

Confidential.

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News and Notes

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The Development of Muhammad's Prophetic Consciousness.

(Extracts from a lecture by Dr. Richard Bell of Edinburgh, delivered
at the School of Oriental Studies, Cairo).

TO the Muslim the Qur'an is the Word of Allah. Its prototype is in heaven, and it was delivered to Muhammad as occasion required by the Angel Gabriel; the prophet then recited it to the people. This high theory of revelation, we of the West can hardly accept. It seems to us mechanical. None-the-less we do believe that men inspired of God spoke messages of instruction, admonition, and reproof, as they were necessary for the guidance of mankind. But we recognize that in all the teaching of the prophets there was a human element. Their own personality entered into their teaching. They believed that the messages they delivered were messages from God, to themselves and their fellows. But they were not simply repeating words given to them; they were delivering truths that they themselves had laid hold of; truths which had laid hold of them.

In that sense, we need not deny to Muhammad the title of a prophet. Faults no doubt he had, but that through him God wrought a mighty work, for the religious enlightenment of the Arabs and of mankind, no one who knows anything of the conditions in which he appeared will care to deny. We may sometimes feel that Islam, stereotyped and hide-bound by tradition, stands to-day in the way of progress and enlightenment. But if so, it is tradition and not Muhammad, that is to blame. For no one ever scourged the inertia of mere traditional religion with ruder words than he.

Now if we admit Muhammad's claim to be a prophet, we are faced with the question: How did he come to make such a claim?

How could a man of sincerity and honesty of mind, claim that he spoke in the name of God and delivered the messages of God to mankind? Two things may help us to understand it in Muhammad's case. First of all, there is *conscience*. To us the idea is familiar and it seems simple enough, until we try to explain it. Then we find this inward voice of right, difficult and mysterious even now. Imagine the mystery of it to a reflective son of the desert, who had never been taught that there was any right beyond the custom of the tribe; but who felt a voice within him whispering that something which every man around him held to be right was wrong; and that something which no one else had done, must be done, and done by him. Secondly, there is such a thing as *intuition* the sudden grasping of a truth. I suppose most of us who have had to consider questions, theoretical or practical, at the full stretch of our faculties, have had some such experience. We have done our utmost, considered and argued, weighed and balanced till we were almost in despair, and then in some quiet moment, the solution came in a flash, given to us as it were from somewhere beyond ourselves. That is an experience which is by no means uncommon. It is perfectly real. But it is an experience which at our peril we try to force, to rely upon or cultivate. For it very easily degenerates.

Something of that sort probably, lay behind Muhammad's claim to inspiration. He was a brooding spirit, essentially solitary though friendly, even genial with companions who appealed to him; open to listen to counsel, but ultimately relying upon the counsel of his own thoughts. As he brooded and worried over difficulties and problems, solutions came to him in that way. They were given him, he assumed, from without from Allah directly or indirectly. That is what is meant in the Quran by the word *wahy*. Muslim theology uses it to cover the communication of portions of the revelation by the meditation of the angel Gabriel. But the Qur'an itself distinguishes between the two things. "It is not for a man that Allah should speak to him except by *wahy*, or from behind a veil: or He sends a messenger (*i.e.*, an angel) who inspires (*yuhzi*) what he (*i.e.*, Allah) wills." (Sur. XLII 50 f). According to that the sending of a messenger is different from *wahy*; and an examination of other passages of the Qur'an in which the word occurs, leads to the conclusion that what is meant by it is something of the nature of those flashes of intuition, those promptings apparently from without, to which I have referred.

According to Tradition, Muhammad was marked out as a prophet from his birth, and was definitely 'called' by the appearance of Gabriel to him on Mt. Hira. I need not here discuss the Traditions. They are to my mind quite unreliable. They are not supported by the references in the Qur'an to visions which he claims—probably quite honestly—to have seen. For these visions, as he at first interpreted them, were visions not of Gabriel but of Allah Himself.

The introduction of Gabriel was probably due, as we shall see, to the development of his ideas of the majesty and dignity of Allah. We need not therefore assume that Muhammad came down from Mt. Hira a complete prophet, with a whole theory of religion and of the mechanism of revelation already given him.

