, but in action. His mind had not passed the stage that has just exchanged many fetishes for one spiritual God, still to be propitiated, not alone by sacrifices, but by prayers, ceremonies, and praise. In the world of action lay the strength of Islam and the genius of its founder; it is therefore in the impress it made upon events and not in its theology and philosophy that its secret is to be found. But besides the acceptance of one God as Lord, Islam forced upon its devotees a still more potent idea, whose influence is felt both in the spheres of thought and action.

As an outcome of its political and military needs Mahomet created and established its unassailable belief in fatality – not the fatalism of cause and effect, bearing within itself the essence of a reason too vast for humanity to comprehend, but the fatalism of an omnipotent and capricious power inherent in the Mahomedan conception of God. With this mighty and irresponsible being nothing can prevail. Before every event the result of it is irrevocably decreed. Mankind can alter no tiniest detail of his destined lot. The idea corresponds with Mahomet's vision of God – an awful, incomprehensible deity, who dwells perpetually in the terrors of earth, not in its gentleness and compassion. The doctrine of fatalism proved Islam's greatest asset during its first hard years of struggle, for it gave to its battlefields the glory of God's surveillance: "Death is a favour to a Muslim." But with prosperity and conquest came inaction; then fatalism, out of the weakening of endurance, created the pessimism of Islam's later years. Being philosophically uncreative, it descended into the sloth of those who believe, without exercise of reason or will, in the uselessness of effort.

Before Islam decayed into inertia it had experienced a fierce and flaming life. The impulse bestowed upon it by its founder operated chiefly in the religious world, and indirectly in the realm of political and military power. How far the religion of Islam is indebted to Mahomet's knowledge of the Jewish and Christian systems becomes clear upon a study of the Kuran and the Muslim institutions. That

Mahomet was familiar with Jewish Scriptures and tradition is beyond doubt.

The middle portion of the Kuran is filled to the point of weariness with reiterations of Jewish legend and hero-myths. It is evident that Mahomet took the God of the Jews to be his own deity, combining in his conception also the traditional connection of Jehovah and His Chosen People with the ancient faith and ceremonies of Mecca, purged of their idolatries. From the Jews he took his belief in the might and terror of the Lord and the admonitory character of his mission. From them also he took the separatist nature of his creed. The Jewish teachers postulated a religion distinct from every other belief, self-sufficient, owning no interpreter save the Law and the Scriptures. Mahomet conceived himself also as the sole vehicle during his lifetime and after his death for the commands of the Most High. He aimed at the superseding of Rabbinical power, and hoped to win the Jews into recognition of himself as successor to their own teachers and prophets.

But his claims were met by an unyielding reliance upon the completed Law. If the Jewish religion had rejected a Redeemer from among its own people, it was impossible that it should accept a leader from an alien and despised race. Mahomet, finding coalition impossible, gave free play to his separatist instinct, so that in this respect, and also in its fundamental conception of the deity, as well as in its reliance upon inspired Scriptures and oral traditions, Mahomedanism approximates to the Jewish system. It misses the influence of an immemorial history, and receives no help in its campaign of warfare from the traditional glories of long lines of warrior kings. Chief of all, it lacks the inspiration of the matchless Jewish Scriptures and Sacred Books, depending for instruction upon a document confined to the revelation of one man's personality and view of life.

Still the narrowness of the Mahomedan system provoked its power; its rapid rush to the heights Of dominion was born of the straitening of its impulse into the channel of conquest and the forcible imposition of its faith.

Of Christianity Mahomet knew far less than of Judaism. He went to the Christian doctrines as they were known in heterodox Syria, far off from the main stream of Christian life and teaching. He went

to them with a prejudiced mind, full of anger against their exponents for declaring the Messiah to be the Son of God. The whole idea of the Incarnation and the dogma of the Trinity were thoroughly abhorrent to him, and the only conception he entertains as to the personality of Jesus is that of a Prophet even as he is himself, the receiver of divine inspiration, but having no connection in essence with God, whom he conceived pre-eminently as the one supreme Being, indivisible in nature. Certainly he knew far less of the Christian than of the Jewish Scriptures, and necessarily less of the inner meaning of the Christian faith, still in fluid state, unconsidered of its profoundest future exponents. His mind was assuredly not attuned to the reception of its more revolutionary ideas. Very little compassion and no tenderness breathe from the pages of the Kuran, and from a religion whose Founder had laboured to bring just those two elements into the thorny ways of the world, Mahomet could only turn away baffled and uncomprehending. The doctrine of the non-resistance to evil, and indeed all the wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount, he passed by unseeing.

