I

THE GIFTED ORPHAN

Under the blazing sun of a summer day in Syria towards the year 600 a caravan of Arab merchants with loaded camels was moving slowly southwards. They had come from Mecca, some forty days' march to the south, with Arabian frankincense, Indian spices and silks, and other luxury goods. They had sold or bartered these in the markets of Syria, presumably in Damascus; and now, laden with other wares, they were setting out for home.

Near Bostra on the flank of the Jebel-ed-Druze they passed the cell of a Christian hermit, the monk Baḥīrā. Most of the men in the caravan had frequently passed the cell, but the monk had paid no attention to them. This day, however, he invited them to a feast. They left the youngest member of the party to keep an eye on the camels and the loads, and went to be the monk's guests. The monk was not content, however. He wanted the whole party without exception. There was in his cell a book of ancient lore, handed down to him by previous hermits who had lived there. Aided by the knowledge he had gained from this book he had become supernaturally aware that there was a personage of great importance in this caravan. He had seen a cloud and a tree protecting him from the glaring sun; and he wanted to know whether this person had also the other signs mentioned in his book which would mark him out as a great prophet.

At the monk's insistence the Arabs agreed that the boy left with the camels should also come to the feast. The monk wanted to know all about him. He questioned the uncle in whose charge the boy was, and then he had a long talk with the boy himself. He looked at the boy's back and saw a mark between his shoulders which he recognized as the seal

of prophethood. Now he was sure. As he bade them farewell, he said to the uncle, ' Go back home with your nephew, and keep an eye on him; if the Jews see him and get to know what I know about him, they will certainly do him harm, for he is going to be a very big man'. The boy was Muḥammad.

This is only a story, of course. It is based on primitive ideas. It is the kind of story one expects to find among people who look upon all writing as akin to magic. Yet it is significant because it expresses a popular Muslim view of Muḥammad. He was a man who had been marked out from his early youth, even from before his birth, by supernatural signs and qualities.

In contrast to this are some European views of Muḥammad. The worst was in medieval times when his name, corrupted to ' Mahound ', was regarded as a name of the devil. This is not so strange as appears at first sight. We have to remember that in the first rush of expansion of the Arabs after Muḥammad's death they wrested from Christian control the lands in which Christianity had been born—Syria and Egypt. From the eighth century onwards the Muslims were attacking Christendom along its southern and south-eastern borders. Was it strange that it should say all the evil possible about this enemy and the enemy leader ? When we consider what was said and believed about the Kaiser and Hitler in recent times, not to mention Napoleon, it is not surprising that medieval Europeans thought that their enemies derived their power from the fountainhead of all evil. Things were not improved when the Western Europeans, who lived simply and roughly, saw the great luxury and refinement of the Muslim rulers of Spain.

Medieval Christian ideas about Islam were little better than war-propaganda. At their worst they were so palpably false that they damaged the Christian cause. Fighting men

were encouraged to think that the Muslims were cruel and bestial savages; and when, in the contacts of war, they found among them not a few 'very parfit gentle knights' they tended to lose faith in their cause. So from the twelfth century onwards scholars laboured to correct the crudest errors. Yet something of the bitterness of the medieval attitude has continued in Europe till the present day, and the resources of modern scholarship have not eradicated it.

How are we then to attain to a sound view of Muḥammad's personality? If he was neither a messenger from God nor (as a scholarly English dean called him in 1697) an old lecher, what was he? It is not an easy question to answer. It involves not only judgements about facts, but also theological and moral judgements. Most of this book will be concerned with presenting the facts on which these ultimate judgements must be based if they are to have any claim to general acceptance.

The Rivalry of the Great Powers

The story of the monk Baḥīrā, though essentially a legend, depicts truly the kind of world in which Muḥammad lived. He was born in Mecca, and spent most of the first fifty years of his life there. The Meccans were traders, and sent caravans to Syria. Muḥammad must have joined such a caravan on at least a few occasions, and may well have travelled sometimes in the company of his uncle. Here is a fact of great significance. Mecca was a little town in the deserts or steppes near the west coast of Arabia, but it was by no means isolated from the great empires of the day. A casual reading of the sources might suggest that Islam grew out of the petty bickerings in this little town; but a more careful study shows that the whole of Arabia had become entangled in the meshes of the politics of the great powers of the day.