Nor do I believe that Muhammad began his career as a preacher of the near approach of the Last Day. Moreover to my mind, the Qur'an itself when critically studied affords proof that these ideas did not form the earliest stratum of it. For there are a number of passages in which the earliest form has been modified in order to introduce a reference to the resurrection.

Here let me say in passing that the point of view from which I approach the Qur'an is that in it we have to do with a welter of written documents, written probably by Muhammad himself, in any case, documents which have been written, revised, added to and altered from time to time during the prophet's lifetime; the rough notes as it were of the Book which he was to deliver to mankind, but which he did not live to complete and finally revise. That is not an assumption on my part, but a conclusion to which I have been gradually forced during the course of my work on the Qur'an. The proof of it is cumulative and it must simply be taken as a working hypothesis, to be justified or not by the results to which it leads.

It seems then that Muhammad began his career as a religious teacher, quite modestly and quite sanely. He was troubled, let us assume, by the religious condition of his fellow townsmen. Mecca was an Arab town, which by some change in the route followed by commerce had, within fairly recent times, become an important trade centre. Its leading inhabitants had grown wealthy. As described in the Qur'an they have all the characteristics of the *nouveaux riches* into whose hands had come more wealth than they had the culture to use with dignity and humanity. This influx of wealth, and the influence of commercial life had broken down the simple kindly customs which mitigated the rigours of tribal life in the desert. The old pagan religion had lost its power to control and guide. Muhammad was probably not the only one in Arabia who was dissatisfied with the pagan deities. He knew that round about Arabia, there were peoples more enlightened, more cultured, more settled and powerful than the Arabs, who worshipped Allah, the One God, the Creator. Possibly as he thought of these things, and sought for some outlet for his pent-up impatience, there may have come to him one of those flashes of intuition of which I have spoken: "Urge your people to the worship of Allah." He may even at this initial stage have seen the visions to which Surah LIII refers, though the description of them must have come considerably later. So he began to urge the claims of Allah, the Creator, to man's gratitude and worship, He being the source of all the important blessings of life.

That, in any case I should regard as the fundamental doctrine in the Qur'an. That there is but one God, Allah, the Creator, is a doctrine from which Muhammad never deviated. There are differences of emphasis at different stages, but from first to last the power of Allah to create, to give or withhold the good things of life is never long absent from the verses of the Qur'an. This doctrine, which, whether derived directly from Christianity, or, as I should prefer to say, derived largely from Muhammad's own reflection, aided merely by such measure of Christian and Jewish belief and conscience as had penetrated indirectly to the better spirits of Arabia, is at any rate a doctrine with which we as Christians can wholeheartedly agree, on the fundamental ground that Allah, God, is the Creator of all things, the giver of every good gift, and that the object of His creation is beneficence, the good of His creatures. Christians and Moslems stand together, not only against Polytheism, but against the materialism and secularism of to-day.

Let us look a little more closely at the passages in the Qur'an in which this doctrine of Allah's beneficence and His claim to worship is set forth, 'sign' passages as we might call them, for the instances of Allah's beneficent power are often referred to as signs. They are not all early of course, for this was a doctrine, as I have said, upon which Muhammad at all times insisted. But I believe that amongst them are to be found some of the earliest things in the Qur'an, though often they have been revised and included in comparatively late Surahs. Some of them are very beautiful and carefully composed in short rhyming lines. As examples I take two:—Surah LXXIX 27—33: and Surah LXXX 24—32.

Though probably not amongst the earliest of the 'sign' passages, both of these have been pieced into the Surahs in which they stand, as is shown by the irregularities at the beginning and end; and are therefore probably earlier than their context. They also illustrate an important difference of form. In the second Allah is speaking in the plural of majesty; but he first speaks of Allah in the third person. Now there are a great many passages in the Qur'an in which Allah is thus referred to; and the majority of them are of this nature; *i.e.*, they are passages which describe His work of power and beneficence. Every student of the Qur'an knows the recurring formulas at the beginning of verses: "Allah it is who . . ." "He it is who . . ." It is hardly likely that Muhammad represented Allah as so speaking about Himself. A more natural explanation is that Muhammad began simply as the advocate of Allah, speaking not as the mouthpiece of Allah at all, but in his own person setting out the benefits which Allah had conferred upon men; and urging that He was the God men ought to worship; and that, later, he worked these passages into the Surahs of the Qur'an, without transposing them into the first person plural, as his later claim to be delivering messages in Allah's name required.