It is useless and indeed unfair to attempt the comparison of Mahomedanism with Christianity, seeing that without the preliminary culture of Greece and Rome modern Christian doctrines would not exist in their present form, and of the former Mahomet had no cognisance. He stands altogether apart from the Christian system, finding no affinity in its doctrines or practices, scorning its monasticism no less than its conception of the Trinity. His position in history lies between the warriors and the saints, at the head of the Prophets, who went, flail in hand, to summon to repentance, but unlike the generality, bearing also the sword and sceptre of a kingdom.

No other religious leader has ever bound his creed so closely to definite political conceptions, Mahomet was not only the instrument of divine revelation, but he was also at the end of his life the head of a temporal state with minutest laws and regulations—chaotic it may be, but still binding so that Islamic influence extended over the whole of the lives of its adherents. This constitutes its strength. Its leader swayed not only the convictions but the activities of his subjects.

His position with regard to the political institution of other countries is unique. His temporal power grew almost in spite of himself, and he unconsciously adopted ideas in connection with it which arose out of the circumstances involved. Any form of government except despotism was impossible among so heterogeneous and unruly a people; despotism also bore out his own idea as to the nature of God's governance. Political ideas were largely built upon religious conceptions, sometimes outstripping, sometimes lagging behind them, but always with some irrefragable connection. Despotism, therefore, was the form best suited to Islam, and becomes its chief legacy to posterity, since without the religious sanction Islam politically could not exist.

Together with despotism and inextricably mingled with it is the second great Islamic enthusiasm—the belief in the supremacy of force. With violence the Muslim kingdom was to be attained. Mahomet gave to the battle lust of Arabia the approval of his puissant deity, bidding his followers put their supreme faith in the arbitrament of the sword. He knew, too, the value of diplomacy and the use of well-calculated treachery, but chief of all he bade his followers arm themselves to seize by force what they could not obtain by cunning. In the insistence upon these two factors, complete obedience to his will as the revelation of Allah's decrees and the justification of violence to proclaim the merits of his faith, we gain the nearest approach to his character and beliefs; for these, together with his conception of fate, are perhaps the most personal of all his institutions.

Mahomet has suffered not a little at the hands of his immediate successors. They have sought to record the full sum of his personality, and finding the subject elude them, as the translation of actions into words must ever fall short of finality, they have overloaded their narrative with minutest and almost always apocryphal details which leave the main outlines blurred. Only two biographies can be said to be in the nature of sources, that of Muhammad ibn Hischam, written on the model of an earlier biography, undertaken about 760 for the Abbasside Caliph Mansur, and of Wakidi, written about 820, which is important as containing the text of many treaties made by Mahomet with various tribes. Al-Tabari, too, included the life of Mahomet in his extensive history of Arabia, but his work serves

only as a check, consisting, as it does, mainly of extracts from Wakidi. By far the more valuable is the Kuran and the Sunna of tradition. But even these are fragmentary and confused, bearing upon them the ineradicable stamp of alien writers and much second-hand thought.

In the dim, pregnant dawn of religions, by the transfusing power of a great idea, seized upon and made living by a single personality, the world of imagination mingles with the world of fact as we perceive it. The real is felt to be merely the frail shell of forces more powerful and permanent. Legend and myth crowd in upon actual life as imperfect vehicles for the compelling demand made by that new idea for expression. Moreover, personality, that subtle essence, exercises a kind of centripetal force, attracting not only the devotion but the imaginations of those who come within its influence.

