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The Glowing Quran. A View Of a Biblical Scholar

Introduction

The Arabian Peninsula was destined for greatness from the earliest times: back at the time of patriarch Abraham's life the Lord granted a promise that "a great nation" would descend from the patriarch's son Ishmael (Genesis 17, 20). Fearing for the life of Ishmael, his firstborn son by Hagar, Abraham prayed to the Creator, expressing his plea for his well-being in such words:

O that Ishmael might live in Your sight! (Genesis 17, 18)

Of course, this prayer conveys not only anxiety for his son and heir's physical life. The Torah as well as the Quran embraces a much broader concept of "life", which denotes a full-fledged spiritual existence founded upon a firm faith in the Creator of the world, obedience to Him, being in a constant inner dialogue with Him. And in reply to the patriarch's prayer God granted the following promise:

...As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation...(Genesis 17, 20)

Let us go deeper into the words of the Torah concerning Ishmael and his descendants. Abraham prayed for his son's "abundant" life — both spiritual ascent and physical prosperity. And when the Lord replied: "as for Ishmael, I have heard you", He confirmed that the patriarch's plea would be fulfilled in all its meanings and senses. Moreover, God speaks of Ishmael's future as follows:

...I will bless him... (Genesis 17, 20)

Blessing from above is the most important thing for human life, and this verse states that it will stand by Ishmael's side wherever he goes. It is blessing that starts the enumeration of all good things allotted to Ishmael in this verse of the Torah. And blessing accompanies only believers and righteous people. Such, according to this prediction, will become Ishmael himself and his posterity — inhabitants of Arabia, who later will form the Arabic nation.

The promise goes on to say:

... I will... make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous... (Genesis 17, 20)

The first part of the prophecy speaks about the spiritual welfare of Ishmael's posterity — of the Arabic nation, about its special godliness in future times, i.e. about the upcoming emergence of the Islamic religion among this people; whereas the second part predicts not only a significant growth of the Arabic population, but also a wide expansion of the Muslim faith, which started up in its environment and historically grew into a third world monotheistic religion along with Judaism and Christianity.

Ishmael's descendants will become "exceedingly" (in the original בְּמֵוֹד מְוֹד <be-me'od me'od> — "very-very") numerous— both physical and spiritual ones, i.e. those who in future will profess Islamic faith. As is typical of prophetic speech, biblical as well as Quranic, reduplication of a word denotes a constancy; in this case the expression "very-very" heralds an endless increase of Islam followers, which is exactly what has been happening right from the foundation of this religion up to the present days.

As to the “twelve princes” who descended from Ishmael and became forefathers of twelve grand Arabic tribes (their names are enumerated in Genesis 25, 13—16), their number symbolically points to all the nations together who will eventually accept Islam and thus merge into a unified Muslim civilization comprising an “*ummah*” — a united community, a Muslim “extra-nation” (compare with Israel’s twelve tribes, which form a religious and cultural unity in spite of the independence of each tribe in ancient times. In a similar way, representatives of every Islamic nation name themselves both by their ethnonym — “Arabs”, “Iranians”, “Tatars”, etc., and by a common term “Muslims”. The number “twelve” had a sacral meaning of unity in multitude in the Ancient Near East).

And finally, the prediction of the Torah ends with this promise from God:

...And I will make him a great nation. (Genesis 17, 20)

In the context of the sacred book the word “great” is to be interpreted as evidence of multitude as well as spiritual grandeur. The Muslim civilization is known to have contributed greatly to the treasury of panhuman culture. This contribution can be traced in all spheres of thinking and activity: in theology and philosophy, science and art, politics and law...

So, Arabia, the country where Ishmael and his mother Hagar settled and gave birth to the Arabic nation, was destined to play one of the main roles on the stage of world history.

Although several branches of Ishmael’s posterity (for instance, those who settled in the south of the Palestine and were called Nabataeans — the sons of Nebaioth, one of the twelve princes mentioned above; see Genesis 25, 13) became politically and culturally mature rather early, still most of the Arabic tribes waited in the wings throughout many centuries for the fulfillment of the prophecy delivered by God back in the times of Abraham.

The hour arrived when the great prophet Muhammad (570 — 632 CE) was born. At that time Arabia, staying aside from the world history mainstream, was a huge territory inhabited by scattered Arabic tribes, most of which were pagans having a long way back departed from the monotheism of their forefathers Abraham and Ishmael. The Arabs worshipped many gods and served their idols even in their central temple — the all-Arabic sanctuary in the city of Mecca, which according to the traditional narrative once was founded by Abraham himself to worship One God.