Both the passages which I have quoted are in Arabic carefully rhymed. But there is still a little Surah in the Qur'an which is not rhymed: Surah CVI. It is an appeal to the Quraish to worship the "Lord of this house" *i.e.*, the Ka'ba, because of the benefits which He has conferred upon them by the establishing of the summer and winter caravans. There are quite a number of other passages in which the rhyme-phrases are very loosely attached, and can be removed without real damage to the sense. Take for instance the passage VI 95—99.

95. Allah is the one who causeth the grain and the date stone to burst, bringing the living out of the dead, and bringing the dead out of the living—that is Allah; how then are ye beguiled.
96. Who causeth the dawning to burst forth, and hath appointed the night as a rest, and the sun and the moon as a reckoning:— that is the disposition of the Sublime the Knowing.
97. He it is who hath appointed for you the stars that ye may guide yourselves thereby in the darkneses of land and sea:— We have made the signs distinct for a people who have knowledge.
98. He it is who hath caused ye to spring from one person and there is a gathering-place and a place of deposit:— We have made the signs distinct for a people who understand.
99. He it is who hath sent down water from the sky:— And thereby have we produced vegetation of every kind, and from it have we produced green shoots, from which we produce close-packed grain, and palm trees from the spathis of which, come close-hanging bunches of dates, and gardens of vines and olives and pomegranates, like and unlike: look at its bearing and ripening when it produces fruit.
Surely in that are signs for a people who believe.

If here we detach the last clause of each verse we are left with a passage recounting some of Allah's signs, which reads connectedly but no longer rhymes. We may conclude therefore I think that to begin with Muhammad's appeals were not rhymed.

In the Qur'an as we have it, however, rhyme is essential to the form, so essential that wherever there is a break in the rhyme we may at once assume that some alteration has been made, or some confusion has crept in—except in a few cases where the rhyme is deliberately broken to emphasize the truth to which a short deliverance leads up *e.g.*, LXXVII 1—6. The form adopted was *saj'* short lines loosely rhythmic, but without strict metre, each ending with the rhyme, or assonance—for we seldom find the strict rhyme of poetry. It may have been that he sought an aid to his own memory; or to impress what he said more firmly in the memories of his hearers; but very probably he followed the model of the Arab *Kahin*, the sooth-sayer who in pagan times gave out oracles in the name of a good, and used this *saj'* form.

Now Muhammad did not rhyme with ease, in fact did not compose these short pregnant lines easily at all. The fact that in the later portions of the Qur'an, the verses grow long and loose, and the rhyme is almost invariably got by the use of stock phrases, and the plural ending *-un, -in*, show that he had no great facility in finding real rhymes. But in the earlier portions the lines are short, more or less equal in length, and the assonances carefully constructed and on the whole consistently carried through. The composition of these passages must have cost him much labour. The opening of Sura LXXIII shows that he burned the midnight oil to get his Qur'an into proper form. It is not a very great assumption to suppose that as he laboured to get appropriate words and rhymes, he found them coming to him, after much effort, in flashes as if prompted from without. It was Allah who prompted him,—so he at first concluded. And as the words were Allah's, he put them in the form of being spoken by Allah.

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We shall never know what form this Book would ultimately have taken. He had no longer the time to polish his rhymes, his verses, and his pieces. All sorts of thing had to be dealt with in his deliverances. He was still a religious leader and teacher. Doctrinally there is not much development in Madina. It is rather the religious practices of the community that he has now to build up. With the exception of the Prayer, practically all the institutions of Islam belong to the Madinan period, and in some respects even the Prayer had to be modified. He had to give directions as to clean and unclean food, ritual purity, the Pilgrimage, sacrifices, the calendar. He was temporal ruler as well as religious leader. He had to formulate laws:—of inheritance, of marriage and divorce, of the giving of evidence and so on. As military leader he had to stimulate the warlike ardour of his followers, restore their courage after defeat, and sway their sentiments as policy demanded. He had wives and concubines, chosen probably more from policy and the desire for male offspring, than at the dictates of sensuality, and sometimes had to regulate troubles arising in the harem. He had to teach unmannerly Arabs how to conduct themselves in the presence of a prophet. All these things were done in the name of Allah "Allah and the messenger"—Muhammad still prefers his old title—were, in conjunction the rulers of Madina.