Mahomet, together with all the men of action in history, possessed an energy of will so vast as to bring forth the creative faculties of his adherents, and the legends that cluster round him have a special significance as the measure of his personality and influence. The story, for instance, of his midnight journey into the seven heavens is the symbol of an intense spiritual experience that, following the mental temper of the age in which he lived, had to be translated into the concrete. All the affirmations as to his intercourse with Djinn, his inspiration by the angel Gabriel, are inherent factors in the manifestation of his ceaseless mental activity. His marvellous birth and the myths of his childhood are the sum of his followers' devotion, and reveal their reverence translated into terms of the imagination. Character was the mysterious force that his co-religionists tried unconsciously to portray in all those legends relative to his life at Medina, his ruthlessness and cruelty finding a place no less than his humility, and steadfastness under discouragement.

But beneath the weight of the marvellous the real man is almost buried. He has stood for so long with the mists of obscure imaginings about him that his true lineaments are almost impossible to reproduce. The Western world has alternated between the conception of him as a devil, almost Antichrist himself, and a negligible impostor whose power is transient. It has seldom troubled to look

for the human energy that wrought out his successes, the faith that upheld them, and the enthusiasm that burned in the Prophet himself with a sombre flame, lighting his followers to prayer and conquest.

And indeed it is difficult, if not impossible, to re-create effectively the world in which he lived. It is so remote from the seas of the world's progression, an eddy in the tide of belief which loses itself in the larger surging, that it makes no appeal of familiarity. But that a study of the period and Mahomet's own personality operating no less through his deeds, faith, and institutions than in the one doubtfully reliable record of his teachings, will result in the perception of the Prophet of Islam as a man among men, has been the central belief during the writing of this biography. Mahomet's personality is revealed in his dealing with his fellows, in the belief and ritual that he imposed upon Arabia, in the mighty achievement of a political unity and military discipline, and therein he shows himself inexorable, cruel, passionate, treacherous, bad, subject to depression and overwhelming doubt, but never weak or purposeless, continually the master of his circumstances, whom no emergency found unprepared, whose confidence in himself nothing could shake, and who by virtue of enthusiasm and resistless activity wrested his triumphs from the hands of his enemies, and bequeathed to his followers his own unconquerable faith and the means wherewith they might attain wealth and sovereignty.

CHAPTER I

MAHOMET'S BIRTHPLACE

"And how many cities were mightier in strength than thy city that hath cast thee forth?" – *The Kuran*.

In Arabia nature cannot be ignored. Pastures and cornland, mountain slopes and quiet rivers may be admired, even revered; but they are things external to the gaze, and make no insistent demand upon the spirit for penetration of their mystery. Arabia, and Mecca as typical of Arabia, is a country governed by earth's primal forces. It has not yet emerged from the shadow of that early world, bare and chaotic, where a blinding sun pours down upon dusty mountain ridges, and nothing is temperate or subdued. It fosters a race of men, whose gods are relentless and inscrutable, revealing themselves seldom, and dwelling in a fierce splendour beyond earthly knowledge. To the spirit of a seeker for truth with senses alert to the outer world, this country speaks of boundless force, and impels into activity under the spur of conviction; by its very desolation it sets its ineradicable mark upon the creed built up within it.

Mahomet spent forty years in the city of Mecca, watching its temple services with his grandfather, taking part in its mercantile life, learning something of Christian and Jewish doctrine through the varied multitudes that thronged its public places. In the desert beyond the city boundaries he wandered, searching for inspiration, waiting dumbly in the darkness until the angel Gabriel descended with rush of wings through the brightness of heaven, commanding:

"Cry aloud, in the name of the Lord who created thee. O, thou unwrapped in thy mantle, arise and warn!"