One of these great powers was the Byzantine empire When the Meccan traders took their goods to Damascus o Gaza, they had entered the Byzantine domains. This empir is also known as the Roman empire or Eastern Roma empire. It was the remnant of the Roman empire of classica times. The western part had been overrun by barbarians i the fifth century and had ceased to exist. But the easter part, with its capital at Constantinople, had maintained itsel and in the sixth century had even won back parts of the western empire from their barbarian rulers. In the year 60c the Byzantine empire included Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt and south-eastern Europe up to the Danube. It also controlled the Mediterranean islands and some parts of Italy, and had a slender hold on the coast of North Africa.

The Byzantine empire had a great rival, the Persian empire under the Sāsānid dynasty. This was ruled from the rich lands of 'Irāq, and stretched from there to Afghanistan and the river Oxus. These were the two great powers of the day so far as Arabia was concerned. In the second half of the sixth century their rivalry led to a series of wars, with only brief intervals of peace. The climax—if we may anticipate a little—came in the later years of Muḥammad's life. The Persians defeated the Byzantines, conquered Syria and Egypt, and in 614 entered Jerusalem and took away the True Cross. The Byzantine emperor laboured patiently to retrieve the situation. Aided by dynastic quarrels in the Persian royal family, he was completely successful. In 628 the Persians had to sue for peace. They evacuated the Byzantine provinces they had occupied, and in 630 the Holy Rood was restored to Jerusalem.

This long-continued struggle of the giants had its repercussions in Arabia. The Persians had a sphere of influence in the Persian Gulf and along the south coast of Arabia. All the little principalities and sheikhdoms there had become

dependent on Persia in one way or another. Often one of the local factions would be maintained in power by Persian support. From at least the fourth century the Persians had some influence in the Yemen. About 570 they sent a seaborne invading force to occupy the region, and subsequently tried to develop trade from the Yemen to 'Irāq by the overland route.

The interest of the Roman world in the trade routes of western Arabia is shown by a large expedition in 24 B.C., but this was unsuccessful, indeed disastrous. About 356 we hear of the Byzantine emperor sending a Christian bishop to the Yemen to counteract Persian influence by spreading Christianity. The Byzantines were so impressed by the importance of this part of Arabia that about 521 the emperor encouraged and approved of an Abyssinian occupation of the Yemen despite the religious and political differences between the Abyssinians and the Byzantines. The latter called their form of Christianity Orthodoxy and regarded the Abyssinians as Monophysite heretics; but they preferred friendly heretics to Persians or Persian protégés. Byzantine policy had a setback when the Abyssinians were driven out by the Persians about 570. A little later—perhaps about 590—we find the Byzantines trying to gain control of Mecca by bringing a pro-Byzantine faction to power there; but the Meccans, though more friendly to the Byzantines than to the Persians, had no desire for this kind of subordination to one of the great powers, and the would-be princeling was forced to flee.

Neither the Persians nor the Byzantines tried to control the Arabian nomads directly. With the available arms and means of communication it was a task beyond the strength even of a great empire. The method both empires employed was to support a prince on the borders between the Desert and the Sown and to see that he was strong enough to prevent the nomads from raiding the settled lands. The

Persians thus supported the princely dynasty of the Lakhmids, some of whose followers were nomads, though they themselves lived in the town of al-Ḥīrah near the Euphrates. Similarly the Byzantines, at least from 529, supported the Ghassānid princes who dominated the region east of the Jordan and of Damascus.

Besides this extension into much of Arabia of political spheres of influence there was a cultural or religious penetration. The Ghassānids had long been Christians, and towards 600 the Lakhmid king became a Christian. With the encouragement of the great powers and also apart from it Christianity had been spreading among the nomadic tribes. By Muḥammad's time there were Christians in many of the tribes, and some tribes or sections of tribes were largely Christian. Just how adequate their grasp of Christianity was, however, it is impossible to say. What is clear is that there was a connexion between religion and politics. Of the forms of Christianity Orthodoxy and Monophysitism were associated with a pro-Byzantine attitude in politics, since the Byzantine emperor was Orthodox while the Ghassānids and the Abyssinians were Monophysites. On the other hand the Nestorian (more correctly East Syrian) form of Christianity had been expelled from the Byzantine empire but had won many adherents in 'Irāq, and was therefore naturally associated with a pro-Persian policy. There was also a certain amount of Judaism in Arabia. Some of the Jews were doubtless men of Hebrew stock who had fled from persecution, but others must have been Arabs who had accepted the Jewish faith. For reasons that are not altogether obvious—perhaps it was the common opposition to pro-Byzantine Christians—the Jews were mostly pro-Persian.