Nonetheless, the Arabic tribes kept the memory of Abraham and Ishmael, as well as the name of the true God — Allah (see Elo’ah, or Elo’him, — one of the main God’s names in the Torah and later biblical books). However, in the period of Arabic paganism (named “*al-ja’hiliyyah*” — “ignorance”) he was worshipped only as the supreme, most powerful god, the father and king of many other deities.

However, having inherited the memories of Abraham’s time, quite a few Arabs as if by instinct strained towards the truth and so, they were looking for a faith that would be purer and more exalted. Probably, that is the reason for the fact that Judaism and Christianity, rather popular in Arabia at that time, were professed not only by immigrants from other parts of Western Asia, but also by whole Arabic families and tribes. There was also some kind of God-seeking beyond these traditional religions; those individuals, who set heart on a pure monotheism outside any confession, were called hanifs.

There is no need to narrate the life history of prophet Muhammad: by this time there are plenty of sources and research concerning this question. Let us only bring into focus Muhammad’s great mission he set out with — the annunciation of monotheism and a call to return to the pure faith of forefather Abraham — in the period of spiritual confusion in his native Arabia, of prevailing paganism in it, as well as conflicts among various Judaic and Christian sects. That was the time of endless murderous wars among separate Arabic tribes and their temporary alliances, the time of dominating dehumanized, cruel traditions among Arabs (for example, more often than not new-born girls were buried alive in order not to portion them later; there used to be a custom of blood revenge, which took away a great number of lives, etc.)

At the same time it must be mentioned that the inhabitants of Arabia kept the ancient traditions of hospitality, loyalty to one's oath, generosity towards the weak and helpless, which rooted back in the times of Abraham and Ishmael.

In such controversial circumstances of Arabs' life in prevailing enmity and unrest the preaching of Muhammad started, who was called upon by God Himself to give humanity a new great spiritual impulse in the form of a religion of pure worship of God and obedience to the will of the Creator ("Islam" means "reconciliation" in Arabic: here the restoration of peace between God and man who obeys Him is meant, as well as among those individuals who form a religiously united people, or a community — "Ummah").

However, by the end of prophet Muhammad's life and preaching a great majority of the inhabitants of Arabia had accepted the message he proclaimed, came to believe in Allah as One God and acknowledged the Quran — a new holy scripture enunciated by the prophet first orally, and put down by his successors only afterwards.

After the end of the prophet's earthly life the triumphant march of Islam around the Earth started: it took little time to annex vast territories in Asia, Africa and part of Europe to the Muslim state, the Caliphate. Since then, the propagation of Islam, as well as the expansion of its impact on other doctrines and cultures, and fruitful interaction among its ideas and earlier ideologies continued century after century — starting from the period of prophet Muhammad till the present time. It was right at the time of Muhammad's life that the prophecy of the Torah mentioned above came true: Ishmael's descendants became a truly "great nation" (Genesis 17, 20).

The text of the Quran was sent down to prophet Muhammad from above gradually — throughout many years. Its surahs (chapters) are classified as older ones called Meccan (full of poetic pathos, based on a vivid, unique prophetic imagery) and later ones, Medinan (discoursed in a "calmer", "more reasonable" mood and containing more legislative ordinances).

The Quran was granted at a certain time and in a certain place, and yet, this living word of God was addressed not only to specific people — the prophet's contemporaries — but also to the whole humanity.

As early as the first surah, "the opening of the Book" ("Al-Fatihah"), one can find a mention of the representatives of traditional religions, who must not serve as a model for Muslims: they are "those who have evoked anger" and "those who are astray" (1, 7). Obviously, those who have evoked God's anger know the truth, but do not follow it; and those who are "astray" are the ones whose religious teaching contains some gross distortions. However, in contrast to the two cited kinds of truth apostates the Quran mentions "the righteous ones" — those representatives of traditional monotheistic religions (i.e. Jews and Christians) who remained loyal to the covenants of their teachers — Moses and Jesus. It was exactly "the righteous", those who "upheld [the law of] the Torah and the Gospel" (5, 66), those who "raced to [all that is] good" who were meant to accept the message of the Quran in the first place. The very "threshold" of the book, the beginning of the second surah, proves it:

This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah...(2, 2)

Thus, the Quran is to become a clear instruction, "a spiritual guidance" primarily for those who are already conscious of God at the moment when they hear or read its surahs for the first time. At the time of prophet Muhammad's life such could be sincere, frank believers

from Jewish, Christian or hanif backgrounds who followed existing Biblical scriptures in the search for their personal way to God.

The Quran, being a new revelation from God offered to righteous people, speaks a language of images, which was so familiar to godfearing Jews, Christians and other monotheists. It carries on the Biblical tradition in all senses, which is why there is a possibility to resort to it in order to unveil quranic images as well as interpret the very teaching of the Quran; moreover, it is the only thing to provide the right context for the real understanding of the holy book of Islam.