Mecca lies in a stony valley midway between Yemen, "the Blessed," and Syria, in the midst of the western coast-chain of Arabia, which slopes gradually towards the Red Sea. The height of Abu Kobeis overlooks the eastern quarter of the town, whence hills of granite stretch to the holy places, Mina and Arafat, enclosed by the

ramparts of the Jebel Kora range. Beyond these mountains to the south lies Taif, with its glory of gardens and fruit-trees. But the luxuriance of Taif finds no counterpart on the western side. Mecca is barren and treeless; its sandy stretches only broken here and there by low hills of quartz or gneiss, scrub-covered and dusty. The sun beats upon the shelterless town until it becomes a great cauldron within its amphitheatre of hills. During the Greater Pilgrimage the cauldron seethes with heat and humanity, and surges over into Mina and Arafat. In the daytime Mecca is limitless heat and noise, but under the stars it has all the magic of a dream-city in a country of wide horizons.

The shadow of its ancient prosperity, when it was the centre of the caravan trade from Yemen to Syria, still hung about it in the years immediately before the birth of Mahomet, and the legends concerning the founding of the city lingered in the native mind. Hagar, in her terrible journey through the desert, reached Mecca and laid her son in the midst of the valley to go on the hopeless quest for water. The child kicked the ground in torment, and God was merciful, so that from his heel marks arose a spring of clear water—the well Zemzem, hallowed ever after by Meccans. In this desolate place part of the Amalekites and tribes from Yemen settled; the child Ishmael grew up amongst them and founded his race by marrying a daughter of the chief. Abraham visited him, and under his guidance the native temple of the Kaaba was built and dedicated to the true God, but afterwards desecrated by the worship of idols within it.

Such are the legends surrounding the foundation of Mecca and of the Kaaba, of which, as of the legends concerning the early days of Rome, it may be said that they are chiefly interesting as throwing light upon the character of the race which produced them. In the case of Mecca they were mainly the result of an unconscious desire to associate the city as far as possible with the most renowned heroes of old time, and also to conciliate the Jewish element within Arabia, now firmly planted at Medina, Kheibar, and some of the adjoining territory, by insisting on a Jewish origin for their holy of holies, and as soon as Abraham and Ishmael were established as fathers of the race, legends concerning them were in perpetual creation.

The Kaaba thus reputed to be the work of Abraham bears evidence of an antiquity so remote that its beginnings will be forever lost to us. From very early times it was a goal of pilgrimage for all Arabia, because of the position of Mecca upon the chief trade route, and united in its ceremonies the native worship of the sun and stars, idols and misshapen stones. The Black Stone, the kissing of which formed the chief ceremonial, is a relic of the rites practised by the stone-worshippers of old; while the seven circuits of the Kaaba, obligatory on all pilgrims, are probably a symbol of the courses of the planets. Arab divinities, such as Alilat and Uzza, were associated with the Kaaba before any records are available, and at the time of Mahomet, idolatry mingled with various rites still held sway among the Meccans, though the leaven of Jewish tradition was of great help to him in the establishment of the monotheistic idea. At Mahomet's birth the Kaaba consisted of a small roofless house, with the Black Stone imbedded in its wall. Near it lay the well Zemzem, and the reputed grave of Ishmael. The Holy Place of Arabia held thus within itself traces of a purer faith, that were to be discovered and filled in by Mahomet, until the Kaaba became the goal of thousands, the recipient of the devotion and longings of that mighty host of Muslim who went forth to subdue the world. Mahomet's ancestors had for some time held a high position in the city. He came of the race of Hashim, whose privilege it was to give service to the pilgrims coming to worship at the Kaaba. The Hashim were renowned for generosity, and Mahomet's grandfather, Abd al Muttalib, was revered by the Kureisch, inhabitants of Mecca, as a just and honourable man, who had greatly increased their prosperity by his rediscovery of the holy well.

Its healing waters had been choked by the accumulations of years, so that even the knowledge of its site was lost, when an angel appeared to Abd al Muttalib, as he slept at the gate of the temple, saying:

"Dig up that which is pure!"

Three times the command fell on uncomprehending ears, until the angel revealed to the sleeper where the precious water might be found. And as he dug, the well burst forth once more, and behold within its deeps lay two golden gazelles, with weapons, the treasure

of former kings. And there was strife among the Kureisch for the possession of these riches, until they were forced to draw lots. So the treasure fell to Abd al Muttalib, who melted the weapons to make a door for the Kaaba, and set up the golden gazelles within it.

