

HEIRS OF THE PROPHETS

An Account of the Clergy and Priests of Islam,
the Personnel of the Mosque and “Holy Men”

by

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CHAPTER TWO

PRE-ISLAMIC PRIESTHOOD IN ARABIA

AMONG the nomadic Semites there was no developed priesthood.

With the beginning of a settled state, however, the local sanctuaries (*bethels*) rose in importance and at these shrines there was not only sacrifice but an oracle and a priest. The Canaanite-Phoenician name for priest is, in fact, identical with the Arabic *kahin*, a soothsayer (Hebrew, priest).

According to Wellhausen, the early Arabian *kahins*, or priests, not only were custodians of the sanctuaries, e.g., at Mecca, but gave out oracles in rhymed prose similar to the short chapters of the Koran.

- The *kahins* were soothsayers;
- They gave imprecations and benedictions;
- They alone offered special prayers for rain (*istisqa*) with peculiar ritual;
- Their garments and saliva had healing power;
- Their hair was sacred and potent.

In all these respects Mohammed, even during his lifetime, was a *kahin* (priest) as well as prophet. It was he who took the pagan-sacrificial ritual of Mecca and made it the central feast of Islam. This was the act of a *kahin*. After giving a list of these pre-Islamic *kahins* (priests), Wellhausen goes on to show at some length that Mohammed himself unwillingly followed in their footsteps: “*Muhammad wollte zwar sein Kahin sein konnte aber doch nicht von ihrer Art lassen.*” 6

He would not be a *kahin* but could not forsake their art.

The *Kaa'ba* at Mecca was a very ancient Arab shrine — a *bethel*. It was in fact called *Bait Allah*, God's house, before Mohammed's day, even as Mohammed's father bore the name of Abd-Allah.

And this shrine, although it contained idols and had pagan worship, was the center of pilgrimage for distant tribes. It had its guardians; it was covered with a curtain or robe, *kiswah*, like the Tabernacle in the wilderness long before Mohammed's time.

The Dutch scholar, R. Dozy, discovered a Hebrew inscription in the interior of the *Kaa'ba* and wrote a thesis on "*the Jews at Mecca from the clays of the Captivity*" (Leyden 1864) (cf. Hughes' *Dictionary of Islam* articles on *Kaa'ba* and *Kiswah*).

So we cannot help concluding that Mohammed knew pagan priests (*Rabins*), Jewish priests or rabbis, and Christian monks and clergy. It would be strange if his own mind and his religion did not take some color from these three sources when he proclaimed himself the Apostle of Allah. That apostleship included many elements common to the religious leaders of the pagan Arabs and of his Jewish and Christian neighbors. *

* Dr. Aubrey R. Johnson, in his book *The Cubic Prophet in Ancient Israel*, discusses the place and function of the prophet (*nabi*) as a cultic specialist in Old Israel, and contrasts his functions with those of other cultic specialists, the priest (*kohen*), the seer (both the *ro'eh* and the *chozeh*). He says, "The prophets were part of the personnel of the shrine, whether local or at Jerusalem. They took their part in divination, and were consulted, even as late as the time of Jeremiah, for the sake of securing the welfare of individuals and of nations alike."

So far as "the idea of priesthood being abhorrent to Islam," Mohammed met Christian monks and priests (*ruhban*, *kissis*, *ahbar*) and received from them directly or indirectly some of his "revelations" (Tor Andrae and Margoliouth).

In the Koran there is a beautiful tribute to them and it is the *only* reference to the Christian clergy of his day: "Thou wilt find the nearest in love to those who believe to be those who say, We are Christians; that is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud" (Surah 5:85; and compare the comment of Zamakhshari, Vol. I, p. 262).

Wensinck says that the title *rahib* was given to various pious individuals in the earliest history of Islam, and Goldziher tells of one, Abu Bekr al-Mahzumi, who had the title, *rahib-Quraish* — the Quraishite monk — because of his constant devotions (11:394).

The pre-Islamic poets refer to the *rahibs'* hospitality and tell of their candlelight which guides the wayfarer by night. There is, it is true, a late and unorthodox tradition, "*La rahbaniya fi'l Islam*" — There is no monasticism in Islam. But this does not occur in the canonical collections. And Surah 57:27, which speaks of monasticism, should read, according to the older exegesis and context: "We put in the hearts of those who followed Jesus, compassion and mercy and the monastic state. They instituted the same only out of a desire to please God, etc." (So Massignon, in the article *Rahbaniya*, *Ency. of Islam*.) "This older exegesis calls monasticism a divine institution; the younger one expresses a feeling hostile to monasticism and coined the tradition, no *rahbaniya* in Islam" (idem).

And it is the older exegesis of tradition and the Koran itself which reflects Mohammed's attitude toward priests and monks.

Early Christianity was far stronger in Arabia when Mohammed appeared on the scene than is realized. Wellhausen states “that had not Islam entered, in a brief period all of northern Arabia from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf would have become nominally Christian.”

There were Arab Christian poets even in Mecca. “There was a superficial knowledge of Christian institutions, rites, and dogma as well as of legends and biblical stories. These were brought to Mecca by Christian traders from Abyssinia, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.” 7

Now in such an environment and under such conditions the borrower is servant to the lender.

Mohammed himself borrowed Koran material from his Christian and Jewish neighbors. The researches of Goldziher, Caetani, and Lammens only emphasize the fact pointed out by Horowitz that “The prophet had to enter into the heritage of his predecessors and wrap himself round with their mantle of saintship. His erstwhile heathen countrymen transferred to him the powers which they had formerly ascribed to their kahins; the new converts from the old (Christian) civilizations assigned to him the attributes of their former saints” (*The Moslem World*, Vol. 12:312).

Such were the swaddling-clothes of the new religion. As for Mohammed himself, Michel d'Herbigny has thrown new light on his career in a remarkable study, *L'Islam Naissant; Notes Psychologiques* (Rome, 1929).

How even the doctrine of vicarious sacrifice, rejected in the Koran, became the chief cornerstone of popular Islam in Persia is told by William A. Shedd and S. G. Wilson. 8

The blood of Hussain at Kerbela took the place of the ancient Kaa'ba blood of sheep and camels, to atone for sin, at the annual festival. And we shall see later that there are various sacrifices and blood-covenants in Islam which have Jewish and Christian features although they may go back to Arabian pagan sacrifices as primary source. Here again Islam is “**a threefold cord not easily broken**” into its diversely colored strands.

6. *Reste Arabischen Heidentums*. Berlin, 1897, pp. 137-140. Cf. also Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhummdanische Studien*, Vol. I, pp. 237-260. The facts he cites are a remarkable commentary on this statement of Wellhausen. At any rate priest (*kahin*) and (*nabi*) prophet were closely related. One is reminded of the lines in Milton's sonnet: “New presbyter is but old priest writ large.”

7. Wellhausen, pp. 230-235.

8. *Islam and the Oriental Churches*, by W. A. Shedd, pp. 75, 76, and *The Atoning Saviour of the Shi'ahs*, by S. G. Wilson in the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, XIII, 51ff.

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