(We would offer the following remarks on what we have found to be a very suggestive lecture. In both Christian and Muslim usage the term 'prophet' is of narrower connotation than in Dr. Bell's use. To the Muslim he is "a complete prophet, with a whole theory of religion and the mechanism of revelation already given to him," belonging to a special order by virtue of which, not simply his "intuitive flashes," but his every word and act becomes normative. Hence the Sunnat. We can imagine a Muslim saying "Dr. Bell says Muhammad is a prophet" and completely ignoring the learned lecturer's new connotation. *Ed.*)

Henry Martyn School.

THERE seems to be some ignorance about one matter in particular in reference to the Henry Martyn School at Lahore. **No charge whatever is made for the lectures given to students resident during the two winter terms** which begin on October 1st and January 1st. The only expense to students is their ordinary living and the cost of a language teacher if they employ one.

The Hindi Quran.

DR. Ahmad Shah, the compiler of a Concordance to the Quran and the translator of the Quran into Urdu and Hindi, has laid Hindi-knowing students of Islam under obligation by his second edition of his translation of the Quran into that language. We drew this fact to the notice of members of the League some little while ago. Now there are but one hundred copies of this edition left and Dr. Ahmad Shah is very desirous that they should be bought by Christians. With this object in view this hundred is being reserved from general sale until December 31st in the hope that in the interim, Missions and private individuals may take advantage of the opportunity offered.

The cost of the book is Rs. 3-12-0 with one rupee postage additional. Application should be made direct to Rev. Dr. Ahmad Shah, K.I.H., Nur Manzil, P.O. Rajpore, Dist. Debra Dun, U.P.

Prayer and Praise.

PRAISE God for the baptism of a young well-educated Muslim and his wife.

LET US PRAY that a way may be opened for him so that his future usefulness may be assured.

LET US PRAISE God that Miss Mildred Cable and her sister have received permission from the Soviet Government to resume their work in Mongolia.

LET US PRAY that the increase of Soviet influence in Kashgar may not adversely affect the work of the Swedish Mission which is working there.

LET US RENEW our prayers for the young Muslim mentioned in our prayer list of last month and also for all those who are so hedged in that they find it difficult to come to the point of baptism.

MISS Kirby of the Sevananda Ashram Komarolu Post, Kurnool Dist., South India writes that they are in need of the services of an educated Christian woman, a convert from Islam, in their Ashram in the Dornakal Diocese. "There is a good deal of scope for work among Moslem women and children here, and so far there are no converts among them. We are two S.P.G. women missionaries and eight Indian Christian women students training to be evangelists, living together a simple life in this village Ashram. We hope that more educated Hindu and Moslem converts will join us. We can only offer free board and lodging and necessary travelling and other expenses. Telugu or English is essential and the ability to learn Telugu. Members of the Church of India, Burma and Ceylon or those willing to join the Anglican Church will be given preference otherwise they may find it difficult being away from their own Church." We give the address above and all particulars can be had from Miss Kirby at that address.

Notice.

Please note that the undermentioned address holds good till Sept. 20th next after which the Editor's address will be as formerly, 5, Egerton Road, Lahore.

Any notification of change of address, names of new members or remittance of subscription, etc., should be sent to the Superintendent, Orissa Mission Press, Cuttack, India, and *not* to the Secretary of the League. The annual subscription to the League is Rs. 2-0-0 (English 3s. 6d.)

Matters of interest to members of the League, items of news and requests for prayer should be sent (if possible, early in the month) to the Hony. Secretary :—

Rev. J. W. Sweetman,
Bowscar,
Dalhousie,
Panjab, India.