The Meccan merchants may not have had a full understanding of this political environment in which they lived. Yet many of them travelled to Syria and a few to 'Irāq, and

they must therefore have been aware of the main features of the situation. They were certainly aware of the rivalry of the Persians and Byzantines, and of the understanding between the latter and the Abyssinians; and the connexions between religion and politics cannot have escaped their notice. This is an important point to keep in mind in trying to understand the career of Muḥammad.

Life in a Commercial Centre

Muḥammad is said to have been born in the Year of the Elephant. This was the year in which the Abyssinian prince or viceroy of the Yemen marched as far as Mecca with a large army which included an elephant. Scholars have hitherto been inclined to date the Year of the Elephant about 570, but recent discoveries in South Arabia suggest that the Persians overthrew the Abyssinian regime in the Yemen about this date, and the expedition may therefore have been a year or two earlier. Certainly in the Mecca in which Muḥammad grew up the merchants were adjusting themselves to the new situation brought about by the Persian occupation of the Yemen, and were apparently profiting from it.

Muḥammad's father 'Abd-Allāh had died before he was born, and Muḥammad had for guardian his grandfather 'Abd-al-Muṭṭalib, the head of the clan of Hāshim. He doubtless spent most of his early years with his mother, who belonged to another clan; but, following the custom of many of the Meccan families, she sent him away for a year or two from insalubrious Mecca to the hard but healthy life of the desert, where he was looked after by a wet-nurse from a bedouin tribe. When Muḥammad was six his mother died, and he was directly under the care of his grandfather until he also died two years later. He then passed into the charge of his uncle Abū-Ṭālib, the new head of the clan of Hāshim.

The lot of an orphan in sixth-century Mecca was not a happy one. In the old nomadic way of life it had been understood that the head of a clan or family had a certain responsibility for the weaker members. But at Mecca in a mad scramble for more wealth every man was looking after his own interests and disregarding the responsibilities formerly recognized. Muḥammad's guardians saw that he did not starve to death, but it was difficult for them to do more for him, especially as the fortunes of the clan of Hāshim seem to have been declining at this time. An orphan, with no able-bodied man to give special attention to his interests, had a poor start in a commercial career; and that was really the only career open to him. By travelling to Syria with Abū-Ṭālib Muḥammad gained some experience, but without capital there were few opportunities of using this experience.

Not much is known of Mecca during Muḥammad's youth and early manhood. The available material is fragmentary, and it is difficult to separate the history in it from legend. Yet it gives us a picture of a city whose commerce was expanding and whose power and prestige were growing.

Shortly before 590 two events occurred with which Muḥammad was connected in a minor way. One was a series of battles, known as the Wicked War, and at one or more of these Muḥammad was present accompanying his uncles, though he is not said to have taken an active part in the fighting. This war began with a quarrel between two nomadic chiefs, one of whom was convoying a caravan from 'Irāq through the territory of the other to a great twenty-day fair held annually at 'Ukāẓ, not far from Mecca. The second felt slighted, and ambushed and killed the first. Before long the Meccans and their allies were involved on the side of the aggressor, and the group of tribes known as Hawāzin on the other. After some defeats the Meccans were victorious, and their victory meant an extension of their commercial enter-

prises at the expense of their rivals. They gained some measure of control over the fair of 'Ukāẓ and even over the neighbouring town of aṭ-Ṭā'if. The latter had hitherto been a commercial rival of Mecca, and more inclined to work along with the Persians.