Abd al Muttalib figures very prominently in the early legends concerning Mahomet, because he was sole guardian of the Prophet during very early childhood. These legends are mainly later accretions, but the kernel of truth within them is not difficult to discover. Like all forerunners of the great teachers, he stands in communion with heavenly messengers, the symbol of his purity of heart. He is humble, compassionate, and devout, living continually in the presence of his god — a fitting guardian for the renewer of the faith of his nation. Most significant of the legends is the story of his vow to sacrifice a son if ten were born to him, and of the choice of Abdullah, Mahomet's father, and the repeated staying of the father's hand, so that the sacrifice could not be accomplished until his son's life was bought with the blood of a hundred camels. This and all allied legends are fruit of a desire to magnify the divine authority of Mahomet's mission by dwelling on the intervention of a higher power in the disposal of his fate.

Of Abd al Muttalib's ten sons, Abdallah was the most handsome in form and stature, so that the fame of his beauty spread into the harems of the city, and many women coveted him in their hearts. But he, after his father had sacrificed the camels in his stead, went straightway to the house of Amina, a maiden well-born and lovely, and remained there to complete his nuptials with her. Then, after some weeks, he departed to Gaza for the exchange of merchandise, but, returning, was overtaken by sickness and died at Medina.

Amina, left thus desolate, sought the house of Abd al Muttalib, where she stayed until her child was born. Visions of his future greatness were vouchsafed to her before his birth by an angel, who told her the name he was to bear, and his destiny as Prophet of his people. Long before the child's eyes opened to the light, a brightness surrounded his mother, so that by it might be seen the far-off towers of the castles in Syrian Bostra. A tenderness hangs over the story of Mahomet's birth, akin to that immortal beauty surrounding the coming of Christ. We have faint glimpses of Amina, in the dignity

of her sorrow, waiting for the birth of her son, and in the house of Mecca's leading citizen, hearing around her not alone the celestial voices of her spirit-comforters, but also rumours of earthly strife and the threatenings of strange armies from the south.

At Sana, capital of Yemen, ruled Abraha, king of the southern province. He built a vast temple within its walls, and purposed to make Sana the pilgrim-city for all Arabia. But the old custom still clove to Mecca, and finding he could in nowise coerce the people into forsaking the Kaaba, he determined to invade Mecca itself and to destroy the rival place of worship. So he gathered together a great army, which numbered amongst it an elephant, a fearful sight to the Meccans, who had never seen so great an animal. With this force he marched upon Mecca, and was about to enter the city after fruitless attempts by Abd al Muttalib to obtain quarter, when God sent down a scourge of sickness upon his army and he was forced to retreat, returning miserably to Sana with a remnant of his men. But so much had the presence of the elephant alarmed the Meccans that the year (A.D. 570) was called ever after "The Year of the Elephant," and in August thereof Mahomet was born.

Then Amina sent for Abd al Muttalib and told him the marvels she had seen and heard, and his grandfather took the child and presented him in the Kaaba, after the manner of the Jews, and gave him the name Mahomet (the Praised One), according as the angel had commanded Amina.

The countless legends surrounding Mahomet's birth, even to the physical marvel that accompanied it, cannot be set aside as utterly worthless. They serve to show the temper of the nation producing them, deeply imaginative and incoherently poetical, and they indicate the weight of the personality to which they cling. All the devotion of the East informs them; but since the spirit that caused them to be is in its essence one of relentless activity, neither contemplative nor mystic, they lack that subtle sweetness that belongs to the Buddhist and Christian histories, and dwell rather within the region of the marvellous than of the spiritually symbolic. Neither Mahomet's father nor mother are known to us in any detail; they are merely the passive instruments of Mahomet's prophetic mission. His real parents are his grandfather and his uncle Abu Talib; but more than

these, the desert that nurtured him, physically and mentally, that bounded his horizon throughout his life and impressed its mighty mysteries upon his unconscious childhood and his eager, imaginative youth.