This success doubtless had repercussions on the relations of the various groups in Mecca. It was apparently shortly afterwards that one of the chief Meccan merchants refused to pay a debt to a trader from the Yemen who had come to Mecca. There seems to have been some question of principle involved here, though not that of commercial integrity. It was probably a deliberate attempt to stop the Yemenite merchants coming to Mecca and sharing in the trade at the Meccan end ; that is, they were to be restricted to the handling of the trade in the Yemen, while the organization of the caravans was to be entirely in the hands of the Meccans.

There was a vigorous reaction from a certain section of the Meccans. They formed an alliance of clans which we may call the League of the Virtuous, though other explanations of the name are given. Muḥammad was present at the meeting at which the League was formed, and even in later life approved of it. It aimed at upholding commercial integrity, but beyond this it was probably interested in preventing the exclusion of Yemenite merchants from the Meccan market, and the clans which formed it seem to have been those which were themselves incapable of sending caravans to the Yemen, or which had specialized in trade between Mecca and Syria.

It is unfortunate that we do not know more of the League of the Virtuous, since it seems to have played an important part in the life of Mecca, and in large part to have been directed against the men and the policies to which Muḥammad later found himself opposed. In particular his clan of Hāshim came to have a leading role in the League of the

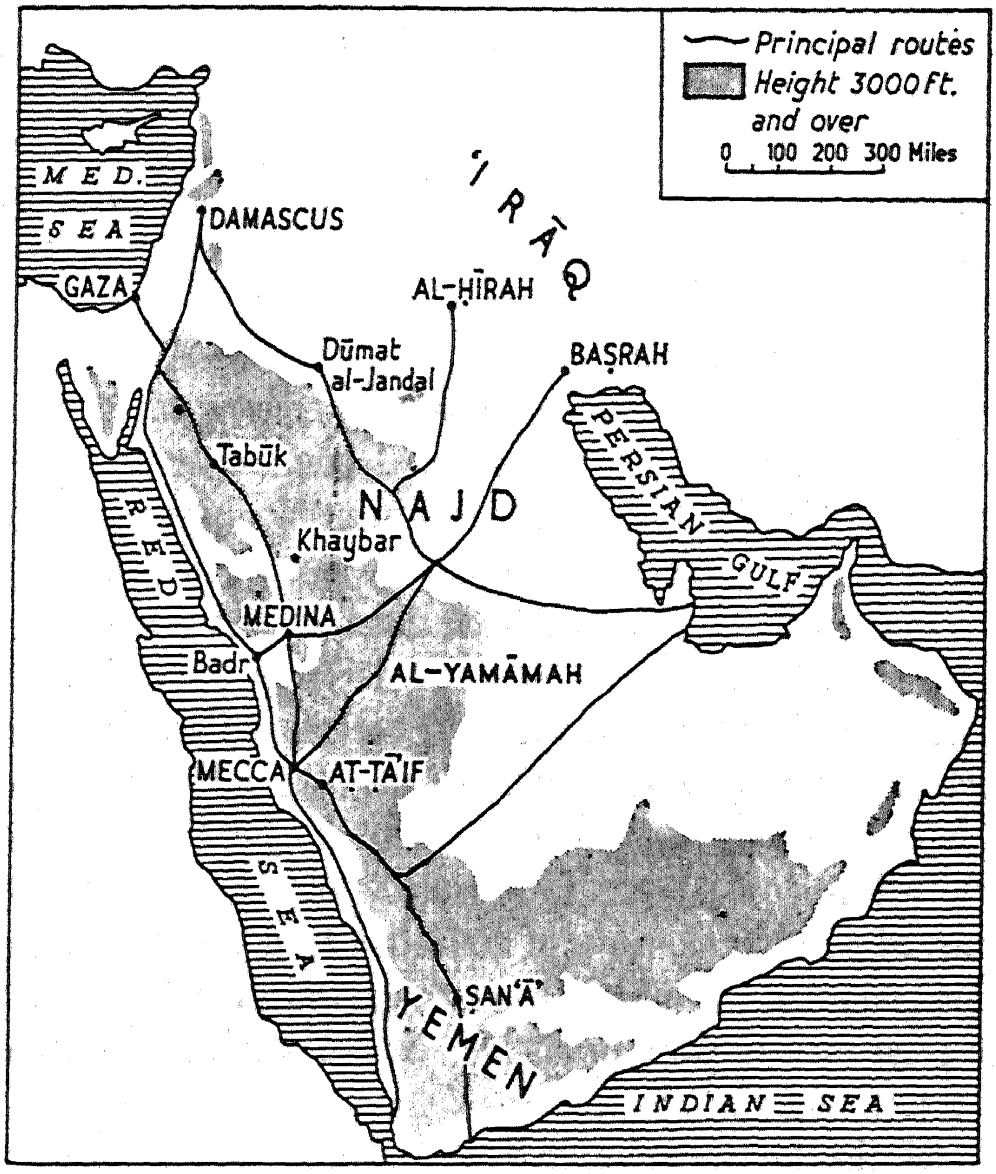
Virtuous. Apart from religious questions the political attitude of Hāshim and the clans in alliance with it would make them tend to support Muḥammad.

Despite the divisions within Mecca revealed by this incident common commercial interests preserved a measure of unity. There was nothing comparable to the bitter fighting which rent asunder the community of Medina in the years before Muḥammad settled there in 622. The Meccans were famous for the quality of *ḥilm*, which is a combination of maturity and self-control, and contrasts with the usual hot-blooded rashness and impetuosity of the Arab. In other words they were able to smother their feelings where these would have harmed their material interests.

In this world of unscrupulous business men, how was a poor orphan, however gifted, to make his way? The one possibility was to find a rich woman to marry him, so that he could, as it were, enter into a business partnership with her. The exact position of women in Mecca at this time is obscure. In the commercial fever and social turmoil of the times, there were at least a few who had managed to win independence and property, so that they were able to trade on their own account. Divorce was frequent in Mecca, and that, together with the numerous chances of early death for the men, brought it about that a woman might have three or four husbands in succession. This must have made it easier for the talented woman to assert her independence.

Muḥammad probably set about looking for something of this sort. There is a list of women whose marriage with Muḥammad was talked about, and among these is one who was probably older than he, and whose marriage with him may have been thought of before he married at all.[1] If this

[1] This was Ḍubā'ah bint-'Āmir; cf. Ibn-Sa'd, viii. 109 f.; F. Wüstenfeld, *Mekka* (Leipzig, 1858), i. 508; etc. Her third husband had been the father of Muḥammad's opponent, Abū-Jahl.



PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA (SHOWING TRADER ROUTES)

was so, nothing came of it. Instead he married Khadījah, another woman with property and independence, who had already had two husbands. Before marrying him she tested him by sending him as her agent in a caravan to Syria. He accomplished his commission successfully, and she proposed marriage to him. Muḥammad was twenty-five at the time, so the marriage must have been about 595. Khadījah is said to have been about forty, but this is perhaps only a round figure, and she may have been somewhat younger since she bore Muḥammad several children, probably four girls and two boys, of whom the latter died in infancy.

This marriage meant a great deal to Muḥammad. For one thing it gave him an opportunity of exercising his gifts in the main form of activity open to a Meccan—commerce. He and Khadījah had sufficient capital to enable them to engage in profitable enterprises. We do not hear of him going to Syria again, but he may well have done so. But the marriage also played a part in his spiritual development. Khadījah had a cousin, Waraqah, who had become a Christian, and who is said to have supported Muḥammad in his belief that he was receiving revelations similar to those of the Jews and the Christians. It was to Khadījah too that Muḥammad turned when in moments of desolation he doubted his commission to be a prophet. His marriage with Khadījah is thus a great turning-point in his life. So long as Khadījah lived he took no other wives.

Of the fifteen years that follow practically nothing is known. Muḥammad is said to have acquired a reputation for uprightness, and to have been known as 'the trusty one'. He was able to betroth his daughters to some moderately important men, though all were somehow related to himself or to Khadījah. As partner, at least for some enterprises, he had a nephew of Khadījah's second husband.[1] Thus he had

[1] Cf. Wüstenfeld, *Mekka*, i. 471, line 2.

a modestly prosperous career. Yet he felt that his gifts were not being used to the full. He had a talent for administration that would have enabled him to handle the biggest operations then carried out in Mecca, but the great merchants excluded him from their inner circle. His own dissatisfaction made him more aware of the unsatisfactory aspects of life in Mecca. In these ' hidden years ' he must have brooded over such matters. Eventually what had been maturing in the inner depths was brought